

How to breeze through your BMedSc(Hons) year: Tips from my personal experience

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The number of medical students choosing to intercalate a Bachelor of Medical Science with Honours (BMedSc(Hons)) degree into their MBChB degree has been steadily increasing over the past 15 years. By the time this article is published, almost all 3rd and 5th year medical students intercalating in 2011, will be committed to a project. This article is written to help those students make it through their research year easily, and get the most out of it. The tips given here are from personal experience, and have been given the acronym B MED SC HONS.

Befriend your supervisor(s), period. This is first and foremost. Supervisors are, in general, nice people who have a vast experience in research, and can make your life so much easier! They have the experience and know how to tackle the dreaded ethics applications, help you get money from grants, and make your thesis look 'pretty' towards the end of the year. They offer so much in exchange for very little; simply meeting deadlines, responding to e-mails and working professionally will go a long way to fostering a positive relationship.

Make new friends at your lab/institute/office. These are the people, also known as research-mates, that you are going to see every day (yes, including weekends towards the end of the year!) for a whole year. Getting to know them well will make life in the lab a lot more fun and, chances are they are going to help you out later down the track when it comes to preparing an abstract, making a poster, culturing cells or analysing your data.

Embrace reading. Your articles are your treasure! Medical research is an ever-evolving field, so you will have to keep yourself up to date, especially in your research field. You will read more articles than all six years of your medical degree years combined. Therefore, it might be a good idea to start reading sooner rather than later. Not only will this give you golden points with your supervisors (helps with point number 1), but it will also help you in planning your thesis; knowing what is important and also what is not.

Do not let anything put you down. Unfortunately, research life is not a bed of roses; it is a bumpy road with many twists and turns. Every researcher must take it (and you can!). You may struggle to get your project approved by the Ethics Committee, or cells that you have been culturing die off, or the manufacturer of your equipment has stopped making it. However, do not give up! Be creative and try to find a way to work around the problem. Research is all about novel thinking, so embrace the chance to think outside the box, and of course there are always your research-mates and supervisors to ask for guidance. Persevere and you will prevail!

Start taking (useful) courses earlier in the year. Courses for students writing theses are offered free of charge by the Student Learning Centre, and are extremely helpful. These include courses on Endnote (i.e. to keep

track of all those papers you have read!), Word, Excel and SPSS (i.e. for the dreaded stats at analysis time). Courses are packed full of useful tips and ways to expedite the laborious tasks everyone must do. They can save you precious time down the track, and help you to complete your thesis with minimal technical problems.

Complete administrative tasks as early as you can. This includes getting your University and hospital/lab ID cards, completing the re-admission form with your school of choice, and completing all health check-ups needed for your project (e.g. MRSA tests or HBV vaccinations). You will become busier as your project progresses. Testing results, analysis and writing up will all pile up in face of looming deadlines, and administration is the last thing you want distracting you.

Holidays: plan them ahead, and plan them sensibly. You will find out that you might not necessarily be able to take a timeout during regular university semester breaks. This might be because you are preparing for a conference presentation, working on live cell culture, or planning to meet patients during their appointments. Having said that however, you will have some flexibility to plan for a nice short holiday, and you should! Once you have planned on the dates, double check with your supervisors in case you missed a deadline, and then go for it!

Organise all the important details, so you can access them easily and reliably. This extends to many aspects of your research life. Deadlines for grants, ethics application, conference abstract submissions and thesis submission all need to be planned ahead and written in your weekly/monthly planner. Similarly, you will find that by the time you have reviewed the relevant literature around your research topic, you will have gone through an average of 80-150 articles. Organising these chronologically or by topic will make your life so much easier for future reference while writing up your thesis. Endnote courses offered by Student IT can help!

Never too early to start your thesis write-up. This is the one million dollar tip! You have anything between 10,000 to 40,000 words to write for your thesis; therefore, it is wise to start writing up as soon as possible! You can, in most cases, finish your introduction chapter even before starting your actual project. Your supervisors can help you structure it, and along with your readings from the literature review, you can produce a good introduction. Writing up the introduction is also important for consolidating your understanding of the literature review and helps you keep the bigger picture in mind when results and analysis time comes. This will save you precious time towards the end of the year (when it will get hectic!).

Senior students are (almost) always happy to help. Research life is fun and rewarding, but you have to work hard for it. Sometimes it is more skill than instinct, and students that have been through it will have so much to advise you on if you approach them nicely. I am always happy to answer questions related to your BMedSc(Hons) degree through my email: alaya899@student.otago.ac.nz.

So, enjoy it and good luck!

REFERENCES

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To intercalate or not to intercalate.
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