Placement at Fidelity Investment Management Ltd.
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Following the completion of my third year, I undertook a 3-month placement at Fidelity Investment Management Ltd. (FIL). FIL is a London-based investment management company, with £285 billion under management, operating from 32 offices in over 20 countries. Although FIL is not an industrial associate of the CM-CDT, I was interested in a career in big data analytics and financial technology (FinTech), a growing global industry, so sought out a relevant placement. These placements are offered by many companies throughout the country and usually have a formal application process. While the process can be lengthy, it also serves as great practice for future interviews and is very similar to the application process becoming more popular for full-time employment.

During my placement, I was working with the Data Services team, in their Kent offices, automating database performance software. My main objectives were to convert an initial proof of concept (POC) project, developed by outside contractors in India, into production software and to automate the process for daily use. The subject of the work I was asked to perform was far removed from my academic research (electronic structure characterisation of quantum materials using ARPES), which was part of the appeal, but utilised some of the key skills developed during my academic research. Over the three-month placement, I was required to learn various programming languages, including SQL, Scala and R, and about big data architectures and programmes, like Hadoop/HDFS and Apache Spark. Having spent the past three years programming and learning about obscure topics to complete my research, I was well prepared for the work I needed to do.

Working at such a large company and with secure, heavily regulated data, as well as real production servers, was at times frustrating, such as when I had to wait for access to be granted to a cluster of servers. However, it was also exciting to work with production systems and on real business problems, not just menial work. It was also sometimes nerve-racking knowing I was working on production systems and could cause serious damage to business processes if I was not careful (and in fact, at one point I did cause a minor hiccup with business applications which was quickly rectified). In the end, I was able to make a real impact on the project I was working on, having performed an in-depth analysis of the software I was helping to develop and making recommendations of key areas that needed addressing before being put into production.

One thing I did not expect in doing a placement at such a large company was the friendliness and relaxed, down-to-earth culture at FIL. The open-plan office space encourages a great environment to work in, if you don’t mind the occasional distraction (one of my managers liked to sing) and everybody in the DBA team was extremely friendly and welcoming. Another unexpected benefit of working at FIL was the academic nature of the work I was asked to perform. Because I was working on a very newly developed system, the first major production project for the recently established Emerging Data Services team, there was a large degree of flexibility in my role and in the objectives of the overall software I was developing. While my
I was allowed to complete them in whatever manner I saw best, within reason, and I was given the freedom to investigate related topics, such as machine-learning methods, to validate the work of the outside consultants. I really felt I was in charge of my progression and had the ability to direct my role in the direction I thought was best for the business. My managers were also extremely supportive in building my skills and future career, helping me to register for big data conferences (even some after my internship finished) that I would otherwise be unable to attend. There were also seminars given by higher-ups from different business areas, which not only gave me a broader appreciation for the company’s operations, but also reminded me of the weekly seminars and colloquia back in St Andrews.

Overall, I cannot recommend FIL highly enough and would encourage others to consider undertaking a placement there. One should not be discouraged if a company is not an industrial associate; there are a vast number of established internship programmes out there, you just have to look and apply. Placements are a great way to build transferable skills and to experience life in industry without committing to anything too long-lasting.