

Peter Lumsden – Times Higher Education Supplement

The British Association annual **Media Fellowship** scheme allows active scientists to spend some time with a media organisation. Having an interest in communications and public understanding of science, I sent in the 250 word application, and thought no more about it. I was therefore quite (pleasantly) surprised to be summoned to a briefing in July, and to be informed that the Times Higher Education Supplement wanted me to work with them.

Before the start of my placement I expected that the office of the Times Higher would be pretty frantic, and was a little surprised that the internal atmosphere was quite relaxed. The offices of the THES are just along from London Bridge, and close by 'fortress Wapping', home of the Murdoch empire! I was based in the news team, which essentially involved me contributing to different stories, as well as having the opportunity to pursue ideas of my own. (I had been asked in advance for one or two ideas of stories I could pursue, and this I was able to do). From the point of view of the THES, it was instructive for the staff to have a 'real' academic to give the view of events from the 'other' side; I was also able to have several useful discussions with the editor and news editor.

The rest of this report is written in the form of a diary

Week 1:

Began on August 12th, based in the news section of the office (news on one side, sub-editors on the other). With different staff being on holiday, I used my initiative in accessing computer terminals, ending up with one for remote access to my University system, and one for internet and internal communication. At the weekly meeting of the news team I suggested that I do a story on Widening Participation. This involved quite a lot of ringing round, and looking up web sites. I soon found myself collecting quite a store of information, and also found that I got a range of responses to phone calls – some Universities being quite cagey when I explained that I was from 'the press'. I soon learned to ask for schools liaison or widening participation office, otherwise ended up at press office! Clearly there was a great deal of activity going on in the area of Widening Participation, although I had now focussed the story on the forthcoming Partnerships for Progression. However, I suspect that most academic staff were unaware of this.

Week 2:

On Tuesday afternoon I was asked to produce a piece for the soapbox column on 'something to do with disability'. A limit of 650 words, by tomorrow! Now that's a deadline! I made some phone calls, called up some of my own files, and had something for the sub-editors by noon on Wednesday (the paper goes to print on Wednesday evening). It was quite satisfying to see the piece on Friday.

I continued with the Partnerships for Progression (P4P) story, and got some animated responses, e.g. the Secondary Heads Association were clear that admissions tutors need to be more aware of schools' curriculum. Meanwhile the HEFCE press office were sure that the summary of the P4P consultation would be circulated the following week, which meant that the story could be in the Higher that week as well.

Another job that week was a team effort, with three of us contacting University departments who had successful JIF (joint infrastructure fund) bids. I made email contact with the hospital at Southampton where a new cancer research building had been put up, with Bangor, where a new survey boat had been built, and the physics department at Glasgow, where a new laser facility for. I then spoke with one of the research staff at Glasgow, and learned a little bit about how magnetic waves are detected. The final piece which appeared included the Glasgow story.

Week 3

Clearly the THES is read by a range of policy makers; following my soapbox piece on disability, I received an invitation from UUK to take part in a one-day conference on the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act. There were also one or two letters taking exception to my article!

That week I also began preparing some material for the BA annual meeting. One item was a piece on a database of University academics willing to give talks in their local schools. Professor Colin Blakemore was to launch this at a press conference, and I managed to talk to him on his mobile about this – he was passionate about the importance of science education and awareness in schools. The item was duly published the week before the festival – good publicity.

Week 4

I was attending a European plant science congress this week, but I did get the opportunity to talk to several scientists from eastern Europe, and began to put together a piece on the state of science in former socialist countries.

Week 5

Part of the fellowship is to attend and report on the BA Festival of Science, which this year was at Leicester. There I had a good view of the daily newspapers in operation. Few journalists attend the lectures; information is gleaned from press releases and briefings, and stories filed by early afternoon. I did a piece on transgenic plants, which in the event was not published, and a short piece on the Daphne Jackson fellowship scheme, which was used the following week.

Week 6

Back in the office and we began ringing around Universities to determine final student numbers. The Universities were not giving much away, and in the end there was not much of a story here. The P4P story was finally published, although as a very slimmed down version (some 400 words as to my original 1200!). I even left with some homework, namely to deliver a book review, by January, and to submit a features article on my own work by October / November.

What did I gain from this placement?

- I realise how quickly news moves, and that stories have to grab the attention, by getting immediately to the point.
- Writing an article for a newspaper requires a particular style, and I learned how to switch from my normal 'academic' style to one with much more focus and punch.
- An awareness of what real deadlines are!
- Within the office I was immensely impressed by the wide knowledge of the news staff (and would like to thank them for their support during my stay).
- A realisation that some Universities are slightly suspicious of the media; there should be mutual benefit to exchange of information.
- I also made a number of useful contacts in the media for the future.

I am already using the experience gained in a number of ways:

- Writing articles for the bulletin of one of the learned societies
- As an additional element in delivering skills modules to undergraduates
- In exploring wider avenues for publicising research activities at the University.

The BA scheme is clearly good for postgraduates, who might be looking to develop a career in media, but is also recommended to older academics who are involved in any sort of communication. Although I did not secure any major 'science' stories, I did achieve output in a range of areas, which was a useful learning exercise. The scheme is an excellent opportunity for CPD (continuing professional development), and I would thoroughly recommend it.