

Still finding my feet

By Sinakhokonke Siyaya

My decision to apply for the intercalated programme was not the result of a carefully constructed five-year plan. It was far more impulsive than that. I saw people around me taking the opportunity, felt a little positive peer pressure, and decided to take the leap before I could overthink it. At the time, I did not fully understand what I was signing up for. I only knew that it seemed like an opportunity worth taking. After Mol Med, coming into Honour's year I was still not sure what all of this was about, but I had already committed so I couldn't turn back. Looking back, that impulsive decision placed me in one of the most challenging, but also most transformative academic experiences of my life.

I had become accustomed to a very different way of learning. Medicine often felt practical and structured: learn the anatomy, understand the disease and regurgitate all of that, as it is on your exam paper. Even when the content was difficult, there was usually a clear destination. A method to the madness. Honours introduced me to a world in which the answers were not always obvious and the path towards them was rarely straightforward. Suddenly, much of my learning involved reading, researching, writing, questioning and rewriting. Instead of simply learning established knowledge, I had to engage with how knowledge is produced, challenged and communicated.

That transition was harder than I expected.

There were many occasions when I sat in front of a blank document knowing that I had ideas, but not knowing how to put them on the paper. There has been times as well where I had no idea or clue what is going on and where should I even start. I would read a paper and feel as though I understood it, only to struggle when trying to explain its significance in my own words. Sometimes, I would reread the same paragraph repeatedly while wondering how everyone else seemed to understand what they were doing. The more uncertain I felt, the easier it became to delay starting.

Procrastination became one of my greatest challenges. At first, I treated it as a simple problem of poor discipline and bad time management. Over time, however, I began to recognise that it was often connected to fear, in a way. Starting an assignment meant confronting the possibility that my work might not be good enough. Delaying it allowed me to avoid that discomfort temporarily, although it always returned later with the added pressure of an approaching deadline. I became caught in the familiar cycle of postponing, panicking and then promising myself that the next assignment would be different.

Closely linked to this was imposter syndrome. I often questioned and still question whether I truly belong in the programme. I compared my unfinished thoughts with other people's polished work and assumed that their confidence came naturally. I worried that I lacked the inquisitive mind, writing ability or academic maturity expected of an Honours student. At

times, I felt as though everyone else had received an instruction manual that I had somehow missed.

What helped me most was realising that I was not navigating the year alone. The same peer pressure that initially encouraged me to apply became a source of motivation throughout the programme. My peers challenged me to keep going, conversations with them reminded me that uncertainty was not unique to me. Behind the confident presentations and completed assignments were people who were also trying to manage deadlines, understand difficult concepts and produce work they could be proud of. There was comfort in knowing that finding things difficult did not mean that I was incapable.

Gradually, I began to find my feet. Not through one dramatic breakthrough, but through smaller moments of progress: understanding a paper that had initially confused me, receiving feedback and recognising how it improved my work, completing a piece of writing that had once felt impossible, or explaining a complex scientific idea more clearly than I could before. I began to appreciate that writing is not evidence that one already understands everything; it is often part of the process through which understanding develops.

I am also learning to begin before I feel completely ready. An imperfect first draft is easier to improve than an empty page. Asking for help is not proof that I do not belong. Receiving criticism does not erase the effort behind my work; it gives that effort direction. These lessons have not completely removed my procrastination or silenced my self-doubt, but they have changed how I respond to them.

I have not overcome every struggle. I still have moments when I doubt myself, delay tasks or feel overwhelmed by what is expected of me. However, I no longer see those moments as confirmation that I made the wrong decision.

My Honours year began as an impulsive choice influenced by the people around me. It has become a journey of learning how to think differently, communicate more effectively and remain present even when I feel uncertain. I entered the programme hoping to gain academic knowledge, but I have also gained a better understanding of myself; my habits, fears, strengths and capacity to grow.

And all of this happened in a space of 6 months, who knows what else I'm still gonna learn and discover about myself? I'm as excited just as I am scared of the growth that is still waiting for me out here