

Meet our lecturer - Dr Alison Cooper



[\(/undergraduate/courses/med/biomedical-science.aspx\)](http://undergraduate/courses/med/biomedical-science.aspx) Dr Alison Cooper is a Senior Lecturer on the **BMedSc Medical Sciences programme** ([/undergraduate/courses/med/biomedical-science.aspx](http://undergraduate/courses/med/biomedical-science.aspx)) and other programmes across the **College of Medical and Dental Sciences** ([/university/colleges/mds/index.aspx](http://university/colleges/mds/index.aspx)).

Tell us a little about your background?

My professional life is, as they say, a game of two halves. My broad interests in biology took me to a first degree in Natural Sciences where I got to investigate everything from the workings of cells to octopus eyes. Initially that led to me undertaking a PhD and further research in neuroscience where I wrestled with various aspects of the functioning of the bits of brain which are most affected in movement disorders like Parkinson's disease. At various points I found myself teaching neuroscience in a variety of roles and found (to my surprise!) that I really enjoyed the challenge of trying to help students understand complicated concepts. An opportunity arose to take up a role with significant contact with students and I've been doing various aspects of this job ever since.

However, these two halves come together when I am struck, almost weekly, by the somewhat freaky and circular notion that if only we could understand more fully how the human brain learns then we could use our brains to think about how to improve educational learning approaches.

What do you teach?

I teach across many programmes in the University including the BMedSc Medical Science programmes, and at many levels from Schools outreach to Masters level. My primary areas of delivery are in the fields of Neuroscience and Pharmacology but I can get all enthusiastic about any part of biology (even plants in my spare time!) from cells right up to the whole body.

Why do you enjoy teaching?

I think it's because I like to share my curiosity and enthusiasm with others and teaching gives me that opportunity. Sometimes, for example at 9am on a rainy Monday in January it can be quite a challenge to get a room full of students "going" and some of these times are more successful than others – but when you do, it is an amazingly rewarding experience which I don't tire of.

What is your favourite thing about teaching?

The sense of achievement I get from my role comes from more than just teaching delivery per se but comes from all of the other invisible things that are needed by students and the University in order for us all to succeed. So, seeing students I meet during the admissions process develop to graduate, sometimes despite difficult circumstances, and then take the trouble to keep in contact and relay their exploits over the following years, is always a source of satisfaction.

What has been your funniest comedy teaching moment?

No one single moment stands out; there have been fire alarms and exploding light bulbs and students discovering they were in the wrong room a good way into teaching sessions. Perhaps the most fun to do and the funniest for others are appearing in student videos supporting all sorts of activities doing unexpected and sometimes daft things, nearly always involving dancing or wearing funny hats!

What methods do you use to inspire students?

I am a firm believer that learning is something that we all actually do ourselves rather than having it applied to us like a coat of paint! So I am always trying to find ways to enthuse and engage students in their chosen courses to help them gain confidence in their skills and knowledge which are attributes we all need throughout life, whatever our career. When this works, the effect on students is profound and that is what drives me to keep trying new things.

What makes a good lecture?

I don't think there is a single answer to this because the term "lecture" can cover a whole variety of activities and what is effective for one student will not be so for another. So it seems to me that actually variety is important, that way staff can play to their strengths and students get to experience all sorts of different teaching approaches and can identify their strengths and weaknesses too.

Is there a strong link between research and teaching?

It can appear as if these two activities are totally different. However, it seems to me that the skills involved in doing both of these well are quite similar. They both require the curiosity to want to find things out for yourself but then to share them. They both need an analytical and critical approach to the vast amount of information available; for teaching this means being able to decide what are the key concepts and most relevant aspects of a topic to explore with students at their level on their course. In research this is what allows hypotheses to be formulated and tested, experiments to be designed and for the results to be added to the body of knowledge we already have.

If you would like to read Dr Cooper's staff profile for further information about her background, you can do this by [visiting her staff profile web page](http://staff/profiles/cem/neubio/Cooper-Alison.aspx) ([/staff/profiles/cem/neubio/Cooper-Alison.aspx](http://staff/profiles/cem/neubio/Cooper-Alison.aspx)).

