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Foundation degrees in biomedical science: the student experience

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Foundation degrees in biomedical science: the student experience

The first cohort of students on a University of Westminster foundation degree completed the course recently. Here, Chrystalla Ferrier, Kelly Brookwell and Paul Quinn employ some reflective practice.

The University of Westminster foundation degree in biomedical sciences offers medical laboratory support workers an opportunity to complete an IBMS-approved Level 5 qualification by blended learning. It is a three-year course which can be used as a standalone qualification suitable for *Agenda for Change* Band 4 roles or as a route to the university's BSc (Hons) Applied Biomedical Science award, with a further two years of part-time study.

The first cohort of students from the course completed their studies earlier this year, and, at the university's annual Employers' Event, held in June, two final-year students, Kelly Brookwell (To Skype or Not to Skype) and Paul Quinn (Representing Students), shared their views and described their experiences of the course.

TO SKYPE OR NOT TO SKYPE

"I volunteered to give this talk partly out of gratitude for the course and the people who made it happen in the first place. I've been a laboratory assistant for over seven years at the William Harvey Hospital in Ashford, Kent. During my interview for the job, I asked about opportunities for career progression. My question was answered with some enthusiastic nodding but no details. A few months into the job and I learned that I could apply for a trainee biomedical scientist position when one became vacant, and I could then do a part-time degree through day release... provided that I had A-levels. I didn't, so I was a bit stuck.

"There was no alternative to bridge the gap left by the lack of A-levels, and no college offered A-levels as a part-time or evening course to fit around my full-time work. My only options seemed to involve either giving up half my hours to fit around study, or gaining A-levels via the National Extension College. I completed NVQs (Levels 3 and 4) when they were offered at work; however, the part-time distance-learning foundation course offered by the University of Westminster fitted the bill perfectly.

"As the course came to an end we did a bit of reminiscing about the beginning. Many of the other students remembered me from the induction day because I was so utterly useless with computers; I'm not a technophobe as I am happy to embrace technology and change, but I had never had the opportunity to develop such skills.

"At the induction I think that we may have been told that we would be doing a PowerPoint presentation at some point during

the course. This information may not have entirely registered with me because at that time I did know what a PowerPoint presentation actually was! As far as I was concerned, a power point was where I plug in the hair dryer. Even worse, I had been to many PowerPoint presentations, blissfully unaware of what I was experiencing.

"If I had fully understood the content of the course, I may not have been brave enough to start, and I might not have realised what I could achieve. At the beginning, the thought of giving a PowerPoint presentation to my peers would have seemed ridiculous. I am a laboratory assistant; what on earth could I talk to biomedical scientists about? How to take out the clinical waste and stick barcodes on samples? I have now completed three PowerPoint presentations; two at work and one at the university. As it turned out, I found it interesting to discover how much biomedical scientists don't remember about what goes on in other departments.

"My first talk was on glandular fever. I work in biochemistry and I compared the agglutination spot test carried out in haematology with the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) method performed in microbiology. One of the many benefits of the foundation course was to appreciate the multidisciplinary nature of many of the tasks we perform. I was also very fortunate to have a training officer who was amazingly supportive, and I can't think of anything further he could have possibly done to help me.

"In general, colleagues at work were very helpful and supportive, and my line manager tried to provide me with some weekly study time, although this was not always possible. This occasionally presented a problem when we needed to fit an exercise around work and we were not given enough notice; for example, a Skype tutorial, which nonetheless was great

'The Westminster foundation degree can be used as a standalone qualification or as a route to the BSc (Hons) Applied Biomedical Science award'

'The modules also provided the opportunity for me to have some experience of the other pathology disciplines'

fun. The three time-slot options given by the university didn't fit anyone's shift, and insufficient notice meant that we were unable to swap with work colleagues. Clearly, tutors need to keep in mind that we are working full-time and it is in our interests to keep our employers happy.

"I don't know what lies ahead for me now; the plan was to progress to the BSc (Hons) Applied Biomedical Science degree at Westminster, as my aim has always been to train to become a biomedical scientist. However, the *Modernising Scientific Careers* programme has introduced some complications and a decision has yet to be made."

REPRESENTING STUDENTS

"It was just over three years ago that I decided I wanted to pursue a career in biomedical science, having worked for a few years in microbiology at Colchester Hospital as an medical laboratory assistant (MLA) and completed an NVQ (Level 2) in Clinical Laboratory Support. I found as much information as I could about appropriate courses through telephone calls to the IBMS and various internet searches, and ended up with a prospectus for the part-time course at Westminster. I took this to my manager at the time and asked for their help to make it happen, which obviously they did.

"I was invited for interview by Martin Parry and learned that I would need to have at least a Level 3 qualification to enter the course. Thanks to the amazing support received from my NVQ assessor and the staff in my laboratory, I was able to achieve this qualification in six weeks, and I started the foundation degree in September 2009.

"I really want to emphasize the benefits that my place of work gained by supporting me throughout the course. Work undertaken during laboratory-based learning modules gave me more of an opportunity to contribute than did my day-to-day role as an MLA, either through something like the analysis of a standard operating procedure (SOP) or presenting case studies and other presentations to my colleagues, thereby contributing to CPD.



Sharing views and describing experiences at the university's annual Employers' Event are, from left to right, Alan Wainwright (IBMS Executive Head of Education), Paul Quinn and Kelly Brookwell.

"The project design module allowed me to contribute to the audit and investigation of how the pathology departments in Colchester, which are on separate sites, would be able to manage changes brought about by the guidelines laid out in the NHS Infectious Diseases in Pregnancy Screening Programme. I feel that the month-long audit I undertook provided valuable data for the senior biomedical scientists to use when dealing with the antenatal department.

"The modules also provided the opportunity for me to have some experience of the other pathology disciplines. As stated above, these are on three separate sites in Colchester and I was given the opportunity to visit the departments, as well as learn more about them throughout various pieces of coursework.

"During the first year of the course I was one of two students chosen to be a student representative at course committee meetings.

'The university continually aims to improve the course, and welcomes views from students and their employers'

This has helped me be confident in raising important issues with my peers. Changes have been made to the course over the past three years, and these have been of benefit to other students. It is good to see that the course can evolve if a particular issue is highlighted.

"I have now been awarded funding to continue my studies on the BSc (Hons) Applied Biomedical Science course at Westminster, starting in September. This successful outcome owes much to those who have provided endless support over the past three years, including the staff in microbiology at Colchester, other pathology and hospital staff with whom I have come in contact, and also my university tutors."

AIMING TO IMPROVE

As mentioned by Paul, the university continually aims to improve the course. For this we depend on, and are grateful to, all the students and their employers who provide us with views and comments, both good and bad, and all the staff involved with the design and delivery of the modules. ■

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