

Meet Callum Gunn: Our #InvaluableIntern & Rising TTIP Afficionado

Everyone's heard about those internships where the main tasks are making coffee and copying and filing mountains of documents. Well, not at Health Action International (HAI)! Being an #InvaluableIntern here means you're adopted as valued member of our team. With guidance from our staff, many of our interns conduct their own research projects on access to medicines and rational use of medicines topics to meet their course requirements.

This month, we're introducing you to Callum Gunn, a Research Master of Science student in Global Health from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam—and free trade aficionado. Callum joined us a few months ago and, through his research, is working hard to unearth the potential impact of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership on access to medicines for those of us living in the European Union. In the following interview, Callum tells us why he's chosen this field of research and why working on access to medicines issues is a pretty "cool" thing to do!

What and where are you studying?



Callum Gunn is researching the impact of TTIP on access to medicines in the EU during his internship at Health Action International.

I'm doing a Master of Science in Global Health at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, having moved here from the United Kingdom last August to start studying.

What's the topic of your research?

I'm looking into the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) trade deal between the European Union (EU) and the United States and its potential impact on access to medicines within the EU. This topic is not something I thought I'd end up researching when I chose to study global health, but it poses a very interesting challenge and opportunity for me.

Why are you interested in your chosen topic?

I actually knew very little about access to medicines, but through research into the area, I found it to be a challenging social issue which I wanted to gain further insight into. I also didn't know much about free trade agreements (FTAs) and their effects on medicine prices and availability. So I was very interested to learn more about exactly how trade deals can affect access to medicines for health systems and the society they serve. Medicines are important for a lot of people, so it's very cool to be working on improved access!

There's a lot of fighting talk regarding TTIP, so I was interested in exploring the trade deal through research and from a public health perspective. It's hard to scientifically investigate the effects of TTIP on the accessibility of medicines because the negotiation hasn't been settled yet and the results would be based on prospective estimates. Therefore, I also wanted to explore the role of access to medicines in the TTIP negotiation period. This angle is interesting as I'll be able to assess the 'priorities' of TTIP in a very interesting time period, with the negotiations 'on-hold' for the time being.

What are you discovering about your topic as you conduct your research?

I'm discovering that TTIP is, in fact, just one of a huge number of FTAs across the globe. Most agreements appear to be favourable to stimulating economic growth by removal of trade barriers and tariffs. But so far, the assessment into the impact of FTAs on areas, such as accessibility of medicines, appears to be limited. The European Commission has worked to engage with stakeholders across many sectors, so the EU lobbying process involves a complicated mix of people and organisations, even in the access to medicines context.

What's the most interesting finding so far?

Many protests on TTIP claim that the negotiators are only interested big business and don't consider the social impact of TTIP on health or the environment. Whilst these arguments may be valid in some areas, my research is finding that access to medicines actually played a very important role in the negotiation process. From a quantitative content analysis of EU publications on TTIP, the frequency of access to medicines keywords and phrases was balanced with other keyword counts (such as environmental, pharmaceutical, or intellectual property-based key phrases). Initial interviews with EU-stakeholders have revealed that intellectual property rights and access to medicines have been described by some as a stumbling point within the negotiations so far.

Why did you want to do your internship at HAI, and what are you gaining from it so far?

I wanted to gain experience working in an organisation that sits at the intersection of health research and policy. The combination of research with advocacy and communications appealed to me, and the areas of HAI's work were most interesting to me. So far, I've found that HAI has a wide range of people coming from different backgrounds but who are all interested in working towards a common goal of improving access to medicines. This produces a work environment that is stimulating and very enjoyable. We interns are made to feel part of the team and are given the freedom to work on our own projects.

What do you want to do when you're done your studies?

I'd like to get more research experience in both population health and health systems. I'd really like to contribute to more efficient and effective health systems and service provision. I'm also keen to keep enjoying myself and developing personally wherever and whatever I end up doing—the important things in life!