

## Case Study: AstraZeneca apprentice shares insight into her apprenticeship journey and involvement on vital COVID-19 projects

Caitlin Cooke, 21, is an apprentice currently completing a Level 5 in Applied Bio Sciences, at AstraZeneca. In this case study, Caitlin shares her apprenticeship journey so far and also what it was like to work on COVID-19 vaccine projects.



### **Have you always been interested in science and/or technology (STEM)?**

Yes definitely! STEM subjects were always my favourite in school.

Although, I was initially inspired by science at a young age due to a close family member, my Grandma, undergoing cancer treatment at the Christie Hospital. Thankfully the drugs and treatments she was given enabled her to recover. From that moment I knew that I would love to work in the pharmaceutical industry, the industry that helped save my Grandma's life.

### **What attracted you to work in the life sciences sector?**

The main attraction for me was the thought of improving people's lives by being involved in the research and production of medicines, which have the potential to increase the quality of life of many patients. Especially after seeing first-hand the impact and improvements medicines can have.

I have strong passion and emotional connection to the work I do and at work, we call them patients but every patient is somebody's family member, they are more than just a number.

## Why did you decide to do an apprenticeship?

Throughout my A Levels, I always preferred hands on, lab work as I am a practical learner, so I knew that a traditional degree may not be best suited to me. My parents actually did apprenticeships when they were younger to become nurses, so when I first told them that I was curious about the apprenticeship route, they were incredibly supportive. In the field I am now in, I was aware that some university students do struggle to get their first jobs without any industry experience, which is exactly what I am gaining while completing my foundation degree. I also knew that an apprenticeship would get me working in an industry that I am greatly passionate for earlier than a traditional degree.

Also, a now colleague, presented at my college on her apprenticeship journey, and that really inspired me! I then attended a careers fair and AstraZeneca had a stall there and I found out more about their apprenticeship scheme, following on from that I attended an open day at the AstraZeneca site in Macclesfield and I applied after that!

## Tell me about your experience of being an apprentice at AstraZeneca.

At the age of 18 I walked into work with no experience in the laboratory. I started in the quality control team and I spent my first two years here, after 12 months I was selected to become a trainer for the team and I have successfully trained many new starters into the department. I really enjoyed my time as a trainer as it allowed me to consolidate my own knowledge, and I loved sharing knowledge and meeting new people.

My mentors and colleagues at AstraZeneca are always aware of when I have exams or busy revision periods, and that I could be under lots of pressure, they are always very supportive of my studies. In September 2020, I was given the opportunity to join the Pharmaceutical Technology and Development Department for the Microbiology group on a 12 month secondment.

I have also been involved with many apprentice events during my time at AstraZeneca including community days and career fairs. I really enjoy these events as it is a chance to engage with new people about the work I do. One example, I loved being involved in is the 'Family Fun Day', where local families visited the site and we shared our science knowledge.

## What have you learned during your time as an apprentice?

One of the main skills I've improved while being an apprentice is confidence! When I first started at AstraZeneca I was quite shy so my apprenticeship pushed me to be confident and to believe in myself.

The whole environment at AstraZeneca, is a really kind so it isn't scary to put yourself out there! Throughout my apprenticeship, I have worked with lots of senior colleagues, so quite quickly you have to come in to your own and be confident in your own abilities. I now enjoy leading discussions, asking questions and just being involved.

One of the best ways to learn is through asking questions, especially when the people around you might have been in the pharmaceutical industry for many years. My colleagues are always happy to share their learnings and knowledge.

## What projects have you been involved in that relate to AstraZeneca's efforts to overcome COVID-19?

One of the best ways to learn is through asking questions, especially when the people around you might have been in the pharmaceutical industry for many years. My colleagues are always happy to share their learnings and knowledge. What projects have you been involved in that relate to AstraZeneca's efforts to overcome COVID-19?

In Microbiology before any new drug release, there are certain tests that have to be carried out, these tests are set out by the Regulatory Agencies. One part of these tests, is sterility testing, every time there is a new drug we have to carry out a method suitability, so 'is the sterility method suitable for use on the product?' In September 2020, I was put on a project to carry out sterility method suitability for the COVID-19 vaccine. I completed this project along with my mentor.

Once the vaccine project was completed I was then asked to carry out a similar project independently! This was working with the COVID-19 monoclonal antibodies (mAbs), which is another treatment or preventative approach to the Coronavirus. It was great to be moved to a similar project once the vaccine was approved as I was really enjoying the work.

## How do you feel about working on such pivotal projects?

I didn't think I would be given such a brilliant opportunity, to work on such a high status project so early on! I feel incredibly lucky to have had an important project to focus on while at work, it allowed me to take my mind off everything going on in the world.

I am also incredibly proud to have been able to do my part towards the COVID-19 effort and I have really enjoyed pushing myself out of my comfort zone to try new things and grow my skills.



## What do your friends/family think about your apprenticeship?

My family and friends are all intrigued by apprenticeships, they are constantly asking what I have been working on. My parents understand and appreciate the apprenticeship route but find the work I do really fascinating, they believe an apprenticeship prepares you for the real world of work. Everyone around me can see my growth in confidence and professional development, and they are reassured that I am training at a world class company that work to such strong values.

Science is transformative and everyone is immensely proud of the vaccine work, and in turn that pushes me to work even harder.

“My biggest piece of advice would be, just be confident and apply! When I applied for my current position, I never believed I would ever secure the role but here I am now. There is nothing to lose from applying but so much to gain. It’s important to believe in your own ability and always ask questions, questions are a great way to show your engagement and enthusiasm.

I would also say once you are in the door say yes to everything, you don’t know if you are going to love or hate something until you try it!”

## What do you feel were the advantages of doing an apprenticeship over other education/ training programmes?

Definitely the experience of working at a world renowned company, I also get to complete my degree with a well-established university. In pharmaceuticals, having the chance to work at one of the top companies is fantastic as you know the training is the best you can receive.

I really enjoy the fact that four days a week, I am a relied upon, regular member of staff. There isn’t any additional coaching and you aren’t constantly watched, you are valued the same as every other member of staff. On the fifth day, that is the chance to invest in your own academic improvements, which is great.

When I first began my apprenticeship, I was worried that it may not be so hands on, but that completely isn’t true. After being with AstraZeneca for two years to then be put on the COVID-19 project was truly amazing. I also had fears around how on earth do you balance a full time job while doing a degree alongside it but again, my mentors at AstraZeneca have been greatly supportive throughout my time as an apprentice.

## What is next for you?

In September, I am hoping to secure a permanent job at AstraZeneca and be given the opportunity to continue studying by starting a Level 6 Apprenticeship and gain a full Bachelor’s Degree. Further study has also been mentioned, so potentially completing a Level 7 Apprenticeship which is Master’s level, so I think I’d like to pursue that when the time comes.

I am looking forward to continuing rotating around the microbiology departments and gaining many new skills. There are also new technologies being researched as part of modernizing microbiology within the company, and I am looking forward to hopefully being given the opportunity to work with these in the future.

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