

Case Study: Internship

Yaqi Hu, Second Year Biochemistry Student

Which company did you undertake work experience with?

I did a research internship in the Murray Lab, at the physiology, development and neuroscience (PDN) department, University of Cambridge.

How did you go about finding the internship?

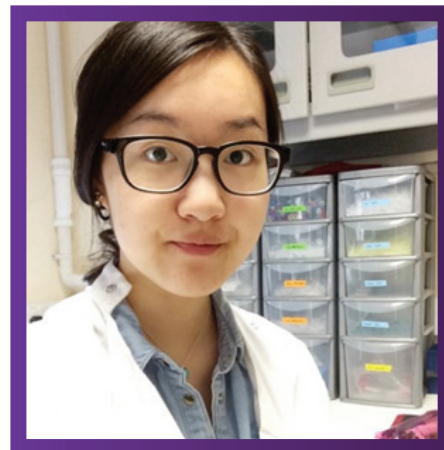
I found the research opportunity via Amgen scholar program which was advertised by life science department. I contacted the lab directly followed by Amgen scholar application. I didn't succeed with the Amgen funding but I was still welcomed to work in the Murray Lab. I then applied to life science department UROP bursary funding

What was the timescale for your application?

I started looking at the program in my first year. I emailed at least 50 labs at that time with many rejections right away. Some labs were interested and asked for my CV which I did not have when I was a first year student so I then stopped applying at that point. Around October in my second year, I started to email research labs advertised on Amgen scholar Cambridge page again for an internship this summer. I had emailed the Murray lab in my first year but nobody in the lab could supervise me as they had lots of travelling to do. I emailed them again in my second year and I was interviewed in January. I would say it took me around 4 months from application to internship offer. But my UROP bursary wasn't settled until Easter. If you don't mind not being paid, it's not hard to find a research internship at all. Many labs would welcome an Imperial student to help out.

What was the application and interview process like?

The application process was a bit frustrating and stressful because I emailed at least 30 labs and most of them either did not reply at all, or rejected me straight away. There were only 2 labs that were interested in the end. Also, I didn't start writing a CV until one of the labs asked for it. So that made my application painful as well, I should have started my CV earlier. The interview was causal and relaxing. I just read a couple papers the lab published recently before I went. It was more like a one-to-one tutorial about what they do rather than asking me lots of questions to see if I was capable of doing things.



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- Yaqi Hu



How big was your team and where did it sit in the organisation?

The lab I worked in was a very small lab. There were 2 PhD students, a Masters student and one other summer student who had worked there before. When I first got there, only one PhD student (he then became my supervisor) was around. It was a very friendly lab; everyone was very nice and kind. I could talk to everyone and got to know them because the team was so small.

What was your role and what did it involve?

I helped my supervisor with his project. My project was to investigate the activity of a particular enzyme in different tissues under different conditions. The data I generated contributed to the larger scale PhD project. My role involved doing lots of enzyme assays and some data analysis. My supervisor was the one who did the actual analysis and he taught me the principles behind the analysis.

What was the most valuable thing about your work experience?

I got the chance to see what it is like to do a PhD or become a researcher. It was nothing like what I thought it would be. Things go wrong every day, on some days things go wrong every hour. My supervisor taught me many things. The most memorable was that being a scientist isn't about getting the data/result you would like to see but about trying your best to find out what happened and why it happened. Things always go wrong along the way but you need to fix them and carry on. I only had a very vague picture about research and science before I did the internship. Now I know much more.

Do you have any tips for future Imperial students looking to make the most of their summer?

My tips are:

1. It's never too early to start looking. In my first year, I looked at some internship positions, mainly research based. But then people were saying "it's just first year, have fun in summer etc." I personally think that wasn't right. As a first year student, you don't have to do an internship but it's always good to start looking and get your CV ready so that you would not panic and stress out in your second year when you really need to apply for internships. I wish someone told me this earlier.
2. Be open-minded. I did a research internship that's very relevant to my degree, but I would also like to try something completely different i.e. banking or commercial roles. It's always good to try many different things especially if you are not sure what you like and what you want to do.
3. Also remember to chill a bit. It's summer after all!

