

The many faces of biology

With over 1,400 different university biology courses, how will you ever decide which is the right one for you? Instead of just randomly picking one out of a hat, this article hopes to give you an overview of the other different options available when choosing your higher education pathway. Interviews by Catherine Lichten, Aisling Spain and Katherine Staines.

David MacFie

Physiology, Nutrition and Sports Science at Glasgow University

Why did you decide to do your degree?

I have always been interested in the human body and how it functions, especially in response to exercise. This degree allowed me to combine this with my love of sport.

What was the best thing about your degree?

I really enjoyed having a mix of teaching – Lab work and small group tutorials meant that I wasn't stuck in a lecture theatre everyday.

What advice would you give people interested in your subject?

I always expected to do a job which directly related to my degree. However I soon learnt that this wasn't always the case! I've done Sky telesales, been a tennis coach, and now I am a manager for a orthopaedic device company which provides surgical instruments

What would you do differently if you could?

I would have taken more careers advice both at school and at university



David studied Chemistry, Biology, English Literature and Economics at A-Level



Rudra (speaking) at the Copenhagen climate conference.

Rudra Kapila

Environmental Sciences at Edinburgh University

Rudra studied Biology, Maths, English literature, French and French literature for the International Baccalaureate.

I work in the topical and high profile field of climate change. This means I get to travel to international conferences such as the UN climate conference in Copenhagen. It also means I get to work with people from a variety of disciplines, such as engineers and policy makers, something that I find to be the most enjoyable part of what I do.

Looking back on how I got to where I am, I wouldn't change a thing. I might have studied law, but in all honesty, I have no regrets, as I love the work I do, and I get to study law now as part of my PhD at the University of Edinburgh.

I've always been interested in the natural environment and conservation but at school I also wanted to be a musician, something I still pursue in my free time.



Jo Mendum

Human Anatomy at Strathclyde University

What subjects did you study in the sixth form?

Highers: Maths, English, French, Chemistry, Biology, Physics

How did you choose what to study at university?

The first year of my degree was a general biology degree but then in the second year we got to do modules. I liked the modules relating to human anatomy the most and so opted to do these in my 3rd and 4th years. Law also interested me so I decided to do it part time.

What did you want to be when you were younger - is that what you are doing now?

I always wanted to be a forensic pathologist. However that is not what I do. Now, I work for a clinical trials company. My job is to ensure all the necessary documents meet the requirements of the Authorities and the Ethics Committees and then submit the documents so that the study can be reviewed and approved. I work with countries all over the world to get the studies approved so patients can be enrolled.

What advice would you give someone who is thinking of following a similar career path?

Be prepared to start with the administrative work and build up from there. Also, always try and get some good contacts as many jobs are word of mouth.



Helen Towrie

Molecular and Cell Biology at Stirling University

What A levels/highers did you do?

Biology, Chemistry, Maths, English, History. I also did CSYS Biology and Chemistry.

How did you choose what to study in university?

I didn't really know what I wanted to do but really enjoyed biology so went with a Biology-orientated degree. I also liked Stirling as a place to study.

I never knew for sure what I wanted to be when I grew up and considered everything from mechanical engineering to teaching to working as an agricultural advisor. I got a job after university which involved doing laboratory testing and whilst here, I completed (by distance learning) an MSc in virology from Liverpool John Moores University.

I now work at a large pharmaceutical services company called Quintiles where I set up laboratory testing for global clinical trials. I particularly like this job because it gives me a chance to work with people who are based around the world.

The most important thing I have learned is how important it is to put yourself forward for opportunities as they arise; they are all good learning experiences. For instance, I managed a cattle health scheme where I had to present to farmers and vets and it has given me great skills for presenting to clinicians now.

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Phil Newton

Biochemistry at UCL, London

I really enjoyed doing Biology and Chemistry at A-level and I found biochemistry a more interesting subject than doing either of these on their own.

I am fascinated about how life works, so for me the topic always interested me. Combine this with the excitement of university lifestyle and the whole experience was brilliant.

I am currently studying for a PhD in bone biology at Manchester University. A PhD allows you to be independent and plan your own experiments. I also enjoy the feeling of being on the cutting edge of scientific research.

What would you do differently if you could?

I'd be more proactive in getting a job lined up for after finishing university – I got a 2.1 in my degree and I couldn't get a science job for 6 months.

What advice would you give people interested in your subject?

Science is an amazing field to study because you feel you can achieve anything and make a difference to people's lives. I think if you are motivated by personal reward then science would not be the ideal choice.

Robin Coltman

Pharmacology at Edinburgh University

A-Levels/Highers: English, German, Geography and Music. Returned to college to take Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Biology.

At school I didn't know what I wanted to be but it was always important to me to work. So, after leaving my business degree I worked as a manager in a furniture shop. Ten years later I decided to return to college so that I could go back to university. I chose to study pharmacology as this time round, the most important thing to me was choosing subject that would interest me for 4 years.

My degree has led me onto a PhD in neuroscience which I really enjoy because it's extremely challenging and really pushes the limits of your understanding about a subject which generally means you learn a lot and this I find very rewarding. Outside of university I am a 3rd dan Tae Kwon Do instructor.



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You can find out more about Biology courses at UK universities on the biology4all website:

http://www.biology4all.com/going_to_university.asp