

Season Three, Episode Two – Student Takeover

00:00 Jess

Hi everyone. And welcome back to the second instalment of this season's pathways podcast. Today, we're doing a student takeover and we'll be talking to you all about our experiences, fitting into university and breaking down social stereotypes, relating to doing a chemistry degree. I'm Jess man, a final year chemistry, BSC student and student comms intern within the department.

I work in the student experience team with Tom Ritchie, Adam Alcock, and Emily Williams who's also this year's chem soc president and with me today are Niraali and Tom who are let introduce themselves to you now.

00:34 Niraali

Hi, I'm Niraali I just finished doing my second year, in the chemistry department and, yeah, thanks for introducing me, Jess.

00:43 Tom

Thanks Jess. My name's Tom Ritchie, I'm director, student experience in the department, really excited to listen on this conversation today. I think I'm going to take a back seat and to see what you have to say. And thanks for inviting me along.

00:00 Jess

Yeah, so let's get straight to it. So, I guess the first thing I wanted to ask you Niraali was how was your sort of fitting into university experience? Because we were both caught up in the midst of the COVID pandemic. So how did that compare to the now sort of more relaxed, non-COVID times.

01:14 Niraali

Yeah, I think we had a bit of a weird, weird first year, Jess. Um, I think, yeah. Like any 18-year-old, who's moving from school to uni. That was a big jump in itself. But I also think that it was even more daunting for our year because. You know, we didn't have a fresher's week unless you count those weird online club nights that they tried to do.

Um, bars, pubs, clubs, literally everything was closed, and all of our learning was online as well. So, on top of being nervous about just moving away from home, I think I was quite nervous about trying to make friends when it was like literally illegal to stand outside in more than a group of six people. It was, it was weird. Um, I think in terms of actually meeting people on the course as well in first year, that was quite difficult. Um, because we didn't have regular weekly labs like we did in second year. of our lectures were pre-recorded and online. And I think this is where social media was quite helpful, actually like Jess, I actually met you on Instagram.

I think we were both in a mildly traumatic online lab and I messaged you asking for help. Turns out neither of us had to clear what was going on, but you know what friends ever since

02:39 Jess

Yeah, honestly, I completely agree with everything you said, and I'm so grateful that you messaged me because I was, I remember sitting in my room completely baffled with these online labs. Um, yeah, it was so difficult. I think, to be honest, I don't, I don't really mind the.

Online lectures and everything like that, because I think it gave me the chance to kind of pause, go back and take things in my stride instead um, the in-person lectures now.

Um, because they kind of just run through everything really quickly in that like hour slot that they give us. So, there's no time to really. You know, put your hand up and ask questions in between. You kind of had to save it to the end. Um, but yeah, I, I think because of the whole COVID situation, I was really scared going into freshers and everything because I kind of lost that social interaction.

And I hadn't really spoken to, you know, new people in a really long time. So, for me that was, that was really scary. But again, as you said, social media played a really big part in that. Um, yeah. Which is, I guess like a really big part of our society nowadays.

03:38 Niraali

Yeah, And I think everyone adapted really well to the situation we were in. So, like for me, that meant stepping out of my comfort zone a little bit and reaching out to people on social media or, you know, trying to get involved with society still, even though it felt really weird talking to strangers on a zoom call.

Um, but I also think that meant. I was more excited to go into second year because there were so many things I, I knew I'd missed out on like walking into a lecture theatre and actually seeing more than 10 socially distanced people. I think that was a very exciting experience.

04:15 Jess

Yeah, definitely. I think everyone's first experience walking into those big lecture halls and everything. It was yeah. Quite an experience for all of us and actually seeing people in person was really weird. You kind of just see on teams like everyone's initials and you're trying to like the initials to faces, which is a difficult thing.

But I think towards the end of, um, you know, year two, I think everyone was quite comfortable familiar with each other. So that was quite nice. Um, and yeah, I guess also in terms of like COVID and everything, did you ever feel a sense of, you know, like imposter syndrome, starting uni starting the course or any, anything like.

04:57 Niraali

I think maybe. Yeah, I definitely experienced imposter syndrome, not even just in first year and second year as well, but in particular in first year, I think it's that. like.

I said before, the jump from going to school from, from school to uni, uh, academically as well, it's a, it's a big jump. And I just remember sitting in my room doing the first few pre-recorded, organic lectures, thinking what the hell is a Neumann projection.

And I didn't even, I didn't know people on the course at that point. I was a bit too scared to ask for help, because I didn't want to seem stupid because it was literally the first lecture. So very early on, I was already thinking, why am I already struggling with this? Um, and I think that's when it was really helpful to have in person things in second year because.

You know, we sat our lectures together a lot of the time. And just being able to explain things to each other when you're stuck is so helpful or looking around and seeing everyone look in.

06:07 Jess

Yeah, I think, yeah. Sorry, go on. Yeah.

06:10 Niraali

No. Yeah, I was, I was just going to say, I think, uh, another time that I probably felt imposter syndrome in like the department was probably in labs. I think I used to just, I used to get a bit scared in the labs at the beginning. And I had this idea in my head that the demonstrators are like prowling around the loves and breathing down your neck and, you know, scrutinizing everything you are doing, which obviously isn't true.

I'm also very clumsy. Um, and so there are a few times where I, I did something stupid. Like, I don't know, shoved my spat, you know, through round, bottom FLAS or wash my entire product down the sink. And at those times I just thought, oh my God, I'm done for. But in both labs actually got a good mark. And I think that's when I realized that they don't just care about, you know, what you make at the end of the lab.

Um, and they don't mark you down for breaking something, thank God or for making a mistake. And they do look at how you try and rectify the situation after making a mistake. So, I do wish I'd gone into labs from the beginning, with the mindset that the lab is a safe place to make mistakes and learn, and that you can ask for.

Because it's quite easy to just look around and think, wow, everyone knows, really knows what they're doing. Why am I struggling?

07:32 Jess

Yeah, I think he raised some really, really good points there. I think with the labs, I definitely felt exactly the same way because kind of, I don't know about you, but the labs or the way that experiments and practicals were done in my sixth form was so different to like university labs. And I definitely felt like when I first went in, like you, we were kind of being like tested or like every step along the way we were being like marked on everything.

If. If something went wrong, we'd be marked down severely because of that. But, you know, having spoken to the demonstrators and like the academic staff, they all said, you know, even if something does go wrong, it's not necessarily about, you know, the end result. It's kind of about how you persevere, how you rectify the issue.

You know, those are the key skills that we learn throughout the course, which I think are really important. And another thing as well is kind of, I think a lot of university students in their first year get into that mindset of just being too scared to ask questions. And I was definitely, you know, in that position as well.

And it's so easy for us now kind of being a bit more experienced and comfortable within the cohort and everything. To, to just say, oh, it's, it's not difficult to ask a question, just put your hand up or just go and go and see or speak to a member of staff. But it's so daunting being a fresher, but genuinely, I mean, Niraali I don't know if it was, you know, if you feel this way now, but I, I think it's just, it's so easy to go and speak to them.

They're quite approachable. And they always just say like, if you want to speak to them, just, just go for it. Like, no question is a silly question.

09:03 Niraali

Yeah, definitely. I think, um, in first year again, I was a lot more scared to ask for help, but you know, with, with labs as well, after making a few mistakes and realizing that, oh, they're not, they're not out to get me. it's okay. They're trying to help.

09:22 Jess

Yeah. I think with, with all of that, like, no, one's out to get you. I think university's just, you know, a learning experience. Everyone has their ups and downs, but at the end of the day, I think, especially like with the staff, they just want to help you out, they want you to get the degree that you want and, and everything like that.

So, I, I don't think there's too much to worry about that. I think you just got to get out of your comfort zone a bit and just kind of push all those, you know, fears aside and just be confident in yourself and just ask questions. I think that's what all the staff are here for even, you know, if you think it might be silly and if they even think it's silly, they're not really going to say that to you.

They're going to just kind of approach it professionally. And yeah, I just, I wouldn't worry too much if, if like anyone has any questions that they wanted to ask the staff. But I think relating to not feeling a sense of belonging and just being a bit worried and, and having a, you know, imposter syndrome, I definitely sort of felt that going into doing the chemistry degree, because I think a, a really big stereotype with chemistry is, you know, all the people that do chemistry are nerds, they just don't go out. Um, you know, not to be rude or anything, but yeah. they just don't have that sort of social aspect of their life and things. So, I felt that initially, just because I think COVID didn't really help, and it was really difficult to put on socials and events and things.

I mean, did you, I don't know if you felt that way or, or if your views changed now. I mean, my views definitely changed. I've made, you know, some, some friends for life on my course, which I honestly did not think I would. Um, but yeah. Do you, how do you feel about, you know, making friends on the course and kind of breaking down those social stereotypes that comes with chemistry?

10:58 Niraali

Yeah, I think I'm quite, I'm the same as you actually, because I think COVID didn't help at all in first year. You know, I didn't feel very, I don't know, connected to the, the course or the people on the course because doing everything online, it's just... There's that barrier and it, you know, I felt a bit distant from it.

Um, I literally, you were one of the only people that I knew on the course in first year, and that's just, because I found you on Instagram, but you know, when everything, um, went back into in person learning and we had weekly labs and lectures in person, it was easy to meet people. And it was weird having to go into second year with that same mindset.

Like I'm going to have to actually talk to people and make friends again. But, um, I definitely made some really good friends on the course. but aside from that, um, I think this gave me the opportunity in first year to kind of venture out, you know, into online societies, obviously everything was online in first year, but something like Hindu society.

I found that in first year online and I made so many friends through that in first year. So yeah, I think it worked out well. I got the best of both worlds in first year and second year.

12:23 Jess

Yeah, that's definitely something. I think I was all students out there. So, in terms of the course or the degree that you do, there's absolutely no obligation or expectation to kind of stick within that, you know, area for, um, society. I mean, there's so many different societies, um, within the university. And I know Niraali you mentioned Hindu society. You were President or co-president for second year. So, I don't know. Do you want to speak to us a bit

more about that and how you, you know, manage to balance that and like all the responsibilities with, being a co-president and then work as well and like academic life.

12:59 Niraali

Yeah, definitely. Um, yeah, you are right. It is important to, you know, kind of look at what's beyond, um, just your degree at university. Like, obviously it's really good to join something like ChemSoc but if you've got, I don't know if you're passionate about something like art or I don't know, Star Wars, like you will find a society for it.

Um, and I know incoming freshers are always told, get out there join some societies make some friends, but it's so true. I think it's just such a great way to find people with similar interests and common ground or from a similar background to you. So, for me, the main societies that I joined were, you know, cultural societies, like Asian society, um, obviously Hindu society, art society, and yeah, I was co-president of Hindu society in my second year.

And. It was, it was such an incredible experience. You know, I got to organize and celebrate Hindu festivals like Holi and Diwali at university, So I, I kind of felt like I wasn't missing out on anything by not being at home to celebrate. And it's, it kind of felt like a home away from home and you kind of do get that sense of community with societies that you're part of.

Um, I got to organize so many things like weekly debates, uh, games, nights, charity events, sports competitions, dance festivals. Like I got to oversee all of these events and obviously. It was a huge responsibility. And at times I probably spent more doing Hindu society admin than I'd plan to do. But this is where you have to be very careful about how you manage your time being an exec member, because at the end of the day, the degree is what you are paying for right. So, um, I always find it quite helpful. Definitely. Definitely to have a timetable, um, make sure. You know, you don't miss a lecture or a seminar, anything because of a society thing. Cause once you start to do that, you'll become, you'll become too lenient with it. You'll say, oh Yeah, it's fine. I can just miss this Thursday thing every week.

So, you just have to find some kind of balance really.

15:22 Jess

Yeah, I completely agree. I think, I think a really key takeaway point from that, from that is, I mean, you are kind of a big, like, evidencing factor of this is, you know, it like anyone is capable and it is possible to balance, you know, doing loads of societies, being an exec member of a society, um, along with really intense and heavy workloads, because chemistry, like we have so much, um, work to do.

The workload is very intense. We have a lot of contact hours and everything, but I think it is, it is possible for anyone to, to balance that and have. You know, mix of socials and, and, um, fun in societies, but also. Keeping on top of work and everything like that, but I would just stress to anyone kind of in that position, just to prioritize obviously academics and everything are really important, but, you know, take the time that you need for yourself and prioritize kind of self-care and everything like that, which I think is really important.

And in fact, the, um, chemistry department are putting in like new initiatives to better the wellbeing of the students in the department and just for the university in general. So, um, and in terms of like time management and everything, um, we are putting together like a wall planner of all of the events for the 2022-2023 academic year.

Um, and we're going to have like loads of QR codes of all the assignments and deadlines. So, if anyone needs kind of an interactive calendar or like a digital sort of calendar that they

can just access really easily. We are kind of giving students that opportunity to better their organization and their time management.

So hopefully, yeah, that'll be a difference this year to how students choose to manage their time and organize themselves.

Yeah, I guess the final thing I wanted to speak about was, women in chemistry the chemistry department put together a women in chemistry event, um, last year, which was the first one ever that has been held and Niraali yeah, you play a really big part of this as well, in sort of organising, Marketing it on social media. So yeah. Do you want to talk us through what you did or what the event was and the importance of it?

17:27 Niraali

Yeah. So, the, the event was, a round table event. And so, there was a panel of. Academics at Warwick and also Warwick chemistry alumni. And basically, people could send in questions through VVox or ask from the audience. And it was a very relaxed, quite conversational type of vibe. and in some way, it was very, it was very empowering to learn about everyone's experience being a woman in chemistry and you know, what kind of difficulties, if any, that they've had to face.

And yeah, like you said, this was the first women in chem in- person event that I'd heard of while being, being at uni. So, I was quite excited about it. Um, I spoke to Dani who co-create the event and I asked her if I could help out. And so, I, helped to set up the Warwick Women in Chem Instagram account. Yes. This is a shameless plug. Go and follow it?

And yeah, I know most people at uni use Instagram. It seemed like the perfect platform to use. Um, we managed to build up a bit of a following, started promoting the event, using feed and story posts. Um, and because of Hindu society. I've had quite a bit of experience using Instagram and Canva to create social media content.

So, I was quite happy to do this. Uh, create some funky looking posts for the page and, yeah on international women's day as well. We did a little thing on the story. I think you remember; I can't remember which one you sent in, but oh wait, you sent, you said it was me, you, everyone sent in favourite woman in stem and why.

And, um, in that way it was quite nice to use the account, to interact with the women in the department and to celebrate women in stem and yeah.

19:13 Jess

Yeah. I think it is really important. I think the whole event and the sort of thinking behind the event is so key and important, especially in a generation like this, where we are trying to break down those stereotypes and those gender stereotypes, and kind of promote the importance of diversifying the industry and just getting more women involved in industry, which is which doesn't discriminate, you know, chemistry does not discriminate, um, at all. so yeah, I thank you for speaking to me and, you know, to the wider listeners about that and hopefully yeah, we'll have more events in the future. I think it's really important to get the message out about, you know, anyone can be involved in chemistry and anyone.

Do anything they want regarding, later careers and chemistry, but even beyond that, they don't have to just stick to chemistry. They can, you know, we can. Anything we can go; we can be involved in any sort of job or occupation or anything like that. So, I think that's really nice. Um, and I think to close, I just wanted to say a massive thank you to, um, you guys for tuning in, and especially if you made it this far, but, um, yeah.

And thank you to Niraali um, for coming in as a guest and speaking about all of her experiences and yeah, just giving a bit of insight into her university experience is, and what she's done as a woman in chemistry, um, within the university and for all of you out there, don't be scared to get in touch if you do want to talk.

So yeah, that's it from me and thank you to Niraali my guest, and I'll see you next time.

20:42 Niraali

Bye. See ya.