

Career Spotlight

BY ACTUA

IKRAN ALI



Ikran Ali, Consultant, PhD

I work as a consultant for a life science consulting firm. In the way coaches help players become better athletes, consultants similarly help companies. Life science consulting involves assisting companies that specialize in healthcare, research, and pharmaceuticals to better understand how they can improve their services, understand their competitors and generally enhance their operations. For example, if a company wants to create a COVID-19 vaccine, I would research what companies like Pfizer and Moderna did to make their vaccines, looking into their techniques and marketing strategies and what worked or didn't work for them. My role exists to provide expertise in specific areas, from drugs to medical devices to policies, and consultants can be key players in driving innovation and contributing to policies through their recommendations. The skills you need include developing strong questions to guide your research, being very good at searching for information online and being tech-savvy since most of the work involves using a computer. I learned these skills not just through my education but also through extracurricular and volunteer roles.

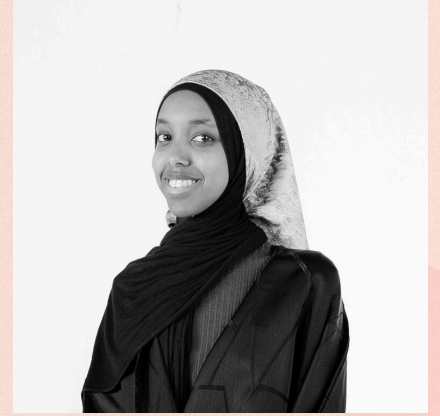
DIVERSITY
IN STEM

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What challenges have you faced and overcome in your career?

Throughout my career, I faced challenges such as the lack of representation in my field, where I didn't see many Black and Muslim women in graduate-level research roles, especially in orthopedic bone research. I navigated this by working part-time as an analyst at a life science consulting firm, gaining industry insights and essential skills for my future job. I engaged in extracurricular activities and co-founded the Say Somaali mentorship program to develop my organizational and managerial skills. I also participated in the Visions of Science program, which introduced me to the value of networking. I learned that networking is as essential as skill-building because connections can open doors for you. It also means that those of us who have learned what it takes to get here can now become the mentors we wish we had for future generations of scientists and STEM professionals.

What advice would you give to youth?

My advice to youth is to remember that you don't have to figure it all out at once and nothing is ever final. Education and skills can be transferable, you can learn a skill from one career and apply it to another. I'm still interested in exploring other careers such as medical affairs, community development and becoming a scientist. The options are endless. At first I felt that I had to be a professor because I got a PhD and when I didn't want to do that anymore, I wondered if I wasted my time. Learning and gaining new skills is never a waste of time; the great thing about it is that you can always use it for something else. In the same way, we can use a single tool for multiple purposes, education can be versatile too, you just need to know how to leverage it in the right way.

Why does diversity and representation matter in your field?

Diversity and representation are incredibly important in my field. Currently, the representation is not where it should be. I often found myself as the only Black Muslim woman in research environments during school and now, I'm the only Black consultant at my company. While there are efforts to increase diversity, progress is slow and requires time. I've noticed a gradual rise in the number of Black individuals in STEM, but true diversity must also improve work conditions to foster inclusivity. The STEM community should actively showcase Black and Indigenous professionals to inspire younger generations. Seeing more professionals who look like me—consultants and orthopedic researchers—would strengthen my passion and commitment to the field. If I had seen more Black scientists/professors, I would've been empowered to stay in academia.