

Choosing the right BMedSc(Hons) project

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INTRODUCTION

The number of medical students choosing to intercalate a Bachelor of Medical Science with Honours (BMedSc(Hons)) degree with their medical degree has been on the rise.¹ One of the difficulties that many medical students face when undertaking a BMedSc(Hons) is choosing a project. One must realise that a BMedSc(Hons) project consists of both a topic and a supervisor. Choosing the right supervisor is as equally important as choosing the topic. At the time of publication, many students will be starting to think about undertaking a BMedSc(Hons). The aim of this article is to provide tips from my personal experience on how to go about choosing a suitable BMedSc(Hons) project. Some of these tips may be more focused toward lab-based research due to the nature of my BMedSc(Hons) project.

BE CERTAIN.

Undertaking a BMedSc(Hons) project might sound easy; however, research can at times be challenging, stressful and frustrating. It is very common for research students to reach a point where they wonder why they had decided to undertake research and possibly regret the decision. If one is not motivated from the beginning, they may find it hard to be motivated midway through their project. Being certain about wanting to undertake a BMedSc(Hons) will certainly help in keeping one motivated to complete the project. If you are still sitting on the fence, it may be useful to undertake a summer studentship or possibly spend a day or a week at the lab before committing to a full year project.

BE INTERESTED IN THE RESEARCH TOPIC.

Being interested in the research topic is essential because research will involve labouring for hours and hours, both reading and writing about a particular topic for a whole year, if not more. Being enthusiastic about the research topic will help to increase motivation during difficult times and also motivate oneself to complete the project. If the suggested topics in the handbook are not appealing, it is always possible to be innovative and create one's own project, provided that there is a willing supervisor. When meeting a supervisor, be willing to discuss possible changes to the research topic or even other potential research topics. Previous BMedSc(Hons) students have been able to find supervisors who have allowed them to

undertake part of their projects overseas. A useful resource to assist in finding a suitable supervisor with similar research interests as you is the online staff profile pages. Furthermore, lecturers and BmedSc(Hons) students may also be good resources in identifying potential supervisors within their departments.

MEET THE SUPERVISOR.

Initially, it is important to assess one's compatibility with the supervisor and whether one would be able to spend a full academic year under their supervision. An important consideration in choosing a supervisor is their experience in the particular research topic. Thus, it is vital to enquire if this particular experiment and methods have been carried out in the lab previously, as much of the experimental work will require training and technical assistance from the supervisor or more senior members of the team. Another important aspect is the supervisor's experience in supervising student projects and whether they have supervised previous BmedSc(hons) students. It would also be useful to know if there are other students or postdocs in the lab. Too many students in a lab may mean less time with the supervisor. Furthermore, supervisors with other administrative responsibilities may also have less time for their students. It may be useful to ask if the research team have regular lab meetings as it could be worth attending a meeting and observing how the supervisor interacts with their students and postdocs.

ASK ABOUT YOUR GO-TO PERSON.

In research, things don't always go the way they should so it is important to have a go-to person with an open-door policy who is accessible and available during times of need. If there are periods when it may not be possible to contact one's supervisor, then it would be wise to enquire about having a co-supervisor. Co-supervision is usually undertaken by a postdoc working in the lab under the primary supervisor. It is typical for primary supervisors who are undertaking administrative roles in their department or supervising multiple projects to assign a postdoc to each student.

TALK TO THE SUPERVISOR'S RESEARCH STUDENTS AND POSTDOCS.

It is always useful to consult with students and postdocs who are working or have worked with a potential supervisor. Ask them lots of questions. It is essential to enquire about their supervision style as some have a hands-off approach while others can be more involved. It is worth considering how much direction and supervision one might need from a supervisor, as having a supervisor who is slightly demanding may be useful in maintaining one's focus and dedication to the project. Talking to other students may also help in envisaging what the project entails and how busy it might be.

Another thing to ask about are difficulties that students have faced during their research. Identifying these issues may help one to avoid such problems and possibly plan ahead with your supervisor in case one is faced with similar issues. They may also be aware of useful resources for the research topic. It can also be worthwhile to look up previous theses supervised by a potential supervisor to get a better idea of their expectations. Theses can be accessed from the reserved section at the library and possibly from the supervisor.

THINK BEYOND THE BMEDSC(HONS).

A BMEDSC(HONS) can be upgraded into a PhD, where an additional year is given to the student following the BMEDSC(HONS) year to continue their research. The student is also allowed to continue the PhD during summer vacations as well as the 3-month trainee intern elective period. If there is a possibility that one might upgrade their BMEDSC(HONS) into a PhD, one should consider undertaking the BMEDSC(HONS)/PhD project in the same city that they plan to complete their advanced clinical training in. This is because PhD students will likely need time during their advanced clinical years to complete their PhD and it is more convenient and efficient to be within the same geographical region as the supervisor. In my opinion, long-distance research projects can be very challenging and inefficient.

Once committed to a project, I would highly recommended reading the article by Alamri published in the NZMSJ, regarding tips on succeeding in the Bmedsc(Hons).² The most important thing is to make sure you enjoy your journey of research, and I wish you all the best.

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