Honours Reflection- Providence Nhongo

In October last year, I received my firm offer into Honours in Infectious Diseases and Immunology. I was over the moon. Months of obsessing over my grades, sleepless nights wondering whether I would make the cut, and more panic attacks than I care to admit suddenly melted away. For the first time, becoming Dr Vee didn't feel like a distant dream. It felt real. The road towards the career I had imagined for so many years had finally begun.

Naturally, I am a planner. I like knowing what I'm walking into, so before the year began, I reached out to students from the previous honours class. Every conversation seemed to end with the same warning.

"Honours is brutal."
"You won't have time for anything else."
I smiled every time I heard it.

They clearly hadn't met me.

I was convinced that if I prepared enough, I could somehow outwork the difficulty everyone kept talking about. I read ahead. I revised old content. I organised notes before lectures had even begun. I thought preparation would make honours manageable.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

The first few weeks, covering Calculations and General Techniques, were probably the easiest part of the year. Much of the material was familiar and our course convenors were incredibly supportive. They somehow always found time for our endless questions and made what could have been an intimidating introduction feel exciting.

But universities often assume that students arrive as blank slates, ready to absorb information. We don't.

We arrive carrying our own lives.

While I was trying to keep up with classes, I was also anxiously waiting for updates about my study permit. UCT's deadline for international students was looming, Home Affairs was painfully unresponsive, and every day felt like a countdown. At the same time, I had finally been accepted into an opportunity I had spent three years applying for- being deputy chief adjudicator for the World Schools Debate Championship (this is like the Olympics of debating). It was something I desperately wanted, but it demanded almost ten hours of work every week. Add scholarship applications, lectures that were becoming increasingly unfamiliar, and the pressure I constantly placed on myself, and I slowly became a zombie.

Wake up.

Go to class.

Try to understand.

Go to work.

Study.

Sleep.

Repeat.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped noticing what day of the week it was.

Then came our Specific practical rotations.

Virology felt comfortable. Years of pipetting, plating and working in MCB laboratories meant I could finally breathe a little. Bacteriology went relatively smoothly too.

Immunology was different.

My practical simply didn't work.

I remember staring at everyone else's successful results and wondering what I had done wrong. Was I missing something obvious? Was I simply not good enough? The failed experiment bothered me far more than it probably should have. I never really got the chance to understand flow cytometry before we had already moved on.

That became one of the defining characteristics of honours.

It never slows down long enough for you to catch your breath.

Our taught modules began with Immunology.

I spent two weeks sitting in lectures feeling completely lost.

Every now and then I would understand a concept, only to realise that everyone else had already moved three levels deeper, discussing signalling pathways, analysing flow plots and interpreting figures that looked like a foreign language to me. The more I struggled, the quieter I became. The first assessment only confirmed the story I had begun telling myself—that perhaps I wasn't smart enough to be here.

That thought hurt more than any mark ever could.

Because if I couldn't survive Immunology, what did that say about the future I had spent years working towards?

There wasn't much time to dwell on it.

Honours simply moved on.

Vaccinology arrived like fresh air.

For the first time in weeks, lectures became exciting again. The concepts built on ideas I already loved. We visited research institutions and vaccine facilities, watching science leave the lecture theatre and become something tangible that changed people's lives. My confidence slowly returned. Maybe I did belong here after all.

Then my body reminded me that determination is not the same thing as sustainability.

I had convinced myself that resting was something I could do later. I slept less, worked more and ignored every sign that I was burning out until my health eventually forced me to acknowledge what I had been doing to myself.

Virology followed soon afterwards and quickly became my favourite module. The clouds lifted again. For a while, science felt enjoyable rather than intimidating.

Then came Bacteriology.

The science itself was fascinating, but the module demanded extensive group work. One of the unexpected lessons this module taught me had nothing to do with microbiology. Somewhere between practicals, assignments and assessments, people had formed close-knit friendship groups. Walking into group discussions sometimes felt like arriving at a party where everyone else already knew each other. There were moments when it felt as though your ideas had to fight just to earn a place in the conversation.

Our final assessment was a presentation.

Normally, presentations are my comfort zone. I have spoken in front of audiences of hundreds, even thousands. Debate has taught me to think on my feet and communicate under pressure. Presenting is usually where I feel most like myself.

Not this time.

I walked out convinced I had completely fumbled it.

For days I replayed every sentence in my head, convinced I had somehow lost the one thing I had always been confident in. If I wasn't keeping up academically and now, I couldn't even present well, who exactly was I becoming?

I cried that night.

When the results were released a few days later, I stared at the screen in disbelief.

I had done really well.

That moment stayed with me.

Not because of the mark itself, but because it exposed something I had been doing all year. Every challenge had become evidence that I didn't belong. Every setback became proof that I wasn't capable enough. I had become my own harshest examiner.

Yet reality kept disagreeing with me.

Through all of this, one question quietly followed me everywhere.

If I was struggling this much just to understand lectures, how was I ever supposed to conduct my own research? Research demands independence, critical thinking and confidence. Three qualities I felt I was slowly losing. For the first time since deciding that I wanted a career in academia, I wondered whether I had overestimated myself.

Looking back now, I realise that honours has a remarkable ability to convince you that everyone else has figured everything out while you're the only one desperately trying to stay afloat.

But every time I convinced myself that I wasn't good enough, honours offered evidence to the contrary.

The failed Immunology practical taught me resilience more than perfection ever could.

The lectures that left me confused taught me that genuine understanding often begins with admitting what you don't know.

Vaccinology reminded me why I fell in love with infectious diseases in the first place.

The presentation I thought I had ruined became one of my strongest assessments.

Repeatedly, honours challenged not just my scientific knowledge, but the way I saw myself.

I don’t have all the answers yet. There are still techniques I want to master, papers that make me stop every few sentences to search unfamiliar terms, and moments when imposter syndrome still whispers that I don't belong.

But maybe becoming a scientist was never about knowing everything.

Maybe it has always been about remaining curious when you're confused, resilient when experiments fail, humble enough to keep learning and courageous enough to keep showing up anyway.

When I accepted my honours offer, I thought the programme would teach me infectious diseases and immunology.

It certainly did.

What I never expected was that the most important thing it would teach me was resilience.

The road to becoming Dr Vee wasn't paved by getting everything right. It was paved by discovering that I could keep moving forward even when I believed I couldn't.

And perhaps that is the first lesson every researcher has to learn.