

Student Article

A placement year abroad - Is it right for me?

Alisha Fleming

University of Leeds

This article describes the personal experience and reflections of a third year university student who opted to complete a sandwich year at a pharmaceutical company in Belgium.

My placement abroad

For my sandwich placement, I opted to travel abroad to Brussels (Belgium), where I undertook work in a toxicology focused research lab at UCB Biopharma. I took on a supervised role in research into drug-induced cardiac injury biomarkers. As this was my first time working in an industrial laboratory, I spent the first few weeks of my placement familiarizing myself with the literature and learning the lab techniques I would be using over the year. I was thrown in at the deep end as I was given a considerable amount of responsibility within months of my placement, and expected to follow unfamiliar scientific protocols precisely and grasp new techniques quickly. Whilst on placement I studied gene and microRNA expression and learnt to master techniques such as RNA isolation, cDNA synthesis, real-time qPCR and ELISA. Working in a medium sized company with a small research department, I effectively took on the position of a lab technician for my supervisor. This was a steep learning curve but provided me with invaluable experience which will be the envy of my peers in my final year of university.

Challenges

Taking on a job role in industry for the first time was a challenge in itself. Initially, I found lab work quite solitary as the labs were minimally staffed and most of the time I was working alone. I found new techniques difficult to grasp and felt little job satisfaction or motivation to continue with the role. This left me feeling confused as to which direction I saw my career path heading. I had wanted to try a lab-based position to see if it was the kind of career I wanted to pursue and from what I had experienced early on, it certainly was not.

The pressure of living abroad was a major test on my personal strength and adaptability. After the initial excitement of starting a new job and exploring a new city, I started to feel overwhelmed and homesick, which was something I had not experienced in my first two years at university. It was the first time I had lived abroad and it was a struggle for me to adapt. I was surrounded by not one, but three foreign languages (French, Dutch and Flemish), and the cultural differences were greater than I had anticipated.

Sadly, I feel the language barrier prevented me from making friends and settling in as quickly as I would have liked. Added to this, there were only three student interns on my placement at UCB and the majority of our co-workers were older with families, so our social network was quite small which was not what I had been used to at university. That being said, with help and support I was able to overcome these challenges and draw some positive conclusions from my placement abroad.

Positive aspects of placement abroad

Although at times the positive aspects of a placement year abroad seemed few and far between, I have been left with an overwhelming sense of satisfaction and gratitude for the opportunity I was fortunate enough to be offered. I have gained a massive amount of professional experience including improving my lab skills, which will stand me in good stead for my dissertation project this coming year, as well as when it comes to applying for graduate jobs.

I have also developed a number of life skills improved my organizational skills, my time management and communication skills. I have a better understanding and awareness of what it is like to work in a professional environment and within a team, and have enjoyed engaging in what feels like an entirely different chapter of life compared to life as a student at university.

I really appreciated the free time after work, on weekends and on holidays and I particularly cherished not having to revise over Christmas! The job role made me realize what was important for me personally in order to find job satisfaction, which enabled me to start focusing on the types of graduate jobs I would consider applying for after university.

As clichéd as it sounds, I feel undertaking a placement abroad has enabled me to grow as a person. There were times when I felt like quitting, as I was not enjoying where I was living or the job I was doing, but I dealt with it and pushed through. This perseverance made me stronger and I actually began to feel a lot more comfortable both in the job role and in the country as time went by. If I had quit when it got tough, I feel sure I would have deeply regretted it.

Working abroad has enabled me to make connections internationally and form friendships across the globe. I became more culturally aware, travelled to numerous places and made lasting memories. I feel I have come out of the experience with a more open and positive mind-set, as well as a new found appreciation for the flexibility of student life. I would recommend this experience to everyone, even if you have doubts initially; the challenge is well worth it.

Advice for students considering a placement year abroad

If you are offered the opportunity to do a sandwich placement abroad, I would highly recommend you take it. Undertake extensive research about where you are considering going to ensure you feel like it is somewhere you could grow to enjoy, or where you can identify with the culture. Although it is great to completely push yourself out of your comfort zone, the experience can be daunting. Familiarizing yourself with your future job or home could take the edge off when it comes to move out day. Also, there is no harm in being prepared! It will mean you can find fulfilment from your placement year much earlier on, leaving more room for development later in the year.

Perhaps try to learn the language used in the country you are planning to work in. Although it may not be essential for work purposes, it will help you to feel more integrated in the society and make friendships much easier. The ability to speak another language is also particularly useful in terms of career prospects, so I would strongly advise this, as it was what I regret the most from my placement year.

Another idea if you plan to work abroad is to use apps such as ‘Meet Up’ and ‘Facebook’ to find activities or social groups in your local area. Joining a gym, sports club,

dance club or any society where you can meet people will help you feel better about living abroad and will help you find friends, so don't be shy!

Conclusion

Working abroad and an industrial placement are both valuable experiences which will not only enhance your professional development but also enhance you as a person. Getting work experience early can help to drive your career forward and can help you determine your future career path. Moving to a different country can be daunting, but broadening your horizons might just surprise you and open your eyes to a new way of thinking. Overall, a placement year abroad has been positive in many aspects of my life, and I would recommend anyone even considering it, to just go for it.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

ajfleming96@gmail.com