



**Alumnus Subject Graduated** Nick Hicks  
Biochemistry  
1984  
**Place of Work Position** Commutateur, Paris  
Owner



Nick is owner of his own Paris based consultancy business, Commutateur, which offers a specialist communications consultancy service to Life Science companies.

# Great minds *go on to* great places

## Why did you choose to study at Royal Holloway?

I was considering four other universities, and chose Royal Holloway purely on the strength and quality of its academic programme in Biochemistry. After visiting the other universities I felt that Royal Holloway had a particular culture and a character to it. This had a strong influence in my decision to study at Royal Holloway, especially after looking round the Founder's building.

## Why did you choose the course you studied?

I chose Biochemistry because I had a particularly strong interest in Metabolic Biochemistry, Neurochemistry and Developmental Biochemistry. When I had my interview I met a number of key members in the department, and they were very open and forthcoming with me, which I liked.

## What did you think of Royal Holloway as a university?

When I was a student here the campus was very small, nowhere near the size it is today. Everything was contained on the Founder's site or in Kingswood, where I was in halls of residence. When I arrived there were around a thousand students – everybody knew each other.

## What is the most important thing that Royal Holloway taught you?

The most important part for me was the academic discipline of Biochemistry which has helped me to bring a disciplined approach to problem solving and to retain the open mindedness and flexibility necessary to solve problems in my career. Working in the medical area, it also helped me understand complex scientific issues and explain them in a simple and meaningful way to non-technical audiences.

## Did you always know you wanted to set up your own business?

It took me a while to really realise what I wanted to do. When I arrived at University I knew I was interested in Life Sciences and Biochemistry, but apart from that I didn't have a long-term career plan in place. If you had told me when I left Royal Holloway that I would be running my own business, I would never have believed it. I also have an office at the College – another thing I would never have guessed when I graduated.

## What has been your career path since graduating?

My first job was as a medical sales representative and sales trainer for a pharmaceutical company. I then worked with various PR agencies within

pharmaceutical healthcare. In 1997 I moved to France with a pharmaceutical company, Sanofi as it was called then, and for four years worked in global communications. Following this, I became responsible for international communications for Biogen, an American biotech company for four years. There was a company restructuring so I left and set up my own business in a specialist area of health care communications.

## Can you tell us a bit about the company you set up?

My company advises pharmaceutical Life Sciences companies on their relationships with patient advocacy groups and related stakeholders eg policy formers and departments in the European Commission. As with most startups, there is no book written about how to do it so I initially learnt by trial and error. My only regret is not having done it sooner – it is the best career move I ever made.

## What do you do on a typical day?

I work with different pharmaceutical companies on a project basis. My job depends on the disease area and the company - there's no two days that are the same. Seventy percent of my time is spent on existing client business and thirty percent on new business development. I try to combine business and pleasure especially around business networking.



# people *with* passion

“The most important part for me was the academic discipline of Biochemistry which has helped me to bring a disciplined approach to problem solving”

**commutateur**   
[Komytatœr] French *nm* a switch



### What big projects have you been working on recently?

I helped one European organisation get a € 600,000 grant from the European Commission to investigate and compare how multiple sclerosis is treated and managed across five different countries for comparative research purposes. This was for a non-commercial client but currently I am very closely involved in working on a disease called Lupus for a global bio-pharmaceutical company.

### What are the drawbacks of running your own company?

The startup phase is always the hardest. During that time you need very strong financial management, and need to be very determined and embrace failure, and from that failure ensure that it doesn't happen again. It is important to gain momentum, and once you gain momentum, the ball starts rolling. You are constantly on-call to clients. You spend a lot of time working, but it is time you don't mind spending. If you want to go away for longer than ten days it is difficult.

### What are the benefits of working for yourself?

You have a different type of freedom. You are responsible for your own success or failure. It develops your self-confidence. Long-term you can look back and say, 'this is what I achieved' which is really important. If you do it right you can create wealth for yourself and in the area in which I am involved you can also make a significant and meaningful contribution to very sick people and their cause.

### Have you been back to the College since graduating?

I was invited to an official Royal Holloway function in the Picture Gallery a few years ago – that was the first time I had been back since I finished my BCS2 exam for Neurochemistry in 1984.

When I came back I was amazed by the change in the number of students and the growth of the campus – most of the buildings never existed when I was there.

### You contribute some of your time as an alumni volunteer – tell us a bit about that?

I started to support alumni activities in France a few years ago. We have organised informal dinners, and a wine tasting in Paris as well as numerous presentations at ULIP (University of London in Paris). We are looking to do further activities in the near future.

I enjoy volunteering for the alumni programme because it is nice to give something back to the College rather than just taking. You meet some interesting people in the alumni network, that you wouldn't otherwise have met. It is always good for business networking – especially for anyone who is looking to set up their own business. Hopefully I will be back in the UK for the next Alumni in the City evening in London for some more networking.

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