

# CASE STUDY: FROM GSK APPRENTICE TO PhD STUDENT



After completing her A Levels, Hajra Bibi had a choice to make between University and an Apprenticeship. Hajra, 25, decided on a Level 6 Laboratory Scientist Degree Apprenticeship at GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) before undertaking a Master's Degree and now has begun her PhD in Life Sciences at the University of Dundee. In this case study, she describes her unconventional journey and hopes to inspire others to do the same.

## Why did you decide to do an Apprenticeship?

When I was at school, completing my A Levels, apprenticeships were a huge unknown and they weren't really pushed as an option. However, my school was relatively close to a Unilever site and they'd just enrolled two students on to their apprenticeship scheme, who had been in the year above me. One day, they came back into school and gave a presentation about their time at Unilever and we were given an opportunity to speak to them directly. That is what first sparked my interest in the apprenticeship route, as I was unaware that apprenticeships existed in the STEM field. I've always preferred to be more hands on and enjoyed the practical elements of my A Levels so that's when I realised the apprenticeship route was right for me.

I had a lot of pressure from family, as I was the first generation to pursue Further Education so they were keen for me to go to University, as neither of my parents had done so. At the start, I'm not sure they were fully convinced that the apprenticeship route was the best option for me. Once I explained the wide range of benefits, that I'd be gaining industry experience while still completing a degree, they were very supportive.

Once I decided on the apprenticeship route, I applied to lots of science led companies and I successfully joined the GSK Stevenage Site in their BioPharm Discovery Department.

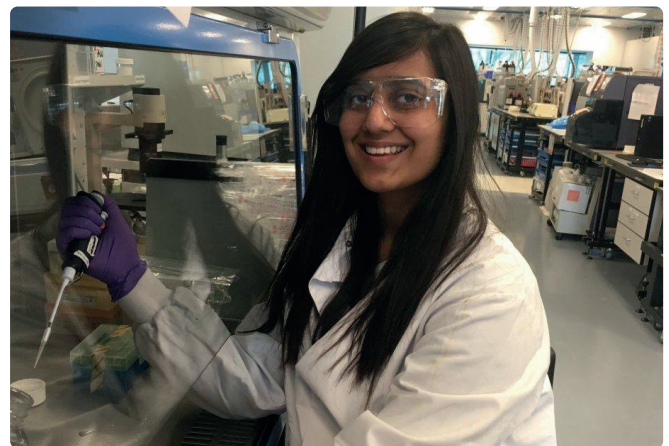
## Tell me about your experience of being an Apprentice at GSK?

When I joined GSK in 2014, I was the first of two Degree Level Apprentices for the BioPharm Department so it was a learning curve not only for me, but the team at GSK too. I joined GSK at 18, walked into the lab with no experience and because of the negative stigma around apprenticeships, I was afraid that I wouldn't be given any responsibility. However, this was not the case as very quickly I was put on to programs, conducting experiments and presenting them back to different teams. I felt extremely valued and that I had a role to play within the department.

I had four days working in the lab and one day to work on my degree, it was tough at times, to balance work, university and life, but I had incredible support from the team at GSK. For example, when it was exam season, my

supervisor would reduce the level of lab work that I had to ensure that I had opportunity to excel, not only in the workplace but academically too.

Another aspect of my apprenticeship that I really enjoyed was the Development Courses. Each year, apprentices across all GSK sites met up for a week in one location and went through a detailed, uniquely designed development course. Building up soft skills, such as: presenting, leadership, change management, and working under pressure. These courses allowed me to interact with apprentices from other parts of the company and developed myself to be able to take on higher roles.



## What did you learn during your time as an apprentice?

When I first began my apprenticeship, I was very quiet and wanted to blend into the background. I wouldn't contribute much to meetings and speaking in those environments made me very nervous. However, I was always pushed to step outside of my comfort zone, I grew into the role and also in confidence. At the start, it was a steep learning curve but now looking back the skills I developed while completing my apprenticeship were incomparable. Each year I rotated and joined a new team within the BioPharm department, learning a whole new set of scientific techniques and gaining a deep insight to the antibody drug discovery process. I was taught an abundance of laboratory skills and soft skills, that will stay with me throughout my career.

### What advice would you give to other people who want to follow your career/education route?

My advice now is to aim high, and don't be afraid to reach out to people that are there to support you. Also, when you're first starting out, take hold of opportunities that arise. Sometimes you yourself may be unaware of the benefits.

Follow your interests, reach for it and you will achieve it.

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

When I completed my apprenticeship at GSK, not only did I gain a BSc in Applied Bioscience from the University of Kent but also five years of industry experience, and that is unparalleled to anything I would've gained, had I chosen the full-time university route. I came away with a degree and no university debt, which can be a huge issue for many young people when deciding on which route to take.

The network that I managed to build during my time as an apprentice was great, everyone I met while at GSK were so supportive and went above and beyond to help me.

### What advice would you give to other young people interested in an apprenticeship?

I think it's really important to follow an interest, even if it's a small inkling. Your work experience will be focused on the apprenticeship subject, so everything you're learning and studying will be concentrated on that area. So, for me it was Biology in general, which I really enjoyed while at school. Follow what you're interested in and you'll have a blast!

### After Hajra completed her Degree Apprenticeship, she applied to undertake a Master's Degree at the University of Oxford after great support from her supervisors at GSK.

Three years into my apprenticeship, I was promoted to Associate Scientist. I continued learning so I could complete my degree apprenticeship. During that two-year period, I was paired up with a mentor by the GSK Early Talent Team. The early conversations I had with my mentor were focused on what my next steps would be after I completed my apprenticeship.

I really enjoyed my third year rotation which was in the Immunology Lab, and I think this is what I wanted to pursue. So in conversation with my mentor, I decided to apply for a Master's Degree, as I only had one year of experience in the field of immunology and I thought it would be great to learn more. I identified a course at the University of Oxford and it looked like the perfect fit, so I showed the course to my mentor, Wendy, and wondered if there were similar options that I could complete part time as I still wanted to work for GSK. At that point, Wendy challenged me and said, why don't you apply for the course at Oxford? I was encouraged to aim high, which I wasn't prepared to do at that time.

I was accepted on to the MSc in Integrated Immunology at the University of Oxford and that was a great moment! But I was unsure on what to do, as I had amazing job at GSK that I didn't want to give up. As the MSc I'd applied to was aligned very closely with GSK own research ambitions going forward, I was sponsored by the company to undertake the degree.

### Why did you choose to pursue a PhD?

After I finished my Master's, it became important for me to develop as a free-thinking scientist, someone who can string together the theoretical with the practical. I had become well equipped to the practical side through my apprenticeship, but perhaps not so much the theory. The best opportunity to do so is by doing a PhD because a PhD allows you to own your research project. I found a love of immunology while doing my Master's and wanted to pursue that further, so a PhD in the area of immunology was the ideal next step.

### How has your time been pursuing a PhD?

So far, it's been really great. I'm very pleased with the people around me, I think I've been lucky in that sense. My PhD supervisors are great scientists and I know I will learn a huge amount from them. Despite all the COVID restrictions, everyone around me has gone above and beyond to make sure I feel settled in a new area. I'm still able to go into the lab to conduct experiments and I'm really looking forward to getting my project off the ground. I'm very excited to seeing how it will progress!

### How did your employer (GSK) support you?

The support from GSK has been phenomenal, they've supported me throughout my BSc, MSc and now as I pursue my PhD. Identifying a Principal Investigator (PI) can be a tricky aspect when you're looking to do a PhD. I was put in touch with my PI, a world-renowned immunologist, by Malcolm who is responsible for all academic liaisons with GSK. My project is a collaboration between GSK's Protein Degradation team and the Division of Signal Transduction Therapy (DSTT) at the University of Dundee. It's really the perfect pairing, as I get to fulfil my ambitions to develop as a researcher and work with some amazing scientists, whilst knowing that my research project will help identify new ways to create medicines and treat disease.

There are many people who have been instrumental in my journey, too many to name, but I am incredibly grateful to all my supervisors, managers and mentors at GSK.