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Social Science students often wonder what they can do with their degree. If you are an undergraduate Social Science student at the University of Manchester you will be studying Politics and International Relations, Criminology, Social Statistics, Sociology, Social Anthropology or a combination of these on the BA in Social Sciences degree. Or you may be studying Law, or for a BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) or be on the BA Economics and Social Studies degree. If you are a graduate student, you will be specialising in your area of interest.

You will read a lot. Be introduced to many theories. Have opportunity to discuss ideas and be challenged on your thinking. You may have some practical lab classes in data analysis.

You may also have the opportunity to put your learning into practice through a work placement or internship or a year-long Professional Year of Experience, or spend time studying abroad.

During your time at The University of Manchester you may join a society or undertake volunteering or engage with extra-curricular activity. You will probably have a constant eye on how your degree could lead to employment or further study in an area that you are motivated by and interested in. But you may not know what a degree in social science can lead to and be curious about what type of career you can progress into.

Some of you might be interested in following a career in a policy-related area. Others will have no idea what this entails, especially if you are not connected with people who work in this space.

This booklet will help you find out what a graduate policy-related career can look like for someone studying social science at The University of Manchester. By gathering stories from those who have gone before you, the purpose of this publication is to show you what is possible.

All of the people included here are former social science students. One of the most important aspects of this collection of alumni voices is to provide information that will help you see the relevance of your degree to a role in policy.

Read on and — hopefully — be inspired.
Each of the people reflected in the case studies in this booklet talks about how what they learned in their degree helped them in the role they are currently in. They all make reference to the research and analytical skills and the professional skills that their jobs require them to have. And they reflect on what they did during their university degree course(s) that has helped them along the way.

It can be difficult for students to understand the relevance of their degree and course units to a future career. The frameworks used here were developed in the book ‘Work placements, internships and applied social research’ (Carter, 2021). They cover research and analytical skills together and professional skills as a separate category. Policy roles require all three of these skill sets.

Columns one and two identify the research and analytical skills, adapted from a British Academy 2017 report, ‘The Right Skills: Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and the Social Sciences.’ Column three highlights seven top skills sought by employers according to reports published by LinkedIn in 2019 and McKinsey in 2018.

### RESEARCH SKILLS
- Designing research and collecting evidence
- Formulating a research question
- Deciding what evidence is needed to answer the question
- Determining how evidence can be collected
- Understanding the ethics of undertaking the research
- Organising the information, selecting relevant information and identifying gaps in the evidence

### ANALYTICAL SKILLS
- Undertaking the analysis
- Ability to manipulate, analyse and filter information
- Ability to interpret and synthesise information using qualitative and quantitative research methods, and appropriate technology
- Detecting partial or ambiguous information by critically evaluating its source
- Understanding the consequences of using unreliable data and information sources
- Drawing conclusions based on critically assessing the evidence and findings
- Appreciating the need to be open-minded and reflect on the evidence base and conclusions drawn

### PROFESSIONAL SKILLS
- Communication
- Collaboration and teamwork
- Time management
- Creativity
- Persuasion
- Adaptability
- Networking

**Columns one and two**: Research and analytical skills

**Column three**: Top seven professional skills sought by employers
AMY DWYER
BA Politics and Modern History (2020) and MA in Politics (2021)
Current role: Electric Vehicle Policy Adviser in Department for Transport

After graduating Amy, having been unsuccessful in her applications to the Civil Service Fast Stream programme, nevertheless secured a place on the Civil Service Summer Diversity Internship Programme where she was placed into the Department for Transport to work on its electric vehicle policy.

AMY’S THREE WORDS
DRIVEN
PASSIONATE
EXCITED

She then applied for a policy role in government, was unsuccessful in her first attempt but placed on a waiting list and a month later was offered a role with the department.

So that was how I got into policy. But I think ultimately, it came from some of the stuff I'd done outside of uni with, like, work experience and internships before that, because I think that kind of gave me a bit of an edge in interviews and a bit more setting of what the actual roles were.

But how did Amy become interested in a policy role? By her own admission when at university she had no connections in this area at all. She decided to get involved in extra-curricular activities. In her second and third year she volunteered at a local MP’s office, learning about how a political office works. Then she decided to join The Young Fabians (she now sits on their national committee), and through this she set up The University of Manchester Young Fabians Society.

We had quite a few events, with influential speakers like Andy Burnham. This was completely out of my comfort zone. But chairing events with these kinds of speakers really helped with my confidence. It set me apart from other people that were applying for policy roles as well. During my Master’s I was chair of the Education Network, and we produced a policy pamphlet with 20 different policy essays. I was just trying to take the initiative.

As well as her experience outside of the university Amy talks about what helped her during her studies. She got interested in politics through her Bachelor's degree and knew that she wanted to work in a policy role when she was studying her Master’s. She recalls the foundational skills she learned which gave her the grounding she needed to start thinking about a career in policy. In particular she spoke about presentation skills and speaking up in seminars, on her degrees. And she was incredibly proactive in linking up what she was learning with the opportunities that were made available to her by her lecturers and professors.

I know no one likes to speak in seminars but actually doing that, once you get used to it, it's not that bad. I don't think I did as many presentations as I should have done though. I wish I'd taken the opportunity to do more as that's such an important part of my role now. A couple of things at uni really helped – The Politics of Policy Making course unit taught me a lot and I did The Policy Boot Camp (which was voluntary) and that was really good. Oh, and I also attended some research seminars on European politics and got other people to go along as they were so good – so relevant to what I was interested in. I thought this was a really good way to broaden my knowledge.

Amy was a student without any connections in the world she wanted to work in but went out of her way to use her university education to make connections by being proactive and focused. She knew she needed to take up opportunities that would set her apart. She looked for variety and thrived on taking on new challenges. She says that having pushed herself when she was studying has paid dividends as now she is not fazed by taking on new work. Her foundational skills, learned at university, have enabled her to understand the need for strong evidence, to question and critically evaluate everything that she is given, to be focussed on the policy area she is tasked with and to ask for help when she needs it. She learned to get up to speed quickly and her degrees taught her how to work through large volumes of research, to synthesise the information and to present this coherently in a way that could be understood by non-experts.

Asked about her policy role in particular, and what professional skills she has developed since graduating, she responded:

It was quite a big jump from university to civil service style writing. But the quality of writing - my degree definitely helped with that. The presentations and communication I did in my degree and especially through extra-curricular activities definitely helped a lot. I’ve been involved in some high profile stakeholder engagement, presenting policies to foreign government delegations, which has been really exciting. I’ve recently got involved with the gender equality network, so that’s quite good. I work with statisticians, analysts and economists. There’s lots of different opportunities to do different bits of work which is great. It also helped that I understood how government works – the background in policy for example has helped a lot because a lot of people in the Civil Service don’t necessarily have that background. It was good to come in knowing a bit about select committees, how Parliament works and something like that I think does actually help.

I don’t think I did as many presentations as I should have done though. I wish I’d taken the opportunity to do more as that’s such an important part of my role now.
Upon graduating Jim entered the Civil Service and has developed his career apace, winning two promotions since starting. His story recounts how he developed his quantitative skills while studying politics, and how he has gone on to use these in his current role.

He entered the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in the Government Statistical Service but is now a generalist (showing it is possible to change professions within government).

Although Jim had done well in maths at school—studying it to A level and taking a statistics module as part of this—he found it quite a dry subject and instead chose to follow his interests and passion in his politics degree. Whilst at university in his second year he applied for a two-month paid, summer work placement through the Q-Step programme, and was successfully placed in New Economy (this has now been subsumed into the Greater Manchester Combined Authority). While there he was able to combine his love of politics and interest in data analysis and learn new research skills.

I walked into the office the Monday after the Brexit vote, which was chaos. They had a dataset on domestic migration, down to local authority level, which no one had time to look at, so I spent time analysing that, and learning new statistical techniques. I was able to uncover new insights that no one else had discovered. I also learned a valuable skill—the most important skill maybe—being able to relay something to non-technical colleagues. These two skills really helped me in my final year and continue to do so in my job.

Jim brought these new skills back into his third year where he chose to use quantitative research methods in his dissertation. He went on to receive the highest mark that year for a politics dissertation and having limited supervision time. His dissertation provided an opportunity that he embraced. This also helped him realise the type of career he wanted to go into. His dissertation and was awarded a prize for his research. His work placement helped him realise that combining statistical analysis with his interests in voting behaviour—in his case the results of the Scottish Nationalist Party’s landslide results in 2015—with his interests in voting behaviour—may not be realising it at university, was that you need to take your bigger question and chunk down what you want to find out. So that key skill is critical thinking—that’s what university taught me is—how to take a broader question, and chunk it down into key things. And I have to use that every day with non-analytical thinking colleagues who have broad questions, and I help them to break them down into smaller ones.

You need to learn how to tap into your academics’ knowledge—because they are the expert in their fields—and learn from it.

Jim also found that at university and in the workplace, there is a need for developing strong relationships with people and use time productively. He finds that in his current role he often needs to encourage people to think about things differently, and to do this he needs to develop rapport with his colleagues and use clear communication. He has found that this helps him, and his colleagues, better understand the task and appreciate it from each other’s perspective. He practised this, albeit unknowingly, during his time at university too, especially when writing his dissertation and having limited supervision time.

A key skill that I didn’t realise at the time is that you have to work with an academic, with your dissertation supervisor, to get the insight you need from them. So, you need to learn how to tap into your academics’ knowledge—because they are the experts in their fields—and learn from it. And with group projects and with other students it’s all relationship building, relationship management, you need to learn how to divvy out work, how to get the best out of people, and how to be productive. And at university things are really time precious but you have this amazing opportunity to research things you are really interested in. And at Manchester there are so many options for you in your politics dissertation. There’s loads of data out there if you want to use it but seize the opportunity because you might not get that chance again, to ask and answer your own question.

Finally, here is what Jim says about his role.

A performance analyst—it’s a digital role. There’s lots of digital projects within government. When paper forms go online, we get access to loads of data. So, there’s two sides to it. Helping teams understand how the user is behaving on the site (which page are they falling off? Where are they struggling?). There’s loads of data crunching and insight generated there. And then there’s the wider context which is about working with other teams to think about why we are putting this online in the first place. What do we want to achieve? How would you want to benefit DWP and the user about setting those goals and then measuring them and reporting on them?
Rosie Latchford
BA Social Science Politics (2019)
Current role: Youth Parliament Programme Officer at the British Youth Council

Rosie graduated just before the COVID pandemic took hold. She managed to travel for a short period then returned to the UK to undertake a Master’s in International Relations in London.

She had really enjoyed studying international politics at The University of Manchester, and even though she had only taken a couple of modules this helped her decide what she wanted to focus on in her future. She knew that she wanted to work in a field where she felt she was making a difference, and her role in the British Youth Council is satisfying that wish. What does her current role entail?

I support the UK Youth Parliament programme and various other programmes at the British Youth Council. I oversee the running of events, registration of Youth Parliament members, and support the programme delivery. It’s really varied, and involves all sorts of things like supporting campaigns, and tomorrow we’re having an event in the Houses of Parliament about votes at 16. I like the mission of the organisation: to empower young people to create social and political change.

Rosie shared how her time at Manchester really helped her develop her worldview and how her learning challenged her thinking. She had started her course studying philosophy and politics but specialised in politics in her final year. She still recalls a couple of courses (and lecturers) who had a profound effect on her to the extent that she still would like to do something in environmental campaigning and policy in a future role. The two courses were Ideologies of Global Capitalism and the Politics of Climate Change.

... that really sparked my passion in environmental politics. And actually, I went on to do my master’s thesis on a combination of environmental politics, inspired by the interests of the lecturer, about utopia and imaginings of climate change solutions. These courses sparked this combined interest and I wrote my thesis on that. And I know that’s not quite linked to what I’m doing now. But I really, really enjoyed that. And I think maybe in the future, I’d like to explore that, maybe in academia.

Rosie was actively involved in a University of Manchester Society called ‘People and Planet’ during her second and third year. The society had been running a campaign for seven years when she joined. The campaign was to get the university to divest from fossil fuels and this required her to work with others to research the issues, present evidence and communicate findings to the university’s Board of Governors meetings.

And the experience I got from that, running quite a big campaign in a university setting, gave us all so much experience, confidence and inspiration because it was such a tough campaign and so many students taking part and over the course of I think it was nine years actually, we did end up getting the university to divest. So yeah, it was really great.

Rosie’s experience on her first degree at Manchester was a positive one. She clearly benefited from being taught by lecturers passionate about their own research and subjects, and this helped her focus on her own interests and develop her skills and knowledge both at university and when she graduated. She was especially mindful of being trained to undertake rigorous social science research, acknowledging that these are skills she now uses every day in her role. She described her undergraduate degree as providing the foundation to what she does now, both for her research and professional skills.

Knowing how to how to speak with people and getting them on your side and sharing your opinions, and expressing why an issue is really important, is definitely something I use that was massively strengthened by my time at Manchester.

The research skills that you’ll learn are so important for anything you’ll find yourself doing – such as how to research a topic, get a really good understanding of it, and then put that into practice, be it through writing an essay, or running a campaign writing, like a policy proposal, you know, doing something in the world of work. Words like qualitative and quantitative and primary and secondary, come up all the time. Maybe people will find surprising but it’s really important to have that understanding, like, you almost take it for granted. Now, it’s basic knowledge, but it’s really important to build those foundations.

And, with communication, and I think, while you’re a student, you learn a lot of skills, like how to write a professional email, how you might address your lecturers, or when we were running this campaign, how we’d address an email to the Board of Governors, and you’re sort of learning all this stuff in a relatively safe environment, which is a really great experience.

Rosie also described how, in addition to communication, some of the professional skills that she uses on a daily basis are persuasion and teamwork. Again, her university experience through her society work gave her the opportunity to practise and hone these skills and she took full advantage of being able to do so.

We would talk to students, almost weekly about the campaign and about why divestment from fossil fuels was important. And that was something speaking to peers and building a rapport with people, and those sorts of relationships to help you get someone on your side. And it’s something that was strengthened during my time at Manchester, because I did it so often. And then certainly, like, speaking to lecturers, writing to the Board of Governors and people in a higher position. And that’s something that, you know, I hadn’t really done before, and doing that there was building a skill, and helping you feel more confident about it. And working in campaigns and the third sector, in a political sense, like knowing how to how to speak with people and getting them on your side and sharing your opinions, and expressing why an issue is really important, is definitely something I use that was massively strengthened by my time at Manchester.

Rosie's three words:
SOCIA LLY-DRIVEN
PASSIONATE
HIGHLY MOTIVATED
SONIA SINGH
BA Theological Studies in Philosophy and Ethics (2015)
MA in Philosophy and Political Theory (2020)
Current role: Fast Stream Civil Service

SONIA’S THREE WORDS: CURIOUS CONFIDENT AUTHENTIC

Sonia did her first degree in the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures and then her Master’s in the School of Social Sciences. She was successful in her application to the Civil Service Fast Stream programme which she has been on since graduating from her Master’s.

She had really enjoyed studying international politics at Manchester, and even though she had only taken a couple of modules this helped her decide what she wanted to focus on in the future. She knew that she wanted to work in a field where she felt she was making a difference, and her role in the British Youth Council is satisfying that wish. What does her current role entail?

My degree is not necessarily one I could take and apply to a subject area such as a role in a nuclear project delivery. It was definitely more those transferrable skills of reading text, analysing data, etc. In my current role, where I’m a commercial policy adviser in BEIS, I was essentially joined with the policy team with the project and have been working on different policy commissions and different policy work.

My degree is not necessarily one I could take and apply to a subject area such as a role in a nuclear project delivery. It was definitely more those transferrable skills of reading text, analysing data, etc. In my current role, where I’m a commercial policy adviser in BEIS, I was essentially joined with the policy team with the project and have been working on different policy commissions and different policy work.

Sonia believes that the skills she learned at university are vital to her current role. She has to read and assimilate huge amounts of complex and often technical information, then present this to government officials and other stakeholders. It calls for excellent time management and organisational skills which she points out are critically important to develop. What Sonia didn’t realise at the time she was studying is just how essential the research, reading and synthesis of knowledge was going to be for her future career. She recalls feeling it was an endless to-do list but recognises how valuable that preparation was for her to be able to perform in her role now.

The skills she learned on her degree helped her when she joined the Fast Stream, where she worked in various policy commissions. One of the modules she took, which she really enjoyed, was The Politics of Policy Making course in which she learned about the discussions and debates, and the research skills she developed at university were worthwhile. She recognises the transferability of many of her academic skills to her Fast Stream role, highlighting independent learning, prioritisation and time management, delegation and teamwork as key skills.

I remember the amount of extensive reading that I would do at university and needing to prioritise which papers to read and obviously my workload, and the need to highlight key information. And then using those skills to transfer the key information identified onto another document, and to give key pointers, and these research skills have been absolutely crucial in my role in both departments. It’s a generic thing that civil servants have to do. They might be given a very short deadline to read perhaps 10 different and complex documents. So maybe a Cabinet Office published guideline book, or a contract for legal support or a recommendation from technical experts, and being able read and understand those documents, to fact check and cross reference the information, and then taking that information and holding conversations with colleagues, with stakeholders with external investors - that’s been absolutely key in my role. And throughout my degree, I’ll be doing all of this in preparing for, and then holding discussions in seminars, lectures and holding debates with fellow classmates and staff.

Sonia’s reflections provide a fantastic example of how important your university education is in preparing you for your future role in your case in a complex policy environment. She acknowledges that all the learning and deep thinking, the discussions and debates, and the research skills she developed at university were worthwhile. She recognises the transferability of many of her academic skills to her Fast Stream role, highlighting independent learning, prioritisation and time management, delegation and teamwork as key skills.

I think prioritisation is key as ultimately, your study and the way that you navigate that is completely down to you. And the way that you prioritise your deadlines, again, down to you, and similarly, in the professional world, too. So even though you may have calls and meetings in the diary, you have your day job too. And your time management is a skill that is transferable, and absolutely key. It’s so important to be able to recognise and prioritise different work, and different deadlines. Also, delegation of work, so for instance, at university, you may be working in a group. I can think of a few examples when I was at university, in group work, I tended to take on a lot more responsibility, as opposed to other members of the group, which is something that I’ve recognised - it’s a brilliant skill to be able to be a team leader, but also simultaneously to recognise that work should be shared out equally within a group. But again, those skills can be transferred to the professional world. Teamwork is key in the professional world.

Joining the Fast Stream meant that in her first role (in the Cabinet Office) Sonia was exposed to different policy teams but not directly involved with policy. She worked with different commissions, with colleagues, which related to policy, and documents would go to ministers for their sign off. Enjoying this, she requested to get more involved. Her second posting enables her to do this. One of the modules she took which she really enjoyed was ‘The Politics of Policy Making course in which she recalls discussing how policy making happens in government, and how things might go wrong, which she found incredibly interesting. She is now immersed in this landscape.

I wanted to take something that I’ve studied and put it into action. And I really wanted to engage in policy. And I’m fortunate to do that in my current role. I remember studying ‘The Politics of Policy making course and hearing terms like ‘ping pong’ and ‘bills going through the Houses of Parliament’. Now I’m on the other side and I’m actually contributing to the writing of legislation of a bill which is currently going through Parliament, going through its second reading in the House of Lords, and we’re having to implement changes from feedback from the Lords. We’re being ping-ponged back to Commons. Studying it is one thing but having the opportunity to contribute to legislation is another. It’s difficult and complex but I have developed so many skills and knowledge; it’s so rewarding.
After graduating from The University of Manchester, Francesca started working in a casino. When an opening in Social Security Scotland (an agency in the Scottish Government) became available, she decided to apply.

I applied for just an administrative position there; organising inboxes, diary management and putting on events because I feel well, I’ve done a degree. And that was really difficult. This can’t be harder than that. My ability to actually juggle multiple assignments helped me to be able to organise multiple events at the same time, so handling deadlines and prioritising your work are important skills.

After working there, a job became available in the Scottish Government. Though ‘terrified to apply’ she thought ‘it’s now or never’ and much to her shock she got the position. After two and a half years she transferred to a Scottish Government position, to her current role. Francesca works in a Directorate for External Affairs, where she covers India and Pakistan as her main geographical focus, with the cover extending to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka for reactive work.

A lot of my day-to-day job is briefing, and accompanying ministers who engage with these countries, so they’re fully equipped with all the information they need in order to best represent Scotland, but also to better engage and build up stakeholder engagement across the countries. We have scholarships that we deliver in Pakistan for young women and girls. And part of what very much interested me in this role was the ability to work on that. And the modules and the theoretical frameworks that I studied, and learning about feminism, and then leading into feminist foreign policy was one of the things that attracted me most to this job. And my degree prepared me for it. All of my competencies for this job came from university.

Francesca emphasised how her degree prepared her to evidence the analytical and research competencies she was asked to give examples of during applications and interviews. Even when she initially thought she might not have the skills, upon further reflection she was able to frame her answers to address all the questions put to her.

Whenever you’re applying for a government job, it’s usual to have to demonstrate how you meet the criteria. You usually choose a single example. I remember one of them was analysis and use of data. I talked about my dissertation – how I looked at different sources of information to identify and answer my research question. And how I had to design that question in such a way that I would be able to answer it sufficiently and provide a decent argument. And for each competency, you have to break it down into: the situation that you were in, the task, the action you took, and a reflection [the STAR method].

Francesca was really unclear how the learning outcomes from her courses would actually teach her what they claimed to deliver, never mind help her develop her skills for the workplace. In retrospect she can see that critical thinking, analysing information, synthesising information, analysing theory and developing arguments are all skills that she honed at University.

Every single week, you’re given certain articles to read. And I remember thinking - this is so useless, when am I ever going to need this? But the skill that actually helps you is critical thinking you’re looking at these articles and you’re extracting pieces of information, so that when you go into writing your essay, and you start off thinking 1,500 words, oh, that’s so many, how will I ever use that many words, but soon you’ve read, say 20 or 30 articles, all of them with really relevant information in them that will support your argument [then your challenge is] how on earth am I ever going to summarise all of this and defend my argument?

Those skills were very subtle to her at the time and she did not realise until entering the workforce that her politics degree was structured to emphasise critical thinking, analysis and research. The way the course was taught enabled her to engage in conversations with students from other degrees, not just the social sciences. Nowadays, Francesca thinks that pretty much every essay she wrote at university has some relevance to her work. Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, she has been helping out with the Ukraine desk officer; not just in communicating with the public, but also with briefings, applying the knowledge she gained while studying. Some of the units she took on her degree have stayed with her, and her experience in striving to do well, and reflecting on her own learning, has persisted in her role.

... [in my role] you often have to summarise bits of information that you’ve learned previously. And the module Terrorism and Political Violence in Modern Europe was probably most formative for me. [Modules such as] Introduction to Comparative Politics, just... the many different readings that we did, and the way in which that we had to approach the readings, but then in tutorials the way that we had to engage with analysis. It was instrumental in helping form your ideas, and think about ‘why do I find this topic so difficult? And what is it that I find so interesting?’

And the more I read, and engaged with the tutors, the easier it was to understand complex issues, and to apply them and have ridiculous debates with people over dinner.

Francesca also practised important teamwork and communication skills during her degree. When others come to her for advice now, she is more than happy to help. She believes being collaborative and part of a team is important, as, if you only focus on yourself, you will miss out on a lot of information and experiences that could help you later on.

A lot of my day-to-day job is briefing, and accompanying ministers...so they’re fully equipped with all the information they need in order to best represent Scotland.

FRANCESCA’S THREE WORDS: LOYAL COLLABORATIVE GIVE-BACK
ELEANOR CAREY
Current role: Policy Analyst in the Development Cooperation Directorate of OECD

Eleanor has had a wide variety of different roles. After her first Master’s she worked for the Co-operative in Manchester where she was able to work with partners in the developing world. She came to realise that her desired career working in international development might require further skills, especially quantitative training. She decided to take the MSc and although it was a very steep learning curve for me in the beginning but she found it tough to begin with, her commitment paid off.

Organisations want people who are quantitatively literate, even if it’s not necessarily specifically important for the role. And so it was a little bit of a leap of faith, in some ways reflective of my faith in The University of Manchester, that I would get a decent course there, and that they would kind of provide her, she notes that in Ghana being seen as ‘data advanced skills she had learned were not called upon every day was a highly valued skill in her role. As is the need for clear and effective communications to those audiences.

Whilst the OECD has 38 member countries, the Development Assistance Committee that she serves has 30 members. We have delegates who sit in Paris as part of a standing committee. If you were to be very narrow about it, they are the key policymakers who make decisions more widely. The report I work on changes topic every year. And that means that we’re building a new community, a new audience, every year. And that’s really challenging.

I think I can phrase something differently than a statistician can phrase it, but still know that it’s accurate. So, I can read a statement that a statistician has written and understand what it means and why they are saying it in exactly that way, can phrase it, but still know that it’s accurate. So, I can read a statement that a statistician has written and understand what it means and why they are saying it in exactly that way, because that’s the way I was trained to write. But I’ll be able to say if we phrase it like this, then that’s accurate. And then I can kind of bounce ideas with them to encourage more analysis that they never thought about. My role is to be thinking about the wider space, and what is the message, or the piece of evidence that we need to present from the data, in order to be part of the narrative, be relevant in the current discussions and also to raise issues that maybe aren’t being discussed.

Being able to target the primary audience for her analysis is a highly valued skill in her role. As is the need for clear and effective communications to those audiences.

On her ODI Fellowship, Eleanor was placed with the National Statistical Office in Accra, Ghana. It was a learning curve for all involved. She began working on Ghana’s implementation and measurement of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals connecting government departments with external and international organisations. She describes her role in that period of international data revolution as less sitting down working with data but more of management connection. She then moved to Washington DC to work on a data initiative with the United Nations Foundation. After two years there she took an opportunity to work in her current role in Paris for the OECD.

Eleanor has demonstrated resilience and adaptability throughout her career. She puts great store in perseverance and determination and is a strong advocate for ‘just keep trying’, having been rejected for many roles that she has applied for.

Reflecting on the specific and general skills that her MSc provided her, she notes that in Ghana being seen as ‘data reflective of my faith in The University of Manchester, that I would get a decent course there, and that they would kind of provided her, she notes that in Ghana being seen as ‘data advanced skills she had learned were not called upon every day was a highly valued skill in her role. As is the need for clear and effective communications to those audiences.

Whilst the OECD has 38 member countries, the Development Assistance Committee that she serves has 30 members. We have delegates who sit in Paris as part of a standing committee. If you were to be very narrow about it, they are the key policymakers who make decisions more widely. The report I work on changes topic every year. And that means that we’re building a new community, a new audience, every year. And that’s really challenging.

I think I can phrase something differently than a statistician can phrase it, but still know that it’s accurate. So, I can read a statement that a statistician has written and understand what it means and why they are saying it in exactly that way, because that’s the way I was trained to write. But I’ll be able to say if we phrase it like this, then that’s accurate. And then I can kind of bounce ideas with them to encourage more analysis that they never thought about. My role is to be thinking about the wider space, and what is the message, or the piece of evidence that we need to present from the data, in order to be part of the narrative, be relevant in the current discussions and also to raise issues that maybe aren’t being discussed.

Eleanor has had a wide variety of different roles. After her first Master’s she worked for the Co-operative in Manchester where she was able to work with partners in the developing world. She came to realise that her desired career working in international development might require further skills, especially quantitative training. She decided to take the MSc and although it was a very steep learning curve for me in the beginning but she found it tough to begin with, her commitment paid off.

Organisations want people who are quantitatively literate, even if it’s not necessarily specifically important for the role. And so it was a little bit of a leap of faith, in some ways reflective of my faith in The University of Manchester, that I would get a decent course there, and that they would kind of provided her, she notes that in Ghana being seen as ‘data advanced skills she had learned were not called upon every day was a highly valued skill in her role. As is the need for clear and effective communications to those audiences.

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Daniel Malocco
MSc Social Research Methods and Statistics (2018)
Current role: Analyst for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)

From school to his current role Daniel had, as he defined it, a very sideways progression. Having studied Sport Science, Biology and Maths at A-Level he then took a Management and Leisure Bachelor’s degree, hoping to go into hotel or leisure management.

He mostly enjoyed the marketing modules and planned to find a job in marketing post graduation. Being unsuccessful, he started a job for a call centre as a market researcher. This led him to conduct customer satisfaction surveys for housing associations tenants. Gathering data for different clients, and seeing the same questions asked in multiple ways, led him to evaluate his role and decide to seek a new career path. He realised he needed skills to enable him to analyse the types of data he was collecting, and that would require him to do another degree – which led him to the MSc in Social Research Methods and Statistics. What does his analyst role with BEIS entail?

Daniel’s three words: CROSS-TEAM-ANALYST
ALWAYS LEARNING

And because social science has a lot of the qualitative stuff and that definitely shapes the questions for the quantitative research as well.

Daniel also really emphasised the importance of the professional skills that he developed during his degree, alongside his research skills. Particularly working in government, professional skills are essential as you make your way through that sphere of work. In Daniel’s work, his research and analytical skills go hand in hand with his professional skills.

One thing I probably didn’t appreciate at the time, but now being an analyst, a policy analyst, is the skill of presenting. That was definitely something that I think everyone hated in the course – having to stand up and present group presentations or presenting your dissertation topic. Everyone hates doing it. But one thing I’ve learnt in being in government is you could be the best analyst in the world, but if you can’t present your findings, […] and convince people that you are correct, it means nothing.

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My current role is on a cross analyst team working to improve modelling and post-processing of modelling for use by other analysts who work with specific policy areas. So, we have modelling software for modelling domestic energy efficiency policies, which I used to work on. Now I do work to develop the post-processing of this new software, from modelling domestic energy policies all the way through to cost benefit analysis, and final impact assessments - the monetary sort – to analyses whether this policy is a good idea.

So how did the breadth of the course, and the variety of techniques that he studied, change Daniel’s mindset towards approaching complex new methods? He developed adaptability in the understanding and application of a range of advanced quantitative methods to research social science questions. He was able to use his training in the fundamentals of what he was taught on the MSc to tackle problems without being weighed down by each component of the research he was undertaking, showcasing his open approach to learning. Reflecting on the range of techniques, and the versatility of applying his learning, he clearly enjoyed the challenge that his MSc provided him with and learned to think beyond the specific statistical methods he studied.

I don’t need to know how to do something. I just need to know it can be done. And then I can go away and work out how to do it at a later time.

So, for my dissertation, I used a technique, partial proportional odds modelling, which was not taught on the course. I had to read papers and was like, ‘Oh, that looks like a technique for the question I wanted to answer’. And so, I went away and learnt it. And again, the fact that the course had given me a breadth of techniques gave me the confidence to go try something that I had no idea even existed until I read about it in a paper […] That’s just my personal preference is finding a challenge […] a way of doing something new.

Daniel is part of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) profession, but he works alongside analysts from the other professions. He stressed the importance of understanding the theoretical context for the analysis that you are doing, noting how government social researchers push the boundaries for thinking critically about the work that they are undertaking, rather than solely analysing a problem, they ask what the next steps are and think about what this means on a wider scale. This openness of approach, the ability to conduct analysis but also frame the questions in the context of ‘What do we want to know and why?’ is, for Daniel, the value of a social science training. Daniel reframes the phrase, ‘Statistics never lie’, saying that it really means ‘You’re just asking the wrong question’. Finding the right question(s) to ask is in the social scientist’s skillset, due to their rigorous methods training and broader theoretical knowledge.

Reflection back on the MSc Daniel noted it was very ‘data heavy’, but while taking it he developed a breadth of quantitative skills and methods – starting with linear and logistic regression, then progressing to multi-level modelling, structural equation modelling, and a variety of longitudinal data analysis techniques. Daniel emphasised the intrinsic importance of the variety of techniques and methods touched upon during his degree.

That definitely helps me be able to go into any kind of analyst job and just know various techniques that could be applied to a problem. But also gives me the comfortableness to use a new technique that I’ve never heard of, and have the confidence that, OK – I’ve got to go learn enough about it to be able to use it. So that was definitely one of the strongest points of that Master’s course in particular: the breadth and giving me the confidence.

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Nicole works for the organisation that she first volunteered at as a mentor then worked for whilst in university. ReachOut is a mentoring charity working with children in disadvantaged communities to raise aspirations and help them grow in character and competence.

Growing up on a council estate in Lewisham, seeing the challenges faced by young people, motivated her to want a role working in education. After graduating she travelled, then worked in a secondary school with children at risk of exclusion, then applied for and secured her current position. Her background in studying sociology helped her prepare for what she is doing now.

I've been doing sociology since GCSE. One of my teachers [at school] told me he thought I'd be really good at it. I actually didn't want to do it but now it's literally become my whole life. Where I grew up helped me see why things were happening around me, and make sense of it, like it wasn't my fault. But it was only when I got to university and applied what I was learning in the context of children and in a school environment that I was able to understand what was happening and how I can help. That's the end goal for me – helping young people.

She took modules on her degree that really interested and motivated her, really enjoying one on race and education. This was a turning point for her – when what she was reading and what she is doing now.

I had to think really hard about what I needed her [my supervisor] for. She made me more organised – and sometimes I wasn't prepared, then I'd just wasted our dissertation meeting. She was really good at keeping me in a routine, on track. I found that someone who gave me strict 'this is what we're doing in this hour' help was really what I needed. Looking back on it … one of the things I didn't do well was utilise my chapters enough. I wasn't organised enough in looking forward. I think. It still annoys me I missed out by one mark. I think if I'd looked for examples of where I could have improved in my essays that could have helped. But I also learned my strengths. And it's not held me back in any way – I'm doing fine now.

Nicole is open in discussing and sharing her struggle with anxiety. She acknowledges that being organised helps her deal with feeling anxious. She writes everything down to help her to remember what she has to do and has used this technique for a long time. This helped her through her studies and in a practice she uses daily at work. These organisational skills are critical for her to be able to do her work well.

I set loads of reminders. I have a monthly planner and a daily section on it. And a separate weekly one. Every month I write down what's going on, because I have ten projects and about 100 students I look after so there's a lot happening. There are so many different things I need to remember so I write it all out. Then I go through it and spread it out over the days that month, so I know exactly what needs to be done. It's a lot of balls to be juggling at the same time. And a lot can go wrong working with young people. So, setting time aside for problems is important too.

Nicole also stresses the need to have good presentation and communication skills. She used to like interacting in tutorials and seminars and is very confident with talking to groups of young people but is less self-assured in speaking with groups of adults. When she applied for her current role, she spent a long time preparing, knowing how much she wanted it but also that she might lose out to someone more qualified or experienced than her.

I made this whole PowerPoint presentation, going into really detailed theory from my degree, to be able to convince them I knew what I was talking about. I remember speaking to my manager a month after I got the job and he said, 'you were the most prepared of everyone even though you didn't have the experience you showed that you could do it.' And that was the change. That was what pushed me from learning at uni to knowing I could apply it – and I trusted to do it. I had that drive. Having that desire and passion is really good.

Nicole's role is informed by national policies around disadvantaged communities and access to educational opportunities. She needs to evidence the impact of ReachOut's work. Whilst 'shying away from numbers' in her degree, she is more comfortable working with data now and is involved in data analysis.

I don't even realise I'm using numbers whilst I'm doing it. We do a baseline survey at the beginning which gives us the academic competencies, social confidence etc. and create a dataset. I have to sift out what is important and relevant for the project leader. And we use that to ensure we're getting the maximum impact in the group. And then we do the survey at the end of the year as well so we can track improvement. So, part of my role is to work with the data and figure out the individual child's needs.

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Giuseppe Maio
BSc Soc Politics and International Relations (2006)
MSc in Social Research Methods and Statistics (2008)
Current role: Senior Data Scientist at Impact Cubed

Giuseppe is quite surprised to find himself in the role of senior data scientist, having never conceived of doing that role when he came to study at the University of Manchester.

Having done his first degree in politics and his MSc in statistics, his journey to his current position has been punctuated by several work placements, a period working as a research assistant whilst doing his Master's part time and several different roles since graduating.

Giuseppe's story starts by outlining what research and projects he is currently involved in then demonstrates how his degrees helped him get there. The company he works for is a business analytics start-up, working in sustainable finance, creating and helping him get there. The company he works for is a business analytics start-up, working in sustainable finance, creating and

In terms of projects, and methods, I've used longitudinal linear regression, some web scraping to get gender pay gap data and build models and an algorithm that would predict the gender pay gap of big corporations that don't reveal theirs... and a project which I'm quite proud of... on geospatial mapping, to get the coordinates of the locations of the of corporations [of interest], and then mapping those with satellite imagery that tells you the physical risk of a particular area. And what I'm currently doing is an NLP (natural language processing) based project.

Giuseppe's passion for data analysis having been ignited he continued to build on these skills, learning coding and applying the research methods he had learned at university on multiple projects. Whilst studying his MSc he worked alongside social science academics, the World Bank, and the World Health Organisation.

Many people in data science come from STEM backgrounds. As a data scientist you need to be a bit of a language processing expert, and having a good understanding of the technical aspects of data science, and also being able to communicate those technical aspects to a wider audience.

Giuseppe's three words are
CURIOUS
DATA-DRIVEN
MULTILINGUAL

On professional skills Giuseppe gave an excellent example of how his writing and communication skills developed through his degrees have real world relevance. He remembered coming to the UK to study, and having real concerns about his ability to write well in English. He soon realised his Italian education, including learning Latin and Greek, had given him a strong foundation to build upon.

100...in my previous role I used to write quite a bit of proposals for funding, just because it was a more research heavy position. And we were quite successful; we won quite a bit of funding for several projects. And I think doing an essay-based degree where there isn't often a ground truth, you know, you get evaluated, you get assessed, based on how persuasive and how strong your points are. And the same goes when it comes to proposal writing. And when you're writing a bid for funding, they don't know in advance what to expect, and which one is going to win. But it's all about how well it's presented and is persuasive, how the points are made, and how well things are connected. And I think that those communication skills really, really helped.

Giuseppe's career trajectory has been, in his words, 'research heavy'. He deliberately put himself into the path of opportunity, not always taking the easy route. Throughout his education, and now in his career, he strives to find interesting, socially-relevant projects.

The important skills the Master's gave me were the coding and modelling. My advice would be to try to pick things that really spark your interest. See your tutors often, especially when it comes to essay writing. I'd rather have a tougher but interesting life than take the easy option.
Hannah works in the civil service, in a role she finds challenging and fulfilling, having navigated into it from her background in criminology at The University of Manchester. She feels incredibly grateful to have had the opportunities that have led her to her role.

She attributes her success to having had the opportunity to go to university and receiving excellent support throughout her studies and career. She wants others to have the same opportunities as she has had, regardless of their background. Hannah is a truly supportive alumna, now helping to give other people the experiences that she enjoyed.

At the start of her Bachelor’s degree Hannah thought she might pursue a career in the police force. … when I joined uni I wanted to be a police officer. I did lots of volunteering at uni for Victim Support, Youth Offending Teams, Manchester Action for Street Health and then finally I applied for, and was awarded, a scholarship to stay at Manchester to do my MRes in Criminology. Fast forward to December 2018 I had been offered a place on the Fast Stream and had graduated from my postgraduate degree.

She started on the Fast Stream as a research officer in drugs and alcohol research. After a year she moved to be a senior research officer in a central research team working on domestic violence, diversity and inclusion and modern slavery research. Just two years after starting her career she became a principal social researcher; the position she currently holds. Her role involves supporting her policy team on drug use research. As the person who leads her team, she now does less research but needs to support, upskill and guide analysts to deliver impactful research, which are skills she had to learn in her role.

She recognises that she uses many of the skills developed at university. Her critical thinking was developed through her degrees, and she learned analytical skills too: to code and undertake both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Her motivation for developing these skills was driven by her passion for her subject, and particular topics she found deeply fascinating.

Very simply, I’m in this role because of my placement. The Civil Service was offering paid summer internships to carry out research analysis on a large household survey and this sounded really interesting to me. I absolutely loved it. I was fascinated by how research could support policy decisions and enjoyed understanding how government works. It provided a great insight into the everyday working of a government department. It also really brought to life what I was doing in my degree and gave it purpose. I was encouraged to think about the Social Research Fast Stream which I applied to after I graduated my undergraduate degree. Meanwhile I also applied for, and was awarded, a scholarship to stay at Manchester to do my MRes in Criminology. Fast forward to December 2018 I had been offered a place on the Fast Stream and had graduated from my postgraduate degree.

I think I’m essentially doing my degree in real life. I scope, design and carry out analysis and research. We have to write reports, read lots of articles/research – all of which I learnt the skills to do when at uni.

On professional skills, Hannah noted that at university she learned to prioritise. Doing lots of extra-curricular activities alongside her degree, meant she had to manage her time well and find methods of working that suited her. She recalls failing her first ever university assessment – receiving a mark of 27%. Although she was devastated this taught her to ask for help when she didn’t understand, and to get support to improve her marks. She continues to do that still, and acknowledges it helped her to progress to where she is now.

Hannah’s team of researchers supports a policy team in providing evidence and research. This can vary from conducting a small quantitative analytical piece such as cluster analysis of a household survey, to conducting interviews to understand pressures for certain sectors. They also commission external evaluations which require project management.

I spend most of my days in meetings, answering questions about metrics, methods and challenging other research. I also do people management, which I love though this can also be quite time consuming. My degree gave me the foundations, methods (haha). I wouldn’t have the understanding of social research that I do now – although I often have to go back a revise certain methods (haha).

Hannah’s advice to current students is to try to understand the real-life impact of what you’re studying. Understanding how your degree is applied really helps build passion for what you’re doing, and it’s helpful to cogitate - when you’re sat in endless lectures - on what you might want to do with your future.
When Sid was studying in Manchester, he wasn’t sure what area he would end up in in his career. He decided to embrace all the opportunities that his education offered him and as his story shows he balanced a lot of activities whilst he was a student.

When he finished his Bachelor’s degree, he decided to narrow down the field of study and start to specialise in an area. He chose the environment, climate change and development pathway on his Master’s degree after speaking with his lecturers to help him focus in on what it was he was interested in studying further. He wanted to learn more and enhance his expertise in a specific area. The research skills he developed at The University of Manchester proved to be very useful.

I’ve now published two papers, on ocean policy. And, and one of the things that really helped me, was the social research skills I learned at University, and all the assignments that we had, and I’m really grateful to my lecturers. That was one of the key things that helped me - doing all the research, academic writing and referencing. I didn’t have a background in social science when I came to university, because back in high school I was doing science. So, in the beginning, it was a bit challenging, but then with time, it started to make sense. And it makes full sense now. I have to deal with a lot of diverse people, professionals, in my current job. And back in university, when I was part of these clubs, sometimes we had to have meetings with other team members or other clubs or get in touch with the relevant university departments. And I think that’s where I developed this skill, getting in touch with external partners to support us with the athletic trainings or looking for a new coach for the team. And then with the hall of residents, they were similar responsibilities as well.

Another professional skill that Sid has developed is adaptability. Whilst his role is secured for another year he has been on a series of temporary contracts and as such has had to cope with huge uncertainty. Adaptability is a much sought-after skill but often hard to evidence. Here is what Sid says about it:

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Silvia Galandini

MSc Social Change (2006)
Current role: Domestic Poverty Lead at Oxfam GB

Silvia has a background in academia and now works for the third sector. After completing a Master’s, then PhD at The University of Manchester (her first degree was gained in Italy), she worked first as a university researcher, then as UK programme researcher when her career with Oxfam began.

Prior to her current role as Domestic Poverty Lead at Oxfam GB, Silvia’s work was predominantly research based. She characterises the style of research carried out in the third sector as being a lot more practical than that carried out in academia. Her experience reflects that with academic research the focus is on filling gaps in knowledge; whereas research in the third sector is likely to be used to inform policy thinking and influencing and programme planning.

Silvia says that the goal when carrying out research for Oxfam is to stay applied and practical, she drives home the importance of this type of research as the foundation for the influencing work she undertakes. She believes that her academic training prepared her for this style of thinking, as it led her to consider the work she undertakes. She believes that her academic training is to stay applied and practical; she drives home the importance of the type and validity of the evidence she uses in her work.

I think, definitely, the kind of the research skills that I strengthened through my PhD, have been very valuable in terms of understanding what methods can be used to answer certain questions. You know, what methods will be stronger, how to really, really be aware of the weaknesses, but also utilise the strengths of say, qualitative and quantitative research.

When reflecting on the research skills that she developed at university, and skills she views as particularly important when transferred to the working world, Silvia stresses the importance of being able to conduct a literature review. She says that this is always the first step in her work, whether that be policy or programme related. Alongside this she highlights the importance of the type and validity of the evidence she uses in her work.

I think the first one [research skill] is how to do a literature review; how to find the literature that you need, and the sources you need to think about a problem or question an issue. Through a Master’s, that’s what you learn, especially if you work on your thesis or an assignment, you have to look for sources and question them and put them together and critically read the literature. So that is always the first step, every time we do anything.

In the policy sector, research is used to make very practical, and at times, very important decisions. It’s crucial to be aware of what kind of evidence you’re using to inform your decisions and your thinking. The critical thing is questioning all the processes and the complexity of social change, being aware of different perspectives and different groups and the evidence that you have to look at and being able to make sense of it.

I think that’s a very practical skill that you learn.

Silvia also stresses the importance of developing skills for data collection, analysis and management. Whether your research is qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods, managing your data well, and ensuring you have ethical approval, are important considerations.

Silvia says that the goal when carrying out research for Oxfam is to stay applied and practical, she drives home the importance of being able to conduct a literature review. So that is always the first step, every time we do anything.

... trying to connect your research to the external world and see it less as a separate exercise that you do, but more as part of a complex picture that is society, and you are in that picture, because you’re doing research about an issue that is relevant to what others have contributed, but can also give back. For example, sharing your findings after a Master’s work, is an inter-connected understanding of her work in the third sector anchors research to the world. Having honed her skillset as an academic researcher, she is now passionate about advocating for research to be undertaken wherever possible in a way that gives something back. For her, collaborative work with colleagues and partners is essential.

Silvia also stresses the importance of developing skills for data collection, analysis and management. Whether your research is qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods, managing your data well, and ensuring you have ethical approval, are important considerations.

Silvia’s role has now transgressed past solely research; she is involved with the strategic direction that Oxfam takes to tackle poverty in the UK, working closely with colleagues across teams. From research to advocacy, to policy and campaigning, and involvement with the media, the poverty and inequality programme expands on the complex issues brought up through research and navigates towards working with others to influence change.

I’m much less involved in delivery of or designing research. What I do now is to think about research partnerships, and how research can support our work. So, part of a bigger process. I would say what I use is definitely knowledge of how research can contribute to influencing more broadly, as a starting point to improving understand about an issue, but also to amplify voices. So, the people experience, you know, the lived experience of poverty and inequality, and how to really give space to these voices. And it doesn’t necessarily have to be qualitatively, a survey can also amplify voices by highlighting issues.

Using research to frame and conceptualise lived experiences, Silvia’s inter-connected understanding of her work in the third sector anchors research to the world. Having honed her skillset as an academic researcher, she is now passionate about advocating for research to be undertaken wherever possible in a way that gives something back. For her, collaborative work with colleagues and partners is essential.

The kind of the research skills that I strengthened through my PhD, have been very valuable in terms of understanding what methods can be used to answer certain questions.
Matthew’s upbringing and his values are a prominent theme in his story. Raised by his grandparents in a northern English industrial town, benefiting from government interventions like free school meals and good NHS care, and seeing his grandparents with long-term health conditions led him to be a passionate social justice campaigner and political activist. He volunteered to work on his local MP’s campaign during the 2015 election and by the time he was 18 he had been elected twice – as a member of the National Youth Parliament and then as an elected Labour councillor for his local ward.

Matthew often chose modules on his degree that reflected his passion for equality and challenging social disadvantage. This culminated in his final year dissertation which studied the impact of deindustrialisation on Labour’s traditional constituency, Dale Campbell-Savours, and academics, like Professor Will Jennings whose work on the politics of towns, rather than cities, was crucial to Matthew’s analysis of the Labour party’s difficulty in the polarised post-Brexit world. Matthew’s supervisor gave him the vital support he needed, taking him through the journey of his dissertation from a basic idea originating in his own lived experience (the predicament he felt his degree was preparing him for). Matthew called upon the skills of adaptability and resilience that he feels his degree was preparing him for.

Matthew switched to straight Politics after his first year. This provided the chance to specialise in the subject that had been his passion for a long time. I think, coming from the background I had I wouldn’t say there wasn’t any imposter syndrome at all, but people were different. You know, my friendship group were predominantly from privately educated backgrounds. I think, coming from the background I had I wouldn’t say there wasn’t any imposter syndrome at all, but people were different. You know, my friendship group were predominantly from privately educated backgrounds. That was a real insight into understanding a bit more about society. Our university, you all come to this one place, and there’s all these different cultures and backgrounds, you know, brilliant, but it made me determined. I wanted to grasp every opportunity.

If his formal modules were helpful in moulding Matthew’s research skills an extra-curricular activity proved a golden opportunity for him to establish a network in the policy landscape. In his second year he attended the policy boot camp. As well as Matthew finding these sessions inherently fascinating, it led directly to a summer placement opportunity for him with GMCVO (Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation). Without the resources or social capital to call in favours from relatives or well-connected associates, the boot camp provided Matthew with the confidence and opportunity to apply for the position. During his placement COVID happened but Matthew called upon the skills of adaptability and resilience that he feels his degree was preparing him for.

At first, I would research different policy areas. So they had some areas where council housing and social housing was really needed across Greater Manchester. And this was an interest of mine. Another was on community-led sport, and areas that they work on - the role that I’m doing at the GMCA is brilliant organisation, and some of the policy work as being one he wants to develop further. The GMCA is brilliant organisation, and some of the policy areas that they work on - the role that I’m doing at the moment is quite administrative but I’m working on a youth unemployment programme – brilliant; an issue close to my heart. It’s a mentoring programme for young people in Greater Manchester, who, due to the pandemic have found themselves as what are called NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

I think the majority of people who are in a policy role are in for the right reasons and go into the sort of social conscience or, you know, wanting to better the world or make a positive change. I got that from my upbringing and The University of Manchester. Some of the values that I’ve got through my early life through to some of the modules that I studied give you that sort of social conscience or values really, that you want to reflect in a job. So, I wouldn’t say I fell into policy. I don’t think that’s the case because I had that experience before University where I essentially saw policy making people I grew up with, our residents that I suppose represent your electorate, making the area worse. So, you know, I want to make it better really.
Iulia is in her third year of her undergraduate Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) degree at the University of Manchester.

Her story is included here as at the end of her second year, she completed one of the Q-Step Data Fellowship paid work placements hosted by Policy@Manchester, a University of Manchester initiative that aims to impact lives globally, nationally, and locally through influencing and challenging policymakers with robust research informed evidence and ideas. The projects that she worked on during her data fellowship fell into three categories.

Iulia was especially unsure about what professional working capacity. Particularly due to the nature of remote work (as her internship - her internship was on health inequalities. We had this project that focused on elements of neighbourhood disadvantage. So, as poor people tend to live in more polluted areas, what does this mean for their health, and how can we tackle this from an ecological point of view? And then the third thing that I did was help the institute according to their needs at the time, for example with their publications, focusing on pre- and post-COVID mobility. COVID also had implications for public transport, the means people were using, how often they were using them, and what they were using them for.

Though she had previously held positions of responsibility in various societies (including the university’s Romanian Society), this was her first time working in a professional capacity. Particularly due to the nature of remote work (as her placement was conducted online due to the COVID pandemic), she was unsure how to establish a healthy working pace and be comfortable with taking breaks. As an international student, Iulia says that the Policy@Manchester team’s friendly approach towards helping her use and understand the data and software packages they used led her not only to improve her understanding but transfer that knowledge back to her degree. She was already quite familiar with Excel because she had used it both at home during her pre-university years, and during my course modules, but I definitely feel like I’m more confident with it now. Also, R Studio - I took econometrics and we worked a lot in R Studio, but I really feel like I expanded my knowledge. I also learned a completely new software, the mapping software I use, which was QGIS. All of this has been helping me with my dissertation.

Iulia has gone on to use all of the software that she used during her data fellowship for her final year dissertation and feels far more confident with her thought processes in terms of data; the experience has helped her develop good practices in work. Having this applied learning experience through the work placement has helped her in applications for postgraduate study. She has been able to develop genuine research and professional skills, and her great relationship with her manager secured her an excellent reference.

Iulia believes that the guidance delivered to her, and support from her team and work placement manager, furthered her confidence in her own abilities and allowed opportunities for networking.

I had the opportunity to participate in some meetings organised by a parliamentary group on net zero. And it was really interesting to represent an organisation in something like this. So, it definitely made me a lot more confident.

Iulia says that the Policy@Manchester team’s friendly approach towards helping her use and understand the data and software packages they used led her not only to improve her understanding but transfer that knowledge back to her degree. Every single week, we had like an hour where we had the team coffee meeting. And it was basically for us to catch up. And yeah, I was telling them about the trains in my country and seeing my grandma and museums and things – it was really nice. It felt like everybody was really keen to get to know us as people as well.

Iulia says it’s easy to succumb to your imposter syndrome. These organisations know that you are a student at the end of the day and you’re there to gain experience and they’re very happy to help and in all honestly, it’s been like a massive confidence booster for me as well.

Iulia’s advice for aspiring Data Fellows is to just go for it – she says it’s easy to succumb to your imposter syndrome.

I know I have a few offers ... they’re all conditional. If I get the grades that I need, I’m probably going to Oxford, studying economics, and also applying to programmes in public policy. I’m still waiting to hear back. I definitely think it’s helped me secure a lot of the more competitive courses - like offers on them.

Iulia’s three words are EXCITING, FORMATIVE and STIMULATING. These organisations know that you are a student at the end of the day and you’re there to gain experience and they’re very happy to help and in all honestly, it’s been like a massive confidence booster for me as well. Everyone has been so supportive, in a way, right? Like it was, ‘oh you are totally okay to Google stuff, like, I do this every single day’. So yeah, that’s the first thing. Second of all, really think about what it is that you like, you know, never forget that. Sure, you want the organisations that you’re applying to like you, to offer you a place. But at the same time, really think about what do you like? Do you like them? Also, during the interview – if you have any questions for them - ask. Or if you want to know more about what you can expect to get on the experience, interview them! And don’t forget that’s a very important component.

As Iulia works towards finishing her undergraduate degree, her experience interning with Policy@Manchester has provided her with an excellent launching pad for her final year studies, her future studies, and her career. It was a good investment of her time.
Philippe came to study at the University of Manchester with an already developed sense of global justice and an internationalist perspective. As a school student he had taken the International Baccalaureate and taken part in Model United Nations exercises both of which he feels broadened his perspective on global rights and responsibilities.

Philippe graduated from his Politics and International Relations degree, went on to take an MA in International Law and Human Rights in Madrid and is now studying for a second Master’s degree at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. He explains that while he had an interest in global politics and diplomacy from high school, his degree allowed him to refine his interests in international relations and development and his participation in The University of Manchester’s Q-Step summer work placement programme in his second year boosted his employability skills.

So, in Manchester I knew that I wanted to go towards the international space and actually work in development policy. And then the Q-Step internship was a great way to see how civil society can help in creating policy and working at Open Data Watch in Washington, D.C. made me more interested in technology actually, and how data can be used for policy purposes. So, I acquired great skills plus got an introduction to how the world works in that sort of sphere.

Philippe’s experience after graduation is a testament to his flexibility and adaptability. His first degree gave him the confidence to adopt an eclectic approach to further study. His two Master’s degrees are preparing him by combining the theoretical foundation that I had got from my first degree. So Manchester gave me the groundwork to work from and helped in shaping my political ideology, and the way I see the world, and then I am using that foundation to build my own interests, which became more personalised.

Reflecting on his time at Manchester, Philippe identifies some critical foundational skills from the approaches to teaching he experienced.

(Studying) politics is a bit more subjective than say biology or physics, but the classes give you really strong tools to develop your own approaches and shape your thinking internally about issues, ... how you approach a topic of interest. And quantitative and qualitative data research (approaches) will have an impact on how you see the world and thus how you impact the world later on. So, the way that Manchester helped me was to focus on how to conduct research and was where I found my passion for technology. Manchester really helped me explore further what I thought I already knew about research methods, but it’s actually very multifaceted, and it can take you in very different directions.

Reflecting more generally on the undergraduate experience, Philippe stresses that he found university to be a ‘reinforcing and supportive environment’.

That goes for the teachers, but also for fellow students; we had great class conversations in seminars ... Being at a Russell Group university, you don’t know what to expect, but you do expect to be with the best of the best, in the educational space. So that helps shape you even from your first year. But as you then move on, in time, you could do a fantastic internship, like I did, and you’re still comfortable enough to apply your own thinking and do your own commentary on what is being done... Being professional certainly means that you are able to express your own point of view in that setting. Because if you can’t do that, then you can’t really change much. And I think having that sort of professional training helps us to achieve that goal.

Philippe’s university experience has established his view that his skills are well suited to research and policy making, particularly in his preferred policy arena of environmental policy and climate change. He has developed a passion for human rights advocacy and global development and thinks it likely that he might pursue an ambition to work for NGOs or international institutions such as the UN. He also thinks that his thirst for new experiences and appetite for travel have chimed with his skillset honed by his university experience.

Philippe is not sure what will come next. He does however hold an impressive CV and record of achievement, both academic and professional, that will help take him to the area he wants to work in. He has also used networking to great effect, including on LinkedIn.

Manchester gave me the groundwork to work from and helped in shaping my political ideology, and the way I see the world, and then I am using that foundation to build my own interests, which became more personalised.

Philippe went on to explore topics that he interested him in international and transnational issues - such as environmental politics - and benefitted from the skills he had acquired in his studies and through his work placement.

After my Q-Step placement, I was able to fine-tune some of the research and data skills that I had acquired [in the classroom] and apply to a setting of development.

My thesis supervisor was then extremely helpful in guiding me towards the right sort of path. I wrote my thesis on the global change to renewable energy and I could not have done that properly without training.

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Having undertaken a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in Politics, Jess then spent a short time in a graduate role at the law firm, Eversheds, followed by a spell working at the estate agent university, but she was always interested in the application of her degree to issues that affect people. She speaks very persuasively about how her role is making a difference to the lived experiences of people in Manchester, and how her own actions are bringing about change. Jess has taken her drive, motivation and interest in her degree subject and is using all her skills, educational and life experience, in her current role.

Even though you don’t think about it when you’re writing a dissertation, it actually does set you up for a job.

...and when you mapped out the data on public transport, because most of them didn’t have a car, it was one bus route that drops you off outside the door. And that’s how we saw people using the wrong service. So, we put that into an excel sheet and did all those fun V lookup, and pivot tables ... and used that as an example ... to show my wider skills.

Jess isn’t especially interested in transport policy at university, but she was always interested in the application of her degree to issues that affect people. She speaks very persuasively about how her role is making a difference to the lived experiences of people in Manchester, and how her own actions are bringing about change. Jess has taken her drive, motivation and interest in her degree subject and is using all her skills, educational and life experience, in her current role.
I lacked out. It was the first graduate scheme that I’d applied to. I knew that I kind of wanted to do something properly in the political or third sector. I was quite keen on doing something where I felt like I was making a difference. So, I had got onto the Generalist Fast Stream and spent a year on that scheme before deciding that I’d rather just take a permanent role in the Civil Service.

Whilst undertaking the Fast Stream scheme, Helena worked for the prison and probation service – where she thoroughly enjoyed the field work aspect. Working first-hand within prisons and observing how, through what means data is collated, she registered a big difference in the nature of data sets in university and those used in her employment.

I think one of the things that’s really interesting moving from, I suppose, university study to actually working in policy is that when we did quantitative research methods modules, you always used SPSS or stats packages and you thought it was the way to work, whereas now you’re working with, the broad range of topics studied begets an understanding of the interconnected nature of the world, and the ability to be comfortable with uncertainty. Helena explains this in terms of her work with the prison and probation service.

...through all of the jobs that I’ve done, in quite different policy areas and environments, I think it’s, for lack of a better term, the kind of intellectual curiosity that sociology gives you, just a real interest in the way that the world works. How the same phenomenon looks different at a very micro, or individual, level - when you’re interviewing a probation officer or someone in their day-to-day experiences - versus looking at it at the macro level of probation funding and privatisation of a service and moving it back into state. [...] I think sociology really gives you the tools to understand how things are connected.

Helena’s approach to the research she does foregrounds ethics. Contradictions and ambiguities are commonplace in her research, and so making judgement calls is essential. She believes that social science subjects are more geared towards preparing students for a certain level of comfort with ambiguity, and the confidence to acknowledge that just because findings are incomplete doesn’t make them bad or wrong. Helena now works for DCMS on gambling policy: a complex issue for which evidence, that perpetuates the single narratives. So, I mean, with gambling, the big debates around are of social harm versus economic benefit, and to what extent does tax revenue brought in by gambling cancel it out? This is very difficult to cost, and there’s sometimes intangible costs that it may also bring. And I think one of the things that you learn to do really well as a sociologist is to kind of work with contradictions and accept that things that contradict one another exist and they don’t necessarily cancel each other out.

Another key skill is the need to synthesise and reduce volumes of information. The policy advice that Helena is required to recommend in her DCMS role requires significantly more brevity than the work she did at university. Moving from academic work to the Civil Service, she is expected to deliver at pace and succinctly, a big change from writing lengthy essays. However, the ability to generate this broad knowledge base, and present her findings, is a skill that she uses constantly.

Giving advice that’s evidence based, but also as concise as possible is something that I struggled with quite a bit. But I think a lot of people who come into the Civil Service struggle, because you’ve come from an environment where you have to cite 100% of your sources. And you’re used to writing 1000s and 1000s of books and essays and things. And when you give advice [to ministers for example], it should be no longer than, like, three pages in length, which is quite a dramatic change. I think, taking any opportunities as a student to do presentations, speak out loud, as much as people don’t like doing it, is really helpful. Because you will find that they will ask for three pages of advice, but then they will also ask to meet you. And ask lots of questions about it. So as long as you have the extra evidence squirreled in your brain, and you’re able to respond on the spot, you can give them that reassurance.

The research and professional skills that Helena developed throughout university, through studying sociology are used daily, and continue to evolve, through her work. In her current role within gambling reform, specifically, she advocates that qualitative evidence, and lived experience, are given equal credibility.
Gabriela graduated from her BA Econ and Social Studies in 2015. She also holds an MSc in International Public Policy, from UCL. Throughout her Bachelor's degree, and during her Master's study, she embraced opportunities to get involved in other activities.

She was a student rep for the BA Econ course, a peer mentor coordinator at The University of Manchester, and did a four-month long internship in Peru for an organisation - Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) - during her graduate studies. Although she didn’t really know anything about starting a career in policy, she became motivated to learn more about policy and research in international development contexts. She specialised in politics in her Bachelor’s and focused on the courses that she was most interested in.

I remember three or four that I really, really enjoyed. I took the Politics of Development, and the Politics of Policymaking, which was really interesting as well. I took a critical thinking course, the ideologies of Global Capitalism, [which gave me] exposure to more critical theories and critical thinking. I recall enjoying the course, but my grades were in those courses. But I also forged close, intellectually rich relationships with my lecturers, and TAs (Teaching Assistants). And that helped me a lot. Those conversations, especially during the seminars, the discussion was so enriching, and I really enjoyed that part of my degree. And I would definitely say that exposure to such a diverse cohort in my politics courses magnified my interest in public policy.

Gabriela now works with multiple stakeholders and her role entails both conducting, and coordinating, research for different research projects. Her experience in Manchester enabled her to develop her confidence in dealing with people from many different backgrounds, not just her student peers but with others she interacted with, through volunteering and paid opportunities. She attributes her communication strengths in her current role in large part to her time at The University of Manchester.

Do network. That’s something I got from Manchester because I was so involved in things and that became really valuable down the line. Now I do a lot of stakeholder management and partner relationship management and being able to speak in front of people when I was a peer mentor coordinator, and when I was a student rep was immensely helpful. I used to work in the Tincan building [University Place] … on the reception desk. I had to speak to people of all ages and backgrounds on a daily basis. I feel like I wouldn’t be so confident or so at ease talking to people in the Dominican Republic and Pakistan if it wasn’t for that early exposure.

Gabriela now recognises that the quantitative analytical skills she developed throughout her education have opened doors to her that might otherwise have remained closed. In retrospect, she wishes she had focused on developing these computational skills earlier; nevertheless, her wish to pursue a role in international development and policy inspired her to acquire these skills during her studies, and the internship in Peru was a formative moment to enable her to imagine her future. She sees her role now as being a ‘bit of a hybrid’ between research design and partner relationship management … while I was here on the job it’s a very important set of skills when you want to work in international development … there’s a very quant heavy focus on this area.

... most of the transferable skills I got from my degree are the analytical skills… thinking about theories of change, literature reviews and all that. If I think more about my statistical skills, in my case, I learned that later on, while I was doing my master’s to do my dissertation, and then while I was here on the job. I do a lot of programming. So, in order to analyse the consequences of data that we collect through RCTs [Randomised Control Trials] and in running the regression analysis and statistical tests, I mostly learned through doing, rather than taking a course. But I do find that it’s a very important set of skills when you want to work in international development … you have the upper hand relative to the people who didn’t.

Reflecting on the research skills that have enabled Gabriela to do her job, which includes evaluation of policy interventions, she draws upon her statistical skills in particular, whilst acknowledging how vital the critical thinking skills she acquired were too.

One thing that’s very true about this industry [international development], it’s very hard to get your foot in the door. But once you do, the opportunities are vast, you can go anywhere. Colleagues I met along the way, they’re now working in UNICEF and the UN system and World Bank and the IMF - all sorts of places. And also, places like Google and Amazon and Meta. I have former colleagues now working at Meta in their public policy division. And a few years ago, that would have never occurred to me that it’s possible to, you know; want a career in policy and work for firms like that. But it is notoriously difficult to get your foot in the door.

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This publication provides a framework to help you understand that what you learn in your Social Science degree at The University of Manchester has relevance to careers in policy-related fields. The analytical, research, and professional skills presented here give you a hook to hang your learning on, to help you make sense of the knowledge and skills you acquire as a student.

The eighteen stories, told from the perspectives of current alumni interested and involved in policy careers, illustrate how a University of Manchester Social Science degree can give you the foundation to pursue a career in a policy-relevant field. All of the alumni reflect on the curricular activities they pursued whilst studying, that enabled them to evidence skills and knowledge beyond their academic studies.

The stories include here reflect how the careers that these alumni are now in were not necessarily the ones they expected to pursue. Hopefully, you can be inspired by their journeys. Some alumni decided to study at Master's level to improve their skillsets and knowledge and enter the policy-related careers they aspired to. Others have worked in multiple sectors, adapting and applying their analytical, research, and professional skills to different environments. Some are still pursuing the role they want to achieve, developing their skills and experience along the way. Almost unanimously the voices included talked about wanting to ‘make a difference’ in their roles. The words they most shared were passionate, curious, driven, motivated and ambitious. Some of the words they chose will undoubtedly apply to you too.

This collection of stories has brought to life the experiences of eighteen alumni interested and involved in policy careers. It has demonstrated how a Social Science degree at The University of Manchester has relevance to careers in policy-related fields. The analytical, research, and professional skills presented here give you a hook to hang your learning on, to help you make sense of the knowledge and skills you acquire as a student.

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FURTHER READING
Online at https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/flagship-skills-right-skills-arts-humanities-social-sciences/


THINGS YOU CAN DO NEXT
- Take a look at the Policy@Manchester website at www.policy.manchester.ac.uk for their blog, publications and activities.
- This has an academic focus but covers a rich tapestry of policy relevant research.
- If you’re not already on LinkedIn create an account.
- This is a professional networking platform and most of the stories featured here are contributed by people who are on LinkedIn.
- Use your award winning career service at www.careers.manchester.ac.uk.
- Talk to your lecturers, academic advisors and your subject employability lead for their advice about careers you can pursue with your degree.

Driven Excited Strategically-curious
Savvy Dislikes spontaneity Socially driven Passionate
Highly motivated Curious Confident Authentic Loyal
Collaborative Give-back Versatile Cross-team-analyst
Always learning Passionate Driven Anxious
Data driven Multilingual Organised Enthusiastic

Reflective Oceans and climate change UN Athletics
Passionate Grounded Ambitious Socialist Curious
Working-class Compassionate Exciting Formative
Stimulating Motivated Resourceful Curious Driven
Determined Ambitious Meaningful Challenging
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