Summer Placement at the British Antarctic Survey, Cambridge.

Jenny Passmore, 2010

I spent my summer placement at the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge where I was collating and updating penguin counts for sub-Antarctic islands. This was a desk-based placement, of which I was initially a bit skeptical but it was interesting to see what life was like working in a scientific organisation. Time spent there gave me a valuable insight into what it would be like if I wanted to pursue a PhD and work in a research career. I enjoyed hearing about the work going on in the department and the work being done by the resident PhD students. Incidentally, the photographs lining the corridors are amazing and it is fun to work somewhere where they are packing up crates to go to Antarctica, there is an aquarium with giant Antarctic invertebrates and film crews regularly come to interview researchers on their latest findings. I had a prior interest in polar ecology so for someone like me, it was fascinating to delve further into this world for two months. The British Antarctic Survey was a great place to do my placement and everyone who works there is really friendly.

In the end, I found the work itself a bit one-dimensional as I wanted to use my initiative and develop skills other than data handling. However, I approached the project knowing this might be an issue and the work did feel important as it was part of an international effort to update penguin numbers. The data was to be used to track penguin populations over the years, as the climate changes and to manage fisheries in the Southern Ocean according to the precautionary approach, taking into account predator requirements. It was surprising but perhaps inevitable due to the conditions down in Antarctica, how little good quality data there is. I had to learn how to deal with data deficiency and a lack of precision in order to come up with a final number.

I would advise current MEM students to ask potential supervisors what skills and experience you can gain from the project from the start, especially if it is desk-based, as you want to make the most of the experience. Also, don’t assume that staying in the UK is necessarily cheaper – rent and living costs add up!