

11. Learning to be professional: the story of my placement experience

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Before the placement

After having completed my first year of Biochemistry, I knew I wanted to do a placement because it would give me stronger career opportunities. At level one I was a good student, so when it came to choosing a placement I had many options. I enjoy traveling and was interested in cancer research, and so I took a placement at the Biotechnology Department at a university in Finland to work within the MPC (Markers of Prostate Cancer) project, through the ERASMUS exchange programme.

Before moving to Finland, I was not nervous, or sad; I knew I would miss my friends and family in England but I was excited and curious more than anything else. I was due to arrive in Finland in November so I was expecting to see lots of snow - apart from that, I did not really think too much about it; I assumed life in Finland would be the same as in England, but I just wanted to keep an open mind and hope for a positive outcome.

A new life in Finland

My first week in Finland was tougher than I expected. I did not expect to be homesick but I was. When you move abroad, you don't realise it's happening for real until you are physically there and cut off from the life back at home. At that point, I realised I would not see anyone from home for a long time, and that I would have to make new friends all over again. I guess this is why I was homesick. At first, everything in Finland seemed so unfamiliar and cold - Finland's famously cold, rainy weather; the Finnish people, who are incredibly shy until you get to know them; and my accommodation was so quiet and sterile- looking. One thing I did warm up to quickly, however, was my workplace. My colleagues and supervisors were very friendly from the start, so even though I felt homesick, uncertain and a little lost, I figured if there would be one thing I would enjoy it would be my work.

Of course, as time progressed, things got much better. Any feelings of homesickness quickly disappeared once I met the lively, very sociable exchange students and got to know Finnish people better. Finns can seem very cold but once you get to know them, they are the most trustworthy and genuine people I know. I have made some great friends in Finland and also many other countries; Italy, Canada, Spain, Peru, and everywhere in between! Meeting lots of people from so many different cultures taught me a great deal of things that I cannot even begin to list. I became much more outgoing and started initiating some very large social events, including a costume-themed parties where over 100 people turned up. I became more open-minded to different cultures, and learned many things about them - in the case of Peru and Finland, I even learned some of their language!

Culture shock soon turned into fondness after I learned just how organised and efficient Finland is. I became more culturally aware of the small differences between Finland and England and so learned to adopt some of the Finnish customs in order to respect their culture. I also became more independent as I started traveling to surrounding countries. My despise for Finnish weather soon turned into appreciation after I traveled to Lapland and witnessed beautiful,

untouched forests covered in metres of snow and the beautiful, unspoilt forests of the nearby archipelago in summer. So, I guess the main thing I learned from this travel experience is to never judge by first impressions! At first, a place can seem cold, harsh and uninviting but it will unfold its magic slowly; it's simply a matter of time.

Developing in my work

As for my work, I enjoyed the work environment from the start. People were helpful; there was always a nice, laid-back atmosphere in the laboratory and there was no hierarchy between professors and trainees. I think this is very important for a workplace and if I was to run my own laboratory, I would definitely encourage an atmosphere similar to the one I experienced. Initially, I had to learn many new practical techniques associated with my projects. At first it was challenging but after some practice I could do all of the work accurately without supervision. Now, I am much more confident and professional in my practical skills; something which will help me a lot in my dissertation work. During my time in the university's Biotechnology Department, I was working as part of the MPC (markers of prostate cancer) research group. The aims of this group are to investigate proteins and genes that could have a potential role in the diagnosis of prostate cancer. The group has already done very interesting research regarding prostate cancer diagnostics, and to continue this could vastly improve prostate cancer diagnostics, which is currently hindered by a high amount of false-positive diagnoses, causing unnecessary treatment and surgery.

My particular work involved the preparation of biological reagents as well as two research projects: TATI and hK4. TATI and hK4 are two proteins thought to have a role in prostate cancer. The ultimate goals of the projects were to develop immunoassays for these proteins in order to detect them in patient samples to see if they have any diagnostic value in prostate cancer. Initially, I viewed the placement as an opportunity to practice my practical skills, obtain better career opportunities and have some fun abroad. I did not expect to be given projects of potential importance because of my lack of practical skills, so the fact that I was carrying out novel research really motivated me to become more professional and responsible in my work. I learned how to research journals rather than textbooks for more up to date research, in order to gain more reliable background knowledge for my projects. I became more active in decisions when we encountered problems and had to look for improvements to our methods, which has made me a better problem solver and more independent researcher. I was also encouraged to teach myself a lot of statistics and to use different, more sophisticated computer programmes (LATEX, Beamer, Prism) for making more professional presentations, reports and data analysis. Communication skills and confidence improved through regular interactions with colleagues and bi-weekly presentations of my work to the research group. The hard work seems to have paid off; results for my first project were presented at an international congress in Helsinki, and will probably get published in the next year or so. Looking back upon level two, I have to say my skills have developed enormously! I feel I am now completely ready for my final year and for a professional career as a scientific researcher.

Finally, I also managed to conquer my fear of public speaking at the "Young Scientist Week". For this event I had to write an abstract and present a poster on my work for the TATI project. I also had to give a 20-minute presentation in an auditorium in front of around 40 people including professors and researchers from outside the university. I have never been a good public speaker so of course I was nervous at first, but having been thrown in at the 'deep end', I am much more confident now and no longer have a fear of speaking in public.

Back in the UK

Now that I am back in the UK for my final year, I can look back upon my year in Finland and certainly say I have changed. I am much more focussed on my career goals than before. Previously, I had a vague idea about wanting to do cancer research. Now, I know this is what I really want to do with my career because it is work I find enjoyable, and most of all rewarding. Also, having lived abroad, I am no longer intimidated by the idea of traveling to new places on my own. I have realized that it is possible to make friends and create a home away from home no matter where you travel, as I now consider Finland to be my second home. I have become much more independent as a person, and also more adventurous. I no longer restrict myself to working in the UK, in fact I want to continue my studies abroad, travel everywhere and experience lots of new cultures!

`Learning to be'

So, to bring us back to the original question, what has learning to be professional meant to me in my placement? Well, I have learned that learning to be professional does not just originate from developing new skills in one's career, because a scientific researcher with the best practical skills and exam grades could still fail if they fail to develop a mature, professional attitude towards their work. Learning to be professional involves developing emotionally as well intellectually; becoming mature and focused in one's career, open-minded and unafraid of exploring new ideas. To become fearless of new challenges, and to always stay hopeful when things go wrong. And, in the case of overseas work, to respect different cultures, always stay positive and never judge a country or its people by first impressions!

If I could give any advice to students considering a placement, I would say do it! Not only is a placement great practice for your final year, it is also an opportunity for you to develop professionally and become more aware of what direction you want your career to go in. I would also encourage students to do their placements overseas, because traveling and living abroad really opens your mind and makes you more aware and respectful of other cultures. Overseas placements generally seem more suited to outgoing types, but even if you are shy, you will almost certainly change after one year in ERASMUS!

Finally, is there anything I would have done differently in my placement? Well, even though there were times I wondered if I had made the right decision in coming to Finland, the answer is no! Because all experiences, whether good or bad, always lead to a positive outcome, helping us to gain better insight; good experiences create good memories, and bad experiences can be viewed upon as a learning experience.