

REJECTION IS FINE, MY PhD STORY...

By **My Engineers** - February 15, 2021



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In 2017, I applied for 5 PhD positions, four ended in premium rejections. But, after each rejection, I improved and moved on. I was finally accepted for the fifth one which was the most competitive, with over 450 applicants for 20 positions. I did not believe my eyes when I received a mail informing me I scaled through the initial screening, I thought it was a fluke. I had my BSc and MSc in Agricultural Sciences. How is it possible I passed the screening for PhD positions at Hannover Medical School?

Well, I was officially invited for an all-expense-paid interview in Hannover, and I also received the list of the available PhD projects. I went through, and I had no experience in none of the topics, as they focussed majorly on cardiovascular diseases, stem cell therapies/research, regeneration approaches, and cancer research.

This is impossible I said...

I read widely on the projects, and I became profoundly fascinated by their prospects. The mere thought that I may get an opportunity to work on something that can potentially benefit a patient, was really thrilling.

But I still thought it was a fluke anyway...

I arrived a day before the interview and got my first reality check. I met my three hostel mates and co-interviewees, one a medical doctor, and the other two had MSc in Biomedical Engineering. I was ashamed to introduce my MSc in Agricultural Genomics.

I was so intimidated...

The next day, I went to the Hannover Medical School. On my way to the interview centre, I walked past the lung transplantation clinic. That name alone scared the hell out of me. I kept saying to myself what am I doing here? Niyi, what are you looking for here?



Medical Doctors, Bioengineers, Cancer biologists, Biochemists, Veterinarians, etc. I was frustrated, and I continued to ask myself...

What am I doing here...?
How did I miss the road...?

My confidence deflated and I just wanted to go back home. I have had enough of this self-inflicted embarrassment. I felt I have taken my dreams and goals too far. Finally, I went in for my interview. My ppt slide was projected, I took a look at my topic "Molecular markers design for oxidative stress tolerance for the entomopathogenic nematode *Heterorhabditis bacteriophora*" and I shook my head. Seriously? I want to talk about nematodes to a panel of cardiologists, oncologists, gene therapists, etc. Is it not obvious I am another Johnny miss road. But, I put in my best and showed them why and how I earned a perfect grade of 1.0 (A***) in my Master thesis.

After my interview, I said this is over. I concluded in my head I had no chance against the other candidates. On my way to the hostel, I called my mum and I was practically crying. I told her how I embarrassed myself and how I set a goal that is too high. As always, she said believe that you can and she comforted me. I decided to forget the horror and embrace the positives. The next day, I met with some professors and group leaders just to discuss their projects.

Interestingly, I was positively surprised by how impressed they were with my presentation during the interview – I could not believe it. Prof. Cantz told me he was impressed by my MSc research findings and how incredible he finds the potentials of *H. bacteriophora* as a potent biological control agents against crop pests. Furthermore, he said I had one of the best recommendation letters and that I am not a fluke.

Dr. Rothe went on to tell me his own personal story and why I should never give up on my dream even if I am not selected. Promise me you will continue to pursue your goal, apply somewhere else, but don't give up, he advised me. He was very kind and encouraging, he single-handedly tanked up my motivation and confidence. I came back to my hostel that night with a greater commitment to become a biomedical scientist. I further embraced the positives of my Hannover experience, I realised I did not pass these competitive screening by sheer luck. So I was fired up and I started making new plans.

The next day, the interview result was out. Out of about 45 candidates, 18 candidates were selected and I was on the waiting list with two others I think. Guess what! I was so happy. Making the waiting list was a big win for me, considering I had no background or prior experience in the field. So, the next and only logical thing for me to do was to maximise the potentials of this big win :).

I made the decision to go back to my city, write professors in the biomedical field to seek an internship position in either stem cell research or cancer research. After writing about 10 professors (another story), Prof. Fransef Müller graciously offered me a position to intern and learn in his lab. I planned to intern for a year and then reapply for a PhD position in Hannover the next Fall.

One month into my internship, the big news came. I received a mail from Hannover, a research group will like to discuss the prospect of a PhD project with me – My people, look at God o (In Nigerian accent)... This time around, I felt more comfortable during the interview. In the one month of my internship, I already know mammalian cell culture and how stem cells are cultured. I was already working on cloning and preparing the different plasmids for lentivirus production.



Exactly this day three weeks ago, I was awarded my PhD degree graduating with “magna cum laude”.

Looking back, this has been an incredible journey for me and the thought I could manage to finish very strongly in a field where I had no prior background was the icing on the cake.

I am forever indebted to all the people who encouraged me down this path. I can never forget that redefining moment with Dr. Rothe. I am profoundly grateful to my supervisors (Dr. Balakrishnan and Prof. Ott) who gave me a chance to prove myself. Such an opportunity is quite rare and I will never forget their magnanimity towards me.

To my parents who taught me to never stop believing in myself, and to keep reaching... I am immensely grateful. I honestly can't wait to pass these values you taught me to my children.

Finally, to anyone reading this, who is coping with rejections, self-doubt, and the frustration that comes with them... These are the untold part of success stories. So believe in yourself, make conscientious plans, and learn to prepare and position yourself for opportunities.

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