Getting Laboratory experience

Introduction

Getting some experience in a laboratory is a really good way of boosting your CV credentials and extending your knowledge of the laboratory working environment. If you are not sure what you want to do after graduating, a period of work experience is a great way of finding out whether you would enjoy working within a laboratory setting. If you have already decided that you would like to pursue a research career then demonstrating that you have practical experience within a laboratory can help to strengthen any future applications.

The reality is that it can be difficult to find placements within laboratories, particularly if you are in the first couple of years of your course. However, with a little research and perseverance it is possible to arrange some work experience within a laboratory.

What sort of experience?

You should first decide what sort of laboratory experience you would like to get. Are you interested in finding out about work in a commercial research laboratory or a diagnostic laboratory within a hospital or similar healthcare setting? Are you keen to find out more about how research works in academia or in one of the major research institutes?

Industrial placements

An industrial placement with a commercial organisation is a structured period of time spent as an employee of the company, often for nine months to one year. Also known as a ‘sandwich’ or ‘extra-mural’ year, these placements are often done during your degree course.

Some departments at King’s offer students the opportunity to do an extra-mural year between the second and final years of the course. Students are given support in identifying and applying for placements although it is ultimately the student’s responsibility to secure their placement. If you are interested in finding out more about the extra-mural year schemes at King’s speak to your course tutor or have a look at the information on Virtual Campus for your department.

Many companies also offer shorter work experience placements (see below for more information).

Research laboratories – universities and research institutes

Some university departments and research institutes take on students as research assistants during the long summer vacation. It is worth finding out whether any of the departments linked to your course will require assistants over the summer.

King’s publishes details of some of the projects and studentships that are available under the summer studentship scheme: https://virtualcampus.kcl.ac.uk/vc/vccommon/studentships.aspx

Alternatively, you could identify a supervisor who is researching an area in which you are interested and find out whether they will require additional help. You could look at the postgraduate prospectus online at www.kcl.ac.uk/prospectus or by searching from the Research Division link on the School home page, www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/biohealth/research

Imperial College London offers an Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme, which provides opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students to participate in the research activities of Imperial College. The programme is open to students at all UK higher education institutions: http://www.imperial.ac.uk/urop

The University of London produces a weekly jobs bulletin which may include research assistant roles: http://www.lon.ac.uk/jobs.html.

Medical charities such as Wellcome Trust and Cancer Research UK (CRUK) also offer short research projects either over the summer or as an intercalated year: www.cancerresearchuk.org ; www.wellcome.ac.uk

Commercial laboratories

It is possible to get work experience within pharmaceutical and biotech companies. Some organisations offer structured placements, either over the Easter or summer vacations or as longer industrial placements.

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) has information on work experience opportunities including a list of companies who offer work placements. Go to www.abpi-careers.org.uk and select ‘getting into the industry’ and then ‘pharmaceutical recruiters’.

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Hospital laboratories
It can be difficult, though not impossible, to get experience within a hospital laboratory due to the time that it takes to train staff to the required standards and to adhere to health and safety regulations. Each hospital will have its own policy towards work experience so it is a good idea to contact each hospital in your area to find out whether they accept students on placements, and then to contact the relevant department within the hospital to enquire about opportunities.

To find contact details for your nearest hospital go to the NHS website: www.nhs.uk.

Scientific recruitment agencies
It is sometimes possible to get experience through a scientific recruitment agency which places staff in temporary positions. Some agencies, such as SRG and Reed Scientific, may be looking for more specialist skills that an undergraduate would not normally be expected to be able to provide, but it is still worth investigating whether there are any opportunities for students. Try Lab Support: www.labsupport.co.uk which does place students in temporary positions over the summer. Other agencies often advertise in New Scientist.

Further resources
Work experience information
The Prospects website has a section devoted to work experience:
www.prospects.ac.uk.

The National Council for Work Experience:
www.work-experience.org.

Scientific sites and sources of vacancies
http://careers.abpi.org.uk/Pages/default.aspx

Pharmaceutical careers information from the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry
www.biosciencejobs.co.uk

A list of recruitment Bioscience recruitment companies
www.srg.co.uk

Other good job sites
www.NewScientistJobs.com/graduate
www.sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine
www.naturejobs.com

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