

A Community Where I Can Contribute

Q & A with Tania Akter, software engineering student, University of Victoria

What if you could boss a computer around, instructing it line by line in how to perform a desired function? What if you could develop algorithms that helped people achieve their goals? Or design and develop software — including those for operating systems and network distribution — that moves the world forward? It's the route Tania Akter took. She's in her final year of her software engineering degree at the University of Victoria, having completed five work terms with ACD Systems, IBM Software Lab, LlamaZOO, and two terms with Microsoft.



On top of all that, Tania's an academic rockstar with a very bright future ahead of her.

We caught up with Tania to gather some intel about her tech trajectory.

Q: *Why is scholarship support important for young women in the field of tech?*

A: This kind of support is important because it gives us a way to provide for our studies. I was awarded the International Student Entrance Scholarship as well as the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards at UVic, which helped me pay for my tuition and living expenses in Canada. It not only helped me financially, it also helped me mentally by knowing that I can focus on my studies more without having to worry about where the money would be coming from. Moreover, when the scholarships were awarded, I felt empowered since I felt appreciated for the effort I have been putting into my studies and work related to engineering. Positive reinforcement always helped me do better, and I found that having supports though scholarships helped me do better in my field. After the first year in engineering, the course load usually gets significantly heavier, and finding motivation and incentive to study and do better in the field is always important — which having a support helped provide for me.

Q: *What drew you to tech? And specifically to software engineering?*

A: I have been always fascinated with science. Being a curious kid, I used to question how things worked. Physics, chemistry, math and biology seemed to coexist in a way that made sense to me. I also realized the satisfaction I get when

I make something that makes people happy was beyond comparison. This is when I knew I wanted to become an engineer or be in tech.

Looking around, I also realized that we live in a world where software is evolving at a vast rate, and can be catered to the needs of the society in a significant way. I wanted to be in a community where I can contribute and leave a positive mark — and software seemed to be the best option. Moreover, it's really fun making a product with keystrokes from virtually anywhere, so why not?

Q: *What have been some of your challenges as a woman in this field?*

A: I think being accepted initially and recognized for their capabilities can be hard. I feel like there is still a bias against the initial impression of a woman in tech and her competencies. Although the teams I have worked with at my co-ops were amazing and supportive throughout the term, I have female friends who were subjected to discrimination in their workplaces, where they had to work extra hard to have their work recognized.

Q: *What other kinds of supports besides scholarships would be useful for women who are studying math, computer science and engineering in university?*

A: Counselling for mental health that is tailored for women in STEM. Women oftentimes do not celebrate their successes, or reaching a milestone; when we see others celebrating and doing well, we often think we may not be as good as the others. There is a hidden pressure on women to work extra hard to get the recognition they deserve. Sometimes dealing with discrimination, keeping up our grades and maintaining that work ethic can be very hard to maintain. The STEM field is highly competitive, and we thrive to be our best selves and excel in the field. But, with a lot of things to balance at once, it's easy to ignore mental health problems, which may affect us in a significant way down the road.

Thanks, Tania. We wish you all the best as you challenge yourself to bring your best self to everything you do.

Stay posted for more Q&A profiles over the coming weeks. And spread the word about the *Women in Technology/Aboriginal Women in Technology Scholarships* offered by the Irving K Barber BC Scholarship Society www.ikbbc.ca These two new scholarships present a real opportunity to support women's advancement in the fields of engineering, math and computer science.