Flight of fantasy

While researching seawater purification at NIBEC in Northern Ireland, HUSSAIN ALI may have faced a few hurdles but he tells PEDEN DOMA BHUTIA that he was very impressed with what he saw. The final-year student of Caledonian College of Engineering now has big plans for the Sultanate...

On May 28 this year, as Hussain Ali boarded the flight, he knew that his flight of fantasy was now turning into reality. As he settled on the flight, the final-year student of Caledonian College of Engineering knew that the two-month stay at the Nanotechnology and Integrated Bioengineering Center (NIBEC) would provide the necessary fillip to his final project on seawater purification. After a two-day stopover in London, Hussain reached Belfast in Northern Ireland to begin his research at NIBEC.

Being the only undergraduate among PhD students, Hussain says he felt a little out of place initially, but once he got working, he concentrated hard to finish the project within the stipulated period.

"While the others would start at 9am and finish by 5pm, I would start as early as 6am and work till 7pm and sometimes even 8 in the evening. I didn't have the luxury of time, unlike others, so I knew I had to work harder to get the desired result. That's why I made sure that I worked on some weekends as well," says Hussain, sipping on a steaming cup of cappuccino.

Once at NIBEC, Hussain had access to a lot of facilities. He was even closer to accomplish the goal that he had aimed for.

The university library housed books and papers that helped him in his research and gave him access to most of the published works. This being his first stint abroad, Hussain seemed mighty impressed with the centre's focus on research work and its well-equipped labs.

"I'm grateful for the support extended to me by my family, friends, the college principal and Prof. Firooz, to help me find my footing in a place like NIBEC. The centre has more than 10 laboratories and what I noticed there was that stress was laid more on practical assignments, while we concentrate more on theory. Unlike our labs here, the labs there were fitted with the latest equipment that give you the ground-level for conducting experiments without any hindrance," he continues.

However, the only hindrance worth complaining about, says Hussain's inability to understand the heavy Irish accent that some of his mates talked in.

"They talked so fast that I was unable to get what they were saying! Many a time, I had to request them to speak slowly, but that was only for the first few days. As I started communicating with them, I got to understand their accent as well," he smiles, as he recalls those days.

But accents aside, Hussain was also not too comfortable with the food stacked on his plate while in Ireland. Not too keen on junk food, he missed home-cooked food during his foreign stint. "Most of the time, food was picked up from the fast food restaurants and it was a big problem for me. But then, my flatmates suggested that I start cooking my own food and from then on, my food problem was taken care of."

Hussain has big ideas for his country. He says, "In Oman, we have a surplus of solar energy, so why not use this energy to improve lives for the people here. But to succeed in this, we need more sophisticated laboratories to help conduct research and experiments and I'm hopeful that this will soon become reality." And when that happens, we sure can expect some significant improvements in the field from this young man.

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