

Dipping in and out – Balancing a Diploma with work (a follow-up article)

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In January 2024 I wrote an article for **infocus** sharing my experiences balancing an RMS diploma with full time work. It feels like a lot has changed for me since then; I've been through the harrowing process of moving house, but more significantly, I've changed jobs. I am now part of the Core Microscopy Facility at the CRUK-Cambridge Institute, assisting primarily with the confocal and light sheet systems. Whilst this was definitely a positive move (I can now call myself a microscopist!), it did mean restarting my diploma project...again.

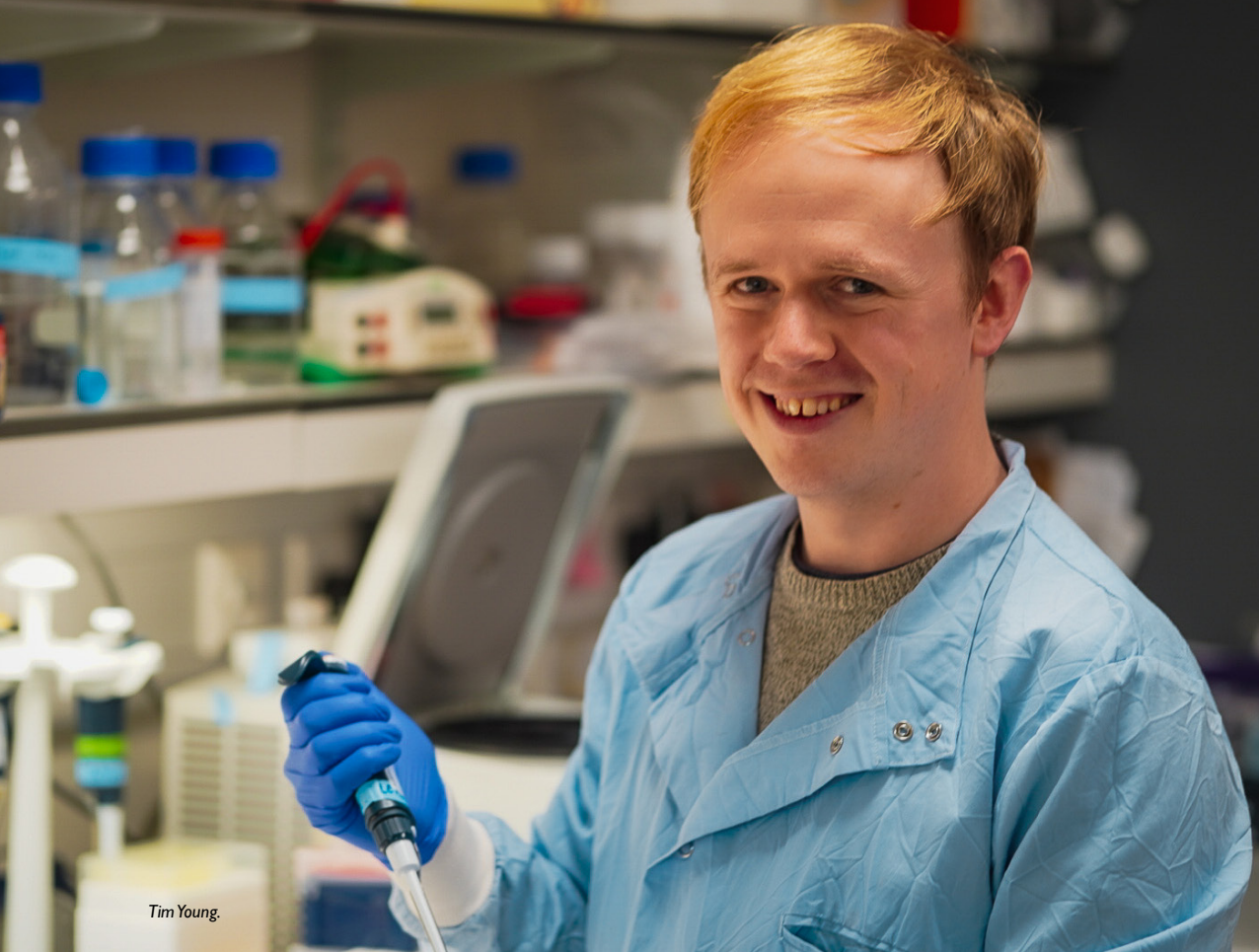
I am not alone in taking a number of years to complete the diploma, but as I now approach the five-year mark since starting, and the end not yet in sight, it's easy to feel a bit demoralised... I set out on my diploma with the goal of moving my career from general laboratory assistant and researcher to microscopist. With this now achieved, is there a reason to continue or am I just creating extra work for me and those around me?

I have been asking myself this since I started my new role, and the answer always comes back as a resounding yes! There are plenty of reasons for me to continue: it is a great qualification organised by

a great team. The work is always pushing me into doing more, learning more and stepping out of my comfort zone. As a requirement of the diploma is outreach, something I find difficult, I have been actively seeking out opportunities within our institute. This has encouraged me to contribute to several events and I'm pleased to report that I very much enjoyed them!

I now find myself sitting on not one, but two RMS committees, as well as the infocus Editorial board. I helped to organise the Early Career Symposium at mmc2025 and attended my first international conference. All of which involve integrating further into the fantastic Microscopy community and working alongside some truly remarkable scientists and lovely people besides. I'm not sure any of this would have happened without the diploma driving me on.

Even though a lot has changed for me, I find myself in a very similar situation balancing work, diploma and home life. The tips I wrote about previously still ring true: Finding this balance is a challenge and the first stop should your line manager or supervisor for an honest discussion about what you would like to do and why, have some clear objectives set out



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and provisions you would need. You may need to negotiate reduced hours or duties to fit in your studies, but your studies should be beneficial, not just to your career, but also to the department you're working in.

It may be helpful to empathise that your work duties will take priority, and the diploma (or other studies) can take a back seat during particularly busy periods. Factor in pauses in your studies and experiments to allow for these breaks in advance. Then be prepared for the quieter times with good experimental notes to come back up to speed again. With these in hand, the project is pushed forward, largely by passion, but also with the support of great colleagues and mentors.

As I write this I am in the middle of, the always

dreaded, data management. Due to the nature of light sheet data, ample processing power and terabytes of storage are needed to analyse the data. One also requires a healthy dose of patience as no single step in the process (copying, converting, loading, stitching, de-noising, segmentation, analysis) can be performed quickly.

This gives me a good opportunity to dip in and out of my diploma work as needed and to focus on the core facility needs, allowing me to make slow but steady progress.

It is often said that "it's the journey that matters, not the destination", and whilst completing my diploma is still very much the destination for me, the journey itself has already got me where I wanted to be.