

I finished Pershore Sixth Form in 2003 after passing my A2 levels with a B in English literature, C in Biology and D in Chemistry (my additional AS subject was French, and I got a D, which wasn't a surprise!). I had worked as hard as I could for my A Levels, and I had been hoping for a B in biology and C in Chemistry so I was very disappointed; I had an offer from Newcastle University based on these results, and I thought that I had lost my place. However, after a few stressful weeks considering clearing and many phone calls, I eventually spoke to Newcastle University, and they still wanted to offer me the place anyway. This was the start of my career path that has been guided by recognising and seizing opportunities, the odd hasty decision and what seems like a lot of luck, and so far it's working well for me.

At Newcastle University I studied Pharmacology, which involved an exciting undergraduate research project which made me realise – completely out of the blue – that I would like to pursue a research career. I graduated with a 2:1 (Hons), again by the skin of my teeth, as my grade had fallen just below the 2:1 boundary. Because of this I was granted a viva, an oral exam to judge whether you should be put up a grade or left at the lower one, and I passed. I found the PhD that I wanted in the Dermatology and Toxicology departments at Newcastle University, I got the position and I enjoyed my PhD project immensely. I gave talks that won prizes at institute and national research days and published a paper from my work, which is a crucial part of our job, as it is how our careers are judged as researchers. I then wrote my 90,000 word thesis, and hated every moment of it! It seemed that I was surprisingly bad at written communication, which probably indicates why I had struggled in exams throughout school and university, but when learning, working and being assessed by different means ie. practical and oral exams, I was able to show my true potential. The final PhD exam is a viva, an oral exam conducted by a professor from your university and one chosen from another university who works in a related field. The examiners read your whole thesis and can question you on any (or every!) part that they like, and vivas are known to often be long and difficult. Mine was 4.5 hours long, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I passed my PhD and I continued working in the same lab for a year as a post-doctoral researcher, to finished my paper for publication.

One of the great things about being a post-doctoral researcher is the ability and opportunity to travel, in both short and long term. We go to lots of conferences, and we can work anywhere in the world! I always knew that I wanted to work abroad as soon as I had finished my PhD; during sixth form I had taken part in the World Challenge trip to Peru and then I had taken a gap year before university. I went with friends from Pershore high and Sixth form and we did a round the world trip, stopping in 8 countries. This was an absolutely wonderful experience that has really helped me throughout my whole life and I still think about it a lot even now! These experiences had given me a real passion for knowing and exploring new places and cultures. So, I searched for a post-doc position in a country that could offer me a new culture and language, as well as a great career opportunity. People often go to the USA for post-doc positions as it has many large successful labs. However, I didn't want to do this, and I applied for a position in a very successful institute in Naples, Italy called the Telethon Institute for Genetics and Medicine (TIGEM). My prospective boss had just returned to Naples after 5 years in the USA, and although my CV wasn't very strong compared to his publications, he gave me the job and in January 2013 I moved to Naples.

I didn't speak any Italian, but I had learned Spanish during 4 months I had spent in Mexico during my gap year. So I moved to Italy with 2 suitcases, and an Italian grammar book and I spoke Spanish to people until my Spanish became Italian (luckily the languages are very similar!), which took about 6 months. There are few foreigners in Naples and even fewer people speak English, so I learnt Italian from people at work but also I found fruit sellers to be my favourite source of language, which luckily for me is a completely different method of learning compared to school lessons! So in all, building on my foundations of learning written French and spoken Spanish, I have learnt Italian quite well.

Our group here works on understanding how the growth of long bones (the arms and legs) is regulated during post natal development, and I specialise in cell biology and cell imaging techniques, which is taking pictures of proteins within cells to see how they behave, what they are doing and where they are in the cell. Our institute specialises in developing genetic therapies for rare diseases, and our work is an important part of the basic science required to do this. My career during this period has been very successful in two ways; the first and main one is that I have recently published in one of the top international journals, Nature. This has opened up many new opportunities for me and I'm still trying to get used to it! The other is that as I work for a charity funded institute, I have been involved in their funding campaigns. The charity is called Telethon, and has an annual week long TV fundraiser "marathon" on one of the main Italian TV channels, a bit like Children in Need. The charity decided to ask me to be involved in their fundraising through interviews on TV and also in national newspapers and magazines. This is a completely unexpected and exciting additional level to my work in Naples, another great opportunity that I have had the pleasure to take!

My plan from this point is to stay in Naples for about another year and then to go to a bigger lab that specialises in cell biology and imaging techniques to increase my cell imaging expertise; cell imaging is a very exciting and fast developing area of research at the moment and I think that my career path lies here at the moment. However, this plan is very flexible and depends upon which interesting people from interesting research areas I meet, and in which directions my current research projects take me! I also have no plans to change my previous method of taking career and life choices by seizing opportunities, being determined, working hard and happily accepting all of the luck that this brings me!