

Bioscience Work Placement Case Study

A student perspective of the industrial placement year

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School / Department: School of Biomedical Sciences

Institution: University of Leeds

Placement host: GlaxoSmithKline

Type of host: Pharma

Before going on placement

Reasons for doing a placement:

I applied to university for the four year sandwich course degree because I was interested in doing a degree that would lead into a related job and so one that incorporated a year's work sounded like an ideal opportunity for me. When it came to applying for placements at the start of second year I was allowed to change my mind but decided to still go for one.

The main reason for me wanting to do a placement was to find out if I would enjoy a career in the pharmaceutical industry if I pursued it after graduation. The chance to get paid was also a factor as I, like most students, was already in a lot of debt by the end of my first year.

I also had the choice of studying abroad for the year instead and we had a talk from staff about the opportunities available to us and what we stood to gain from the experiences. I spoke to my tutor (who was also the placement coordinator) about both of these options and the possibility of combining them to do a year in industry but in another country. He was very helpful and gave me a lot of advice regarding what would be involved and how to go about it. In the end I decided not to go abroad mainly because of commitments I had outside university.

Experience of the application process:

Daunting at times, especially the interviews. Luckily I had a lot of things to put in my CV which helped and also gave me something to talk about in the interview. There were a lot of people giving us advice on how to put together a CV. As well as my tutor and other staff, we had to attend a CV workshop at the university careers centre. I found the advice being given by different people, was either basic and obvious or contradictory. In the end I used my common sense to put together what I thought looked good and should be included. I also asked my Dad to read over it because he had previously worked in management and so had read many CVs over the years.

I had my first experience of an HR interview for which I was totally unprepared. Fortunately I had taken a gap year and had done many activities outside university so had experiences to draw upon but I think I would have done much better had I known to expect those sorts of questions.

Before my second interview I actually managed to speak with a previous student who went to my university and had just returned from a placement at the same company. Knowing what to expect put me at ease and I was also able to ask lots of questions that it did not occur to me to ask at my first interview until after I had left.

The part of the application process I found the most difficult was deciding whether or not to take the first offer. From my experience of the company when I went down for the interview, I was not sure I would enjoy working there. However, I was worried that if I turned down this offer I would not get another. The initial offer was made over the phone and I was told I had to reply within 24 hours which was not long enough to find tutors etc for advice. In the end I decided not to take the offer but it was not a decision I was sure about. When I went to the second interview I was so thankful I had not taken the first offer because I came away really wanting that job, a totally different feeling to after the first interview. Before this experience I had thought interviews were only about selling yourself to the company and not about deciding if a job is right for you. This is one of the biggest lessons that I took away from my placement. At some universities you have to take your first offer but I am really grateful Leeds University does not have that policy.

Getting feedback from my placement supervisor once I had got the placement was also useful. Listening to what they liked and disliked about the interviewees who came whilst I was on my placement was a great insight into what comes across well in interview.



Expectations and concerns:

I honestly had no idea what to expect! My concerns were mainly around getting accommodation sorted before I started work and how difficult the work would be once I got there. At the beginning when I had just been shown all the expensive equipment I would be using I was also somewhat worried about what would happen if I broke any of it!

Before the placement started there were no briefings or advice from the university on what to expect but everyone was doing completely different placements so I am not sure how useful this would have been anyway. I had a familiarisation day with the company about two months before I started, held at the site where I would be working. In the morning I got to meet other students and choose my housemates for the year which sorted out my accommodation concerns. In the afternoon I went to see the labs and people I would be working with. I also got to speak to the then current student. The work done on my placement was so different to anything done at university it was impossible to have any clue about it just from an afternoon spent there but speaking to the current student and the other staff was useful. The staff put me at ease by assuring me they did not expect me to know anything when I turned up on my first day and that I was expected to make mistakes. I spoke to the student away from the permanent staff and heard about all of her mistakes and those of previous students and that my boss took it very well no matter how wrong things went! Knowing I was going to have a boss like that was the most reassuring thing to know before I started.

Although it did not happen before I started my placement, when we returned to university we attended a Q&A session for students thinking of applying for placements the following year. From the feedback received it appeared to have been very useful and informative.

During your placement

Induction to work:

Induction to work took a while to get started because I had to wait until I had done the right safety courses before I could touch anything in the labs. It was a steep learning curve at first which was both exciting and scary but there were always plenty of people to ask when I pressed the wrong button and things started beeping and flashing warning lights! I worked with really helpful people who were easy to ask about things and always had the time to show me or help me with new techniques.

There was no handover with the previous year's student but this would not have helped anyway because, as mentioned earlier, it was about 3 weeks before I could do anything. My induction was the same as it was for all new staff i.e. health and safety training followed by learning each technique when it was required.

After my first month I had a 'performance development plan' meeting with my boss which all full-time staff have annually. This was to set personal targets and was reviewed at six months and at the end of my placement. This was not particularly useful because the targets were mainly to learn new techniques in the future as the team's workload required. To do my job I had to learn the techniques needed for each study so this would have been done with or without 'planning' to do so. It was, however, the same form the permanent staff have to fill in each year and so was an insight into the kind of targets and development that the company expects of its staff.

Tasks/activities during placement:

I learnt a huge range of different techniques whilst on my placement. Initially I was conducting small parts of studies for members of my team but by the end of my placement I was competent and confident enough to undertake whole studies for them, reporting back with the completed data at the end. Whilst undertaking my individual research project I became the expert for a particular assay and was able to teach it to new staff as well as help more senior staff analyse any unusual results. I also gained a lot of transferable skills in terms of basic lab skills and juggling all my work for different people so that everything was always completed on time.

The work was repetitive at times but that was the nature of the work that I was doing and not because I was a student employee. During my project I was able to delegate work to two agency staff who were with the company at the time, this was a great experience for the future.

I do not think I could have been better prepared for my placement. The work done at all the departments across all the companies that accept pharmacology students is so varied that it would be impossible for the university to prepare students for all of them. For example I needed knowledge of GLP regulations and a Home Office license but I only knew students in one other department that required a Home Office license and the only other students I knew that needed knowledge of GLP were in another company. All the courses I needed to attend to be able to do my job were arranged and paid for by the company. The Home Office license had to be completed before I started because it takes a while to process and I was given a choice of dates over the summer and recompense for travel expenses.

Contact with your university:

I did not have much contact with my university whilst I was on placement. This was because I had no problems and didn't need to contact them than because I could not. There were plenty of people I could have contacted, both within the company and at university if I had had any issues. Each student had a visit by their tutor after 3-4 months to speak to them and their placement supervisors. The purpose of this visit was to check that we weren't having any problems and our supervisors were happy with how we were working. It was also to give us advice on how to get the most out of the placements once we had settled in. For my tutor, it was the first time we had met and he had not had a placement student before or done a placement himself so it was not particularly useful for me. I think these meetings were a good idea and well timed but their usefulness does depend entirely on the tutor. During the placement both myself and my supervisor were e-mailed by someone involved in coordinating the placements every few months to check that I was still okay and that he had no problems with me. If I am honest I had no idea who this person was and whenever I needed to contact the university I spoke to my school's undergraduate office or one of the lecturers that I knew well. I think my supervisor got quite irritated towards the end of the placement with the constant e-mails and would have dealt with any placement student related issues within the company anyway.

After your placement

Returning to university:

Returning to university was difficult. Adjusting to living on a student budget was only one of many difficulties. By the end of my placement my opinion was not only respected but often, especially with regard to the essay I was researching for my project, actively sought after. I was also trusted with responsibility and to organise my work myself. Returning to university felt like a backwards step as all that respect, trust and independence was effectively taken away. However after 2 or 3 months I had settled back in and now have the motivation to make my final year count because I know what I am working for. When we first returned we had to attend a short debrief session for all students with the careers centre in the first few weeks back at university. This was to reflect on your year and identify the things you had gained from it, i.e. new skills, contacts etc. Personally I did not find this useful because I tend to reflect on my experiences anyway but others may have done. For myself, I think a more useful session would have involved some of our tutors so that they could realise the level of independence and responsibility we were now used to working with. I hope this would have led to staff giving returning placement students a greater degree of freedom to organise their own work. I think a lot of returning students were resentful of being treated like students straight out of second year and being constantly checked up on. A good example of this is with dissertations. I have to provide work to my tutor each week over a period of 6 weeks to prove that I am working on it despite having already proved last year that I could independently and competently complete a 6 month research project to the standard required by a large pharmaceutical company.

Assessment:

The bulk of my assessment was a 6000 word practical report on the project I undertook. It had to be finished before completing the placement so it could be cleared by intellectual property for release. The report was only pass or fail and was really useful as a 'practice' dissertation for my final year which follows a similar format. I was given plenty of time and help to do it at work because it was research that the company wanted doing.

During the project I had to give regular presentations to my team and to the relevant research group within the company. This was my first experience of giving presentations on a subject in which I was the expert and the audience were genuinely interested in. I mention this because this year the university removed the requirement for us to do a presentation on our return. I think this is a shame because I learnt far more from presenting my own research than I did at university presenting papers to staff who were already intimately familiar with the results. Oral communication is an important skill and I think the development of this skill should have contributed to our marks. It also would have been interesting to see what the other students had been working on during their placements.

Further comments or information:

I would highly recommend doing a placement to anyone. I really enjoyed my year in industry even though I decided not to pursue it as a career after graduation. It gave me a unique insight into what I want from a job that I would not have had otherwise. I made some great friends amongst both the other students and the staff.