

SUPPORTING ETHNIC DIVERSITY THROUGH STEM CAREERS OUTREACH

PFIZER CASE STUDY

Harpreet Sehra works within Vaccines R&D, as Clinical Scientist at Pfizer and is a STEM Hub Lead at the Hurley site. Harpreet's role is to coordinate and provide updates to the STEM Hub.

Pfizer have an amazing STEM programme across the UK, and at the Hurley Hub. In addition to the Science in a Box and Medicine and Me offerings, we have a range of STEM-related initiatives that include support at career and apprenticeship fairs, CV review workshops with constructive feedback, mock interview sessions, presentations sharing personal STEM journey, Bring Your Child to Work events and a Work Experience program, in an effort to tackle lack of ethnic diversity in our industry, as well as the general STEM skills gap.

Another successful initiative that we have been running at Hurley is our summer work experience programme. The students get to participate in a wide range of STEM activities and also get to meet and interact with Pfizer colleagues from across different functions within the organisation; from Clinical Scientists within Vaccines to Clinical Operations, Regulatory and Commercial staff. We have run this for 2 years now (including a completely virtual offering this year) where we proactively try to ensure we select students from a diverse range of schools, so we have fair representation. The feedback on the experience each year has been very positive, and we intend to continue this year on year.

What impact has STEM Outreach had on the community?

We wanted to use the Pfizer STEM programme as a gateway not only to raise awareness of our industry and various career pathways available, but also to bust some myths, challenge the stereotype (e.g. white lab coat, older male dominated) and importantly, encourage diversity, given the challenges with representation of scientists from a BAME background.

Born and raised as a Sikh, the values of selfless service or 'seva' have always been a major part of my upbringing. Coupled with the importance of education that was instilled in me from a young age and that I would have to work 2-3 times as hard as my non-BAME male counterparts to prove myself, I was determined to demonstrate that I was more than capable.

When the opportunity arose to step into becoming a STEM Hub lead at the Hurley office, it was a perfect mix of all things I feel so passionate about.

At the Hurley Hub we pro-actively go out into a wide range of schools located in different areas of socio-economic status ensuring we are able to reach BAME and disadvantaged students. The feedback we receive every time is so positive, sometimes touching and sometimes sobering; one example from an inner-city school was where I was asked 'Have you ever experienced racism in your career journey?' It really gives you a stark reminder of the wider social issues that still exist and are recognised at such a young age sadly. It also highlights the importance that our personal STEM journeys are shared with students from underrepresented groups so they can see first-hand, that someone who looks like them, who shares the same name as them and from a similar background as them, has been successful in this field.

Harpreet Seehra, Clinical Scientist at Pfizer UK



One of the common perceptions that often exists amongst BAME communities is of the prestige that comes with following traditional career routes such as medicine and dentistry, especially if there are family members who are already in the profession. This further fuels the stereotypes within wider society where certain professions are associated with particular BAME groups, making it harder to be taken seriously if that is the path you truly want to take, but also to break out of that mould. Our aim is to showcase that the opportunities within science and industry are endless, with the contribution to society just as valuable and fulfilling as any other field. With the current COVID-19 pandemic, science has never been more important, and we really hope that our school Outreach program helps to highlight the need for diversity within STEM.

On a broader level, the unconscious/conscious bias teachers and wider society may hold towards BAME students can negatively affect their self-worth and self-belief potentially impacting their career decision making. Whilst this is a far bigger issue than the Pfizer STEM initiative can hope to challenge and address on its own, by intervening at a grass roots level early on in schools, we hope to see improved metrics on the uptake of STEM subjects and ultimately STEM based careers whether that be in academia or industry.

How do you see the initiative evolving in the future?

This is a long term 'work in progress' with no quick fix, but the hope is that with continued engagement with students from underrepresented groups by means of the various initiatives described earlier, we can help break down some of the barriers that exist and hopefully inspire and motivate students to seize opportunities for a rewarding future ahead. Another work in progress, is the way we reach out to various schools; we try and look at Ofsted Inspection reports to allow us to reach out to lower performing schools. Although these schools can often be a lot harder to reach as they struggle for resources, it is all about persistence and getting that foot in the door.

Thank you to our contributor



Harpreet Seehra,
Clinical Scientist at Pfizer UK

