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**PATHWAYS  
INTO RESEARCH  
SOCIAL SCIENCE  
ALUMNI STORIES**

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# PATHWAYS INTO RESEARCH SOCIAL SCIENCE ALUMNI STORIES

INTRODUCED BY  
**PROFESSOR JACKIE CARTER**

Social science students are highly employable but when they begin studying may not know which careers are open to them. At The University of Manchester social science includes criminology, economics, law, politics and international relations, social statistics, sociology and social anthropology. Students can study a combination of these on the BA Social Sciences (BASS), BA Economics and Social Studies (BA Econ) or the BA Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) degrees. Graduate students specialise in an area for a Master's or PhD.

Studying social sciences here means you will read a lot and be introduced to many theories. You'll have opportunity to discuss ideas, be critically challenged, and even to take some practical classes in data analysis.

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

During your time studying you may join a society or undertake volunteering or engage with other extracurricular activity. You will no doubt contemplate how your degree will lead to graduate employment or to further study. You'll want to know which career choices are open to social science graduates and how to find out about these.

Some students might be curious about following a career involving research. As a research-intensive

institution The University of Manchester places significant emphasis on rigorous social research. But exactly how do social scientists navigate into a graduate research career and what types of research roles are open to them?

This booklet will show you a variety of research careers available for some alumni who studied a social science degree at The University of Manchester. By gathering stories from those who have navigated the pathway before you the aim is to show you what is possible.

All eighteen of the people included here have gained a social science degree - Bachelor's, Master's or PhD - at The University of Manchester. This collection of voices will help you see the relevance of your own degree to a research career.

Read on and – hopefully – be inspired.



# RESEARCH, ANALYTICAL AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Each person's story in this booklet captures how what they learned and did throughout their studies helped them find a research role. They all make reference to the research, analytical and professional skills that their jobs require them to have. And they reflect on what they did during their university degree course(s) that led them to their current role.

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. Research roles require all three of these skillsets.

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

## TOP SEVEN PROFESSIONAL

### SKILLS SOUGHT BY EMPLOYERS

- Communication
- Collaboration and teamwork
- Time management
- Creativity
- Persuasion
- Adaptability
- Networking

# AMY TYLEY

BA Criminology

Current role: LLM student specialising in Criminology, University of New South Wales

Amy graduated from The University of Manchester with a BA in Criminology. She is currently studying at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and completing an internship with their Centre for Crime, Law, and Justice. The Centre aims to facilitate networks and alliances involving criminal justice stakeholders to develop solutions to pressing challenges in criminal justice.

Amy's story is one of determination, tenacity and not letting external circumstances – including studying during the COVID pandemic – defeat her. She shares how she has overcome multiple obstacles to follow her dream of studying in Australia, and how developing her research skills and embracing extracurricular activities, have combined to enable her to confront any challenge thrown at her. While she is only at the start of her pathway into research, her story provides a beacon for anyone facing adversity – things don't always go according to plan – and to encourage students to grab all opportunities available at university. She also encourages flexibility as your thinking at the start of your degree might change as you learn more about your likes and dislikes of the subject.



From the start of my undergraduate degree, I was sure to jump right into all the opportunities available. In my first year I attended law workshops, mooting competitions, and legal dinners, exploring my potential as a solicitor. By the end of my first year, I decided that a solely legal route didn't interest me as much as I had initially thought, particularly as it taught me there is a lot of injustice in England and Wales. I wanted to make a difference. I began volunteering for Salford Food Parcels, helping destitute asylum seekers. I also undertook some project work with The Innocence Project as well as volunteering at the Justice Hub and working on referral cases with pro-bono lawyers.

These experiences taught her that while she thoroughly enjoyed this work, it was very law heavy and required a lot of extra learning to keep up with colleagues who had LLB degrees. During her second year she learned that she had been successful in her application for a study-year abroad at UNSW in Sydney, Australia. Unfortunately, due to the global pandemic, this opportunity was cancelled. By the end of her second year Amy recalls being a little lost. She still hadn't found something her heart was truly set on that she could see herself pursuing after graduating. At this point she also received her first ever first-class grades, and her academic advisor suggested she might want to consider applying for a Q-Step Data Fellowship.

AMY'S THREE WORDS  
**STRENGTH  
PERSEVERANCE  
ENTHUSIASM**

Q-Step is an eight-week paid research work placement. I received one of the three placements with the UK Home Office, working with the Protection, Asylum and Resettlement Integration team. For the data analysis I used SAS and Excel to filter a very large dataset (180,000 rows) into a more manageable cohort. My original research

question wasn't a commissioned piece of work but following my final presentation, the project summary and report were requested by the Head of the Operational and Policy Unit to be sent to the analytical team. This experience was truly life changing - highlighting my love for criminological data research and contributing to research that will ultimately change people's lives.

Returning to her final year Amy took what she had learned from the work placement to enable her to take optional courses on criminological research, and her dissertation addressed the growing issues surrounding police racism and trust in the police. For her quantitative data analysis, she used the R software, achieving a first-class mark for her dissertation. She had clearly impressed her lecturers as she was then approached to use the skills that she had developed in a piece of social research.

I spent six weeks working with Dr Laura Bui on a project on Culture and Criminology in the Department of Criminology. The role entailed systematically reviewing 49 criminology journals for a research project on culture and crime. The review was carried out manually (going directly to the journal website and searching each issue) and through the University library database using a Boolean search for key terms related to the concept of culture. Articles whose abstracts met the criteria were then included in a full-text search. In total, 289 abstracts were collected and categorised into ten topics. Weekly meetings with the Principal Investigator occurred where I provided updates and discussed any issues related to the review. I then presented my part of the review to the Reading Sessions in Quantitative Criminology (RESQUANT), a monthly discussion group by scholars working on quantitative research.

**I don't believe there is a step-by-step guide to how to find your dream career and what gets you excited to work - my process has been a whole lot of trial and error, and I wouldn't change it for the world.**

Amy's confidence in undertaking research was boosted by this experience. That her academics had reached out to her to assist with a literature review had given her an understanding of how research is conducted and demonstrated how she could build on this. She continued to want to push herself. Attending a research talk she was informed that while over 65% of 21-25-year-olds have an undergraduate degree, fewer than 9% have a Master's degree. This prompted her to contact her international advisor from her cancelled year abroad, to discuss opportunities to take a Master's at UNSW. She was successful – and is currently enjoying her studies in Australia.

Amy's can-do approach and refusal to be beaten is a salutary tale. Her willingness to be proactive, to take a lead in seeking out opportunities and making things happen, is inspirational. Amy accompanied me in giving a talk to senior staff at the University and was a huge hit with the audience who wanted to hear the student voice. Amy sums up her experience to date:

I went around the block to get to where I am now. I am thoroughly enjoying my Criminological Master's and finally being able to experience life in Australia. Whilst it is a few steps away from my ultimate career goal, it is an opportunity I felt I needed to fulfil. Research opportunities will still be there when I return to the UK. I don't believe there is a step-by-step guide to how to find your dream career and what gets you excited to work - my process has been a whole lot of trial and error, and I wouldn't change it for the world. Who would have thought a global pandemic could steer me toward my dream career!



# DR ASMA SHAHIN KHAN

BSocSc Social Policy, MSc Human Resources Management, MSc Social Change, PhD Sociology  
Current role: Research Associate in British Muslim Studies, Centre for Study of Islam, Cardiff University

Asma's story covers 24 years from starting her undergraduate degree to becoming an academic researcher. She has taken four degrees, starting at The University of Manchester with her Bachelor's degree, undertaking two Master's degrees (one at Cardiff, one at Manchester) and finally her PhD at Cardiff University where she is now a researcher.

Asma's story is one of perseverance, self-belief and constantly improving her skills in undertaking social research. In her words 'life happened' but even difficult personal circumstances and sometimes less than helpful support did not prevent her from being successful in her career choice.

I chose to pursue a degree in Social Policy because I felt the subject allowed me to explore practical applications for my interest in Sociology (which I had taken at A-Level). And this turned out to be the case. I learnt about the development of the welfare state, state benefits structures, and inequalities that government policies seek to address. Social inequalities, particularly on the basis of ethnicity and religion, are my main area of research interest now so the degree kick-started my career. I really didn't pursue the degree thinking about next steps or what work I would do, or postgraduate study.

At the time when Asma took her first degree she recalls there were few modules on her degree specifically on the experiences of ethnic and religious minority groups in Britain. She found courses on race and ethnicity, which she took as options, in the Sociology department. She clearly recalls reading an article by Tariq Modood and thinking 'wow, brown people can be academics too?' She didn't at that stage though think it was a possibility for her. Thankfully, she says, things have changed but Asma concedes that there is still quite some way to go and is proud to be part of this change for better representation in teaching and research. Asma has some wise words of advice for students, based on what she took from her own studies, and especially for those from minority groups who she implores to use all support offered at university.

The most useful outcome from my degree was my ability to read and understand research. And, over time, to analyse

and make sense of it in new and interesting ways. It was really when I started my third year that I felt confident to interpret research findings, so I could explain them clearly to develop an argument that felt authentic and convincing – to me and then to the lecturers who marked my assignments! That takes a degree of confidence that has to be developed over time and encouraged.

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ASMA'S THREE WORDS

# OPTIMISTIC GRITTY REPRESENTATIVE

It was only around that time that I would take my questions directly to the lecturers during their office hours to discuss my outline essays and ask for help with finding the right readings. When I started doing this, I did not understand why I hadn't done it earlier because it was so helpful. I have read that ethnic minority students are less likely to seek this kind of one-to-one support (which may contribute to their relatively poorer outcomes in final degree grades) so my main advice to all university students (including my own children) is 'ask for help if you don't understand'.

Asma enjoyed research and found that the qualitative research skills she had developed through her undergraduate and first Master's degree helped her land a research post at Cardiff University. She relied on her social science research skills to find her feet in that first job and became 'quite good at it.' She developed a reputation at her university as a competent and skilled qualitative researcher and remained in post there for seven years. Nonetheless, without a PhD her career prospects were limited. Her personal circumstances changed — she now had small children and was a single parent — and she returned to Manchester to take a second Master's degree, where she added to her research skills toolbox by learning more advanced quantitative methods. Her tenacity and determination helped, and she graduated in spite of sadly being the recipient of some unsupportive comments. Having had an excellent female academic role model helped.

I'm a contrary soul, and I was determined to do it especially when I was told I couldn't. Whenever I felt down this actually gave me the drive to carry on. When some academics were less than supportive to my personal circumstances this actually motivated me to succeed. In fact, these experiences shaped the type of academic I want to be — supportive, warm and encouraging. Like the phenomenal Dr Siobhan M<sup>c</sup>Andrews, who was a lecturer on the course at the time and remains someone I can go to for advice and support.

How did Asma become an academic? Her interest was sparked during a guest lecture given by a prominent sociologist, Prof Anthony Heath. The topic - high levels of economic inactivity among British Muslim women - enabled her to bring together her research skills to answer a persistent and marked social inequality. Examining the area more closely she found that quantitative researchers were relying on dated qualitative literature to explain higher levels of economic inactivity. She completed a mixed-methods (quant-qual) PhD on that topic and Professor Heath was her external examiner. In summing up her role now, Asma says:

I am doing robust, academic, research-informed work that allows me to make a direct impact on the lives of marginalised minority groups. This feels like an honour and a privilege.

My current work includes writing up my PhD findings - soon I'll be the author of academic publications that students studying ethnic and religious inequalities might read. Last year, I developed an online course called Understanding Mental Health in Muslim Communities - the course has had almost 2,500 registered learners to date. I am also working on an impact project related to my PhD and working collaboratively with a third-sector partner in Cheetham Hill, Manchester. The aim of the 'Pathways to Work for Muslim Women' programme is to encourage and support Muslim women who seek to join the labour market.

# CHESTER HOWARTH

BA Politics and Economics, PGDip Social Research Methods and Statistics

Current role: Senior Researcher, Directory of Social Change

Chester did his first degree in Politics and Economics at the University of Nottingham and obtained his PGDip in Social Research Methods and Statistics from The University of Manchester. During his graduate studies, which he did part time, he was also working at his current organisation as a researcher. He is now a senior researcher there.

Chester's story focuses on the skills he uses in his current organisation where he has progressed to be a senior researcher. During his postgraduate studies he had a co-authored article published based on his undergraduate research dissertation. His reflections show that he is critically aware of the need for rigorous research training, coupled with an appreciation of how research is conducted outside of academia.

His story reflects his own research training experience: covering the research skills needed to define a research question and organise and select relevant information, together with the analytical skills for manipulating data, interpreting the results of the analysis and drawing robust conclusions based on the findings. His reflections also consider the need for being productive when undertaking research and speak to the practice of producing reproducible research especially with regards to the coding he undertakes.

I'd like to highlight how varied a professional role in research can be. Throughout the life of a research project, there's a vast number of things involved: from working with clients or partners to understand their needs and the gaps in their evidence or knowledge, designing (and, inevitably, redesigning) surveys and conducting interviews, to writing code to analyse data and communicating your findings.

Chester says that one of the most important lessons he has learned is being more comfortable in making judgments and taking decisions. At school, he realises, there was a focus on rote learning, his Bachelor's degree required him to demonstrate a lot of economics knowledge, and his politics courses drew on evidence and analysis to make judgments. He was able to build on this set of skills in his graduate studies where he became more comfortable in using evidence to make judgments

particularly in the face of uncertainty. This reflects the higher order analytical skills of drawing conclusions through critically assessing the evidence and findings and reflecting on those results and conclusions.

...developing a research proposal for a survey requires a lot of important decisions - from big things like your target population to the small things like the choice of response options in a questionnaire - and these decisions often interact with each other.

Through his social science lectures and assignments, he has come to appreciate that there's often 'an answer' rather than 'the answer', and that using existing research to explain your rationale and conclusions is critical. This helped him in his academic assignments, and through understanding this he learned that research can help inform decision making, but that consensus is something that cannot always be expected.

Having to defend decisions helped me gain the confidence in taking new or alternative approaches - a new statistical approach, a particular mode of sampling - in my studies. This same confidence and approach help me in my role as a researcher to make decisions on research design (for any particular element of a project, there are often a number of different ways to proceed) and propose new ways of working.

CHESTER'S THREE WORDS:  
**INQUISITIVE**  
**REFLECTIVE**  
**ADAPTIVE**

A particular technical skillset that Chester was able to develop during his studies, which is now helping him daily in his senior researcher role, was learning to code in R. He first encountered coding for analysis when he volunteered on a research project as an undergraduate, and recalls it being terrifyingly complex, while recognising the immense possibility it revealed. His graduate programme, especially, enabled him to learn, apply knowledge and ask for help to improve his coding skills.

I now use coding - specifically, R - almost every day. It helps me work much more efficiently, for example, through creating replicable routines for producing charts, or providing a way to connect and clean large and unwieldy datasets on a regular basis. But it also helps me to manage my time: I don't need the final data to begin coding the analysis for a research project, which helps me circumvent and mitigate the effects of bottlenecks in my workload, and to reprioritise tasks more easily.

Chester recognises the enormous value of being able to code, not only as a technical skillset but as a means of developing reproducible analytical pipelines in the research project. This is the holy grail of research, especially as it means code can be shared on publication of the analysis through platforms such as GitHub. Consequently, research can be audited and peer reviewed and the benefits around productivity, quality of outputs and robustness result in significant time savings and examples of good practice. Chester uses elements of this approach to rerun analyses with different parameters and maintain a systematic record of the analyses undertaken.

One of the areas that Chester feels there could be improvement in the courses he studied was in visual communications. As this is a top skill sought by all employers it is helpful to hear his thoughts on this.

For your research to be useful to others, communication is pivotal. There was a strong focus, especially in my graduate studies, on presenting all aspects of research - but especially empirical findings - clearly and transparently. However, the technical presentation of statistical analysis in my academic

For your research to be useful to others, communication is pivotal. There was a strong focus, especially in my graduate studies, on presenting all aspects of research - but especially empirical findings - clearly and transparently.

courses, while relevant to academic research, did not fully prepare me for a role in research outside of the academy. In the charity and voluntary sector, for example, a research report is typically communicated to a wide audience: from charity volunteers to CEOs, and from grantmakers or funders to policymakers.

Chester emphasises that most of the people using research in the charity sector are not themselves researchers. He suggests that academic courses could encourage students to develop a set of evidence-based techniques and principles for communicating research for this audience. In doing so he proposes that visual literacy should be included in social science courses.



# CHRIS PAINTER

BEconSc Economics, MSc Economics

Current role: Health Economist, Mahidol-Oxford Tropical Medicine Research Unit

Chris did both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Economics at The University of Manchester. He now has a career as a health economist at Mahidol-Oxford Tropical Medicine Research Unit (MORU) in Bangkok, Thailand. Between graduating and his current role, he has worked as a health economist in various organisations in the UK and overseas.

Chris's story is yet another of when a student at university didn't know what they wanted to do upon completing their studies or about the role they now occupy. He has navigated into an applied research role in health economics, where he is using the skills gained through his degrees on a daily basis. He has held several positions in this field since graduating and his reflections show what he has applied from his studies, as well as what he thinks could have been improved.

Chris was motivated through his own experiences to move into the healthcare sector as a researcher. As a result of his own, and his friends' and family's experiences he became very aware of the impact that healthcare can have on people's lives, and although it wasn't something he consciously planned to pursue, he believes this latent passion for the subject helped shape his career.

Starting with what his role entails now, and with a focus on his quantitative research and data skills, he says:

A lot of the research provides information about the value for money of certain health policy decisions in low- and middle-income countries. For example, this type of research can help policymakers understand whether the public healthcare system should provide a certain drug for a disease or not. It typically combines scientific data from clinical trials with financial and administrative data related to the cost of providing healthcare.

Chris acknowledges that his undergraduate course provided the foundational understanding, of knowledge and skills, on which he has continued to build. In particular he comments that the course provided many of the quantitative skills required for mathematical modelling and statistical analysis. He discovered health economics in his Master's course, through an elective he

took, which he found really interesting and different from his other modules. He went on to do his Master's dissertation with the Department of Health Economics, and decided then that he wanted a graduate role that was an application of his degrees.

I think that my desire to seek a career in applied economics really stemmed from the elective modules that I chose throughout the Master's course. The elective modules opened my eyes to the multitude of practical applications of economics that exist. Now I spend my time translating groundbreaking medical research through an economic lens into practical policy applications.

The link between economics theory, applied economics and statistics, and evidence-based policy and evaluation started in university but has continued to develop throughout Chris's career. Over the years prior to attending university Chris had what he describes as a 'variety of seemingly unrelated jobs', in hospitality, childcare, lifeguarding, and a series of administrative jobs. He's keen to point out that these helped him to develop skills in management, organisation, or customer service that have helped him along the way – in other words professional skills that he still uses to this day.



**It's really common that I'm the only economist in meetings, and it's crucial that I'm able to convey complex technical material in a way that people from a variety of backgrounds will understand.**

He comments that the majority of his studies focused on quantitative mathematical and statistical skills, with much less focus on writing techniques and the structure of essays or written materials. He is acutely aware of the high value placed on quantitative skills in his profession but sets this against the importance of written and verbal communication skills that are essential in any professional setting, stressing how these are put into use on a daily basis. He wishes he'd had more opportunity to develop his communication skills while at university.

I think one of the most underrated skills (or it seemed so at the time, anyway) that we worked on was our communication and presentation skills. On some of the applied economics modules we were required to give presentations on journal articles to explain various quantitative methods and case studies. At the time, it felt a bit burdensome and very different to most of the assessments we had on other courses, and it certainly wasn't something I enjoyed. However, it's really common that I'm the only economist in meetings, and it's crucial that I'm able to convey complex technical material in a way that people from a variety of backgrounds will understand.

When Chris completed his studies, he saw a lot of his peers take up roles in the finance sector or management consultancy. He knew that wasn't something he was interested in, but at that point didn't know what he wanted to do. He had thought about pursuing a series of internships in different fields of applied economics to find out what he liked most before committing to anything. And he followed this plan to gain his first graduate role as a health economist.

I ended up staying at the first company I did an internship with for several years, and that was in the healthcare sector – so it was a sort of happy accident in the end. I was lucky enough to find my first job extremely interesting, however it was generally oriented towards the private sector and eventually I decided I wanted to focus more on global health and the public sector, which is how I ended up in my current role.

Chris's story highlights how personal motivation (in his case healthcare), a good handle on research skills and methods (applied economics and statistics) and a willingness to be flexible and embrace opportunities as they present, can lead to a career in research – even if that wasn't (i) known about or (ii) the grand plan when he was a student. The combination of analytical, research and professional skills – gained from study and work experience – is a powerful mix in creating successful graduate outcomes.



# CLARA MAURE

BSocSc Politics and International Relations, MSc Management  
Current role: Associate Researcher, International Vaccine Institute

Clara took her Bachelor's degree at The University of Manchester and her Master's in Management at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is now an associate researcher based in Seoul, South Korea, at the International Vaccine Institute, an organisation dedicated to developing safe and effective vaccines globally.

Clara's story combines the impact her studies have had on her career trajectory, together with what she has gained from her extracurricular activities. It illustrates how a combination of analytical and research skills alongside professional skills can open doors to research careers. While her Bachelor's and Master's qualifications equipped her with the passport to her current research career for an international organisation, she previously had no idea this type of role even existed. Her story shows how she travelled from Manchester to South Korea and from a Politics and International Relations degree to become a social researcher in the health industry.

When I started my undergraduate degree, I would have never imagined that I would now be working in the public health sphere even less in a research-based role, a world that I considered then out of reach.

Clara says that while she was studying at The University of Manchester she was exposed to how politics, economics and policy issues are relevant to various sectors. Having an understanding of this, she was intrigued to explore different career paths. Her current role requires her to support the implementation of various projects, including clinical trials and

qualitative assessments within the clinical unit where she is a researcher, as well as to participate in setting up new strategic initiatives in her department. Her background in social sciences helped develop the foundational skills for this work.

In my politics degree, I was trained to summarise, analyse and compile information from different audiences. Digesting information quickly and being able to introduce and discuss difficult topics with audiences not necessarily familiar with the context was a key takeaway from my degree. I learnt hard skills - like analytical and research methods - which I now apply daily through, for instance, having to perform literature reviews to decide on whether a vaccine candidate should be pursued for clinical development.

Clara is very clear about the value of having developed her research methods skills while studying at Manchester. She also reflects on how research is context specific, acknowledging that she needed to be enculturated into the health research arena, for example acquiring a different vocabulary. However, her degrees provided the skills and knowledge for her to build on. She says that her research knowledge helped her during interviews, and in negotiating better terms of employment.

She is also mindful how valuable her professional skills have been – especially in communication, critical thinking and developing arguments.

When I started my undergraduate degree, I would have never imagined that I would now be working in the public health sphere even less in a research-based role, a world that I considered then out of reach.

More than hard skills, my degree definitely deepened my ability to speak and deliver information, both in public settings but also during one-to-one conversation. Through classes and time spent on debating, I was able to learn how to form my own opinions on specific topics and deliver information catered to the audience I am interacting with to achieve most impact.

CLARA'S THREE WORDS:

# CHALLENGE OPPORTUNITY ADAPTABILITY

Clara's story will also appeal to international students. Before coming to Manchester to do her Bachelor's degree she had studied in France – a country which she describes as having a good and more financially accessible education system. Indeed, her desire to study in the UK, was primarily driven by her drive to engage in extracurricular activities. She saw this as an opportunity to develop her professional skills, while at university, and find out what she wanted to do upon graduating.

My positive experience at The University of Manchester was heavily impacted by my extracurricular work. I became President of Unicef on the UoM campus during my third year after having been part of the society since the beginning of my degree and it marked the beginning of my relationship with global development agencies. This was also a key factor for my recruitment at my first long-term job at Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance in Geneva as it demonstrated my ability to lead, take up responsibilities and engage with the development sector.

It is often the case that the work experiences students engage with outside of the classroom are better placed to develop professional skills, and Clara confirms this - her commitment to extracurricular work resulted in a positive outcome. Her story is also a great example of how having these experiences helps to contribute to providing evidence of these professional skills, and, importantly,

developing networks while at university that can help develop the contacts you might want to draw on when pursuing a graduate role. In Clara's case this happened with her links to Gavi.

Clara's parting message is that she wishes she has been exposed to different fields in which research careers exist, and the many career paths social science graduates can take to enter them.

I recall a big emphasis on career development through traditional academic routes - for instance through pursuing a PhD. However, there was less on how research is compatible with various private industry work. I am very glad this editorial is coming to light and hope it contributes an external perspective to University of Manchester social science students.





# GEORGIANA BACIU

BSocSc Politics and International Relations, MSci Communication Science

Current role: Portfolio Manager, Research Marketing, Elsevier

Georgiana took her Bachelor's degree at The University of Manchester and her Communication Science Master's degree at the University of Amsterdam. She now supports the production of research in her role as a portfolio manager at Elsevier, the world's largest scientific publisher.

Georgiana works in a research-centred role for one of the top global scientific publishers, Elsevier. Her pathway into this career, and her discovery of the type of work involved in supporting research, came about through serendipity and having the right skills and experience. Her story describes how she progressed from doing a Politics and International Relations Bachelor's degree at The University of Manchester, to a Communication Science Master's degree at the University of Amsterdam and shows how she has also used her extracurricular experience (including an internship with Elsevier) to help shape her career path.

**I wish more people knew that there are options to support the world of research without actually being a researcher.**

Have I always known that I would have a researcher-centred career? Not at all. Did I know what I was doing when I applied for the internship? Absolutely not. It was all a bit of a coincidence. I was lucky, but I now wish more people knew that there are options to support the world of research without actually being a researcher. In the future, I hope to work to strengthen the collaboration between research organisations and governments, to ensure better outcomes for society.

Georgiana grew up in Romania, and as a child met hundreds of people from all over the world due to her parents volunteering work with Habitat for Humanity. This made her curious about the world and it led to her feeling energised when surrounded by people from different cultures and backgrounds. After spending a semester of high school in the South of France, in a small town where few people spoke English, she was determined that her studies should help her better understand the world, to enable her to act more effectively to change and improve it.

Studying on the BSocSci Politics and International Relations (POLIR) degree at The University of Manchester was a decision that has shaped my life. You might often hear me say that "Manchester made me" - it further shaped my sense of community and purpose while allowing me to interact with people from all over the world, listen to their stories and expand my knowledge. I even have a bee-shaped tattoo in its honour!

The course itself did a great job at stimulating my creativity, collaboration and teamwork. Studying IR meant that for each piece of coursework I could focus on my own areas of interest, while working with peers to exchange ideas. We were 100 students from 50 countries, which meant that



I could easily find someone with a completely different perspective than mine, who could challenge my ideas and provide some fresh insights.

While acknowledging that her politics and international relations degree helped shape her, Georgiana says that 'the real magic happened outside of class'. She notes in particular two extracurricular activities that had a strong influence on her career choice. The first was her term as President of AIESEC Manchester (AIESEC is a global youth-led organisation striving to achieve peace and fulfilment of humankind's potential by activating leadership in youth). This experience cemented Georgiana's desire to have a purpose-driven career and helped her realise that politics is not the only way of making a difference. It also highlighted the importance of networking and persuasion - both important skills. The second was a Library Student Team role which exposed her to what research support entailed.

I was already very interested in the area of research and what impact scientific insights can have on policy, but I was unaware of the struggles of researchers and the tools that can help them. As part of the Library Student Team, I supported drop-in sessions for researchers to develop their academic skills and understand research platforms such as reference managers. This niche really spoke to me, as I was interested in research but couldn't see myself as a researcher, so it was the perfect way to stay involved and support those with a calling for research.

During her undergraduate studies Georgiana became interested in communication as a next step, and her Political Communication professor recommended a Master's degree in the Netherlands. This Master's of Science (uniquely for the Netherlands) degree at the University of Amsterdam was rated best in the world on this topic and focused heavily on research. Successfully gaining a place on this programme, she also did an internship alongside it at Elsevier, the world's largest scientific publisher. Elsevier also develops tools and platforms for researchers and research managers. She immediately felt at home at Elsevier and has since held two roles within

## GEORGIANA'S THREE WORDS

# VALUE-DRIVEN SERENDIPITY ALWAYS LEARNING

the company: Open Science Manager and Portfolio Manager (her current role). In both she has contributed to helping the company understand how they can more holistically support researchers, ensuring that their needs are met to enable them to conduct their work seamlessly, whether for publishing through open access or developing skills via the Researcher Academy. She is currently investigating how to improve the experience of chemists who work on multiple projects simultaneously while collaborating heavily with researchers from other disciplines.

Georgiana has also demonstrated her capacity to be flexible in seeking out other roles to assist her career. Between the first and the second role she has held at Elsevier she took the chance to work at a new government agency in Denmark.

I temporarily left Elsevier because I got an opportunity to work for the International Centre for Antimicrobial Resistance Solutions (ICARS), which is providing funding and expertise to low- and middle-income countries who wish to implement research-based interventions. The year I spent at ICARS as Communications Officer reinforced my commitment to supporting the world of research and gave me closer insights into the day-to-day needs of researchers.

Georgiana's story is characterised by her having found an area that interested her through her time studying, seeking out and taking up opportunities that helped her better understand the role of research support in the publishing industry, and staying true to her personal values of wanting to work in diverse and stimulating environments. Her story blends the academic and research skills and knowledge she has developed, together with the professional skills that she has sought to acquire and reflects the passion Georgiana has for her chosen career.

# HENRI EGLE SOROTOS

BA Econ: Economics and Politics  
Current role: Lead Knowledge Engineer, Beamery

Henri studied on The University of Manchester BA in Economics and Social Studies (BA Econ) degree, following a pathway in Economics and Politics. He is now working in an R&D (Research and Development) team in what he describes as ‘fundamentally a software research position’.

Henri's story illustrates how, even with limited technical and programming skills gained as an undergraduate, it is entirely possible to acquire these skills through graduate positions and enter a career in a technical R&D profession. Moreover, the motivation to learn these skills comes from the wish to critically engage with the subject studied – in Henri's case economics and politics.

Right now, I'm working for Beamery - a start-up based in London, but with employees all over the world. We build enterprise software for really big companies to enable them to effectively manage their workforce. On paper it might not sound hugely interesting, but I find it fascinating. Much of my time is spent prototyping software solutions that may or may not eventually make it into production. My last three jobs have been in this space and I can't see myself leaving it any time soon.

I think doing such an interdisciplinary degree gave me the confidence to try working in different settings, and the focus to equip myself with new skills that built on what I learnt in my degree.

His role as a knowledge engineer involves building and maintaining semantic web-standard knowledge graphs. This is a kind of data engineer role working specifically with graph databases – a technical term that describes how knowledge can be represented, structured and stored (a bit like drawing a diagram on a whiteboard, but digitally). Web search tools like Alexa, Google and Siri use graph databases to store their data and build relationships between the data points. Henri works on similar databases to the type that underpin those systems. Much of his role is about structuring data and aggregating data from the web into ontologies and taxonomies (technical terms to describe how knowledge is described, structured and connected). He also builds software to read and write from these databases.

Henri is certain that his degree at The University of Manchester positioned him well for his roles in a technical R&D field.

It wouldn't be possible to be where I am today without my degree from Manchester - referring both to the skills I gained, as well as the aspirations it gave me. This may sound odd - many would assume a computer science degree would be better aligned - but I disagree.

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HENRI'S THREE WORDS:

# CREATIVE NON-TRADITIONAL BROAD

My job today is fundamentally research based. It requires a curious mind and creative problem solving, as well as technical skill. My politics dissertation was the first time I had been given the creativity and space to properly explore a 'big' question. It made me value the importance of deeply understanding a problem and proactively and logically reasoning through different solutions. I also had to defend this thinking with my tutor. I still structure problem solving in a similar way today.

Today he works regularly on problems that require a similar thought process. For instance, he recently built a new data model that describes the HR (Human Resources) world - how people, companies, skills, experiences and qualifications are related to one another. This knowledge representation is inherently subjective and requires justification and reasoning as to why a certain approach and set of relationships is optimal. His role involves justifying and problem solving with his colleagues, and actively contributing to the industrial and academic community in the field of the semantic web.

Before his current role Henri tried out a few other positions after graduating. The common theme with all of these was that they spanned the data and tech sectors.

Before settling firmly in the tech sector, I had quite a few 'data/research type' jobs, working in different sectors. I didn't fancy a traditional grad scheme. First of all, I worked as a database administrator for a charity in Manchester, and then worked as the Research Manager at UoM Students' Union. This was a great role - I was responsible for working with NUS and the University to complete quant and qual research into the student body. It was the first time I got to apply some of the skills from my dissertation and

econometrics module. One of my favourite things was conducting a health needs assessment for the students in the city, commissioned by the NHS.

Henri has had to become highly proficient in the use of different software languages. How did he go from doing an economics degree to being in this highly technical profession? He says that the core programming skills required for his role are the Python and Java programming languages, acknowledging that he has honed these skills through a long period of self-learning in addition to his studies.

He would not, however, have thought of learning them were it not for his degree. In fact, he says he can pinpoint exactly when he first became interested in using software to manipulate data, and that was in his second-year econometrics module. The class was taught using EViews, and there was the opportunity to also learn some SPSS and R (two types of statistical software). Using this software and public data, Henri was able to undertake data analysis and answer real world macro and micro questions like 'does raising taxes increase government income?', and 'how long does it take for prices to stabilise?'. As his career has progressed, he has built on these skills learned as part of his degree, and is now proficient using multiple general-purpose programming languages.

In addition to his data and technical skills gained at university and then in his subsequent roles, Henri was an active student and invested in his course, including in efforts to change it to help it become more 'real world'.

As an 18-year-old, I think it's fair to say that I was quite bewildered by the whole university experience when I first arrived. I helped set up a student society - The Post-Crash Economics Society. This really helped give me some purpose and structure outside academic studies. We also released a research report into the state of economics education in the UK.

Finally, Henri's story provides a great case study of how social science graduates can enter the world of technical research, contributing to building knowledge in a fast-growing area.

# JACK FORD

BA History and Modern Languages (German), MA Politics (European Politics and Policy)  
Current role: Lead Evaluation Officer (Transport), West Yorkshire Combined Authority

Jack did his Bachelor's degree in history and German at the University of Oxford and his Master's in Politics at The University of Manchester. He is now leading on the evaluation of the £830 million City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement at the West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

Jack currently has responsibility for the evaluation of a city region sustainable transport programme – a significant investment. His story reveals how he has navigated into this major role, drawing on his adaptability and flexibility together with his research skills. As a modern languages and social sciences graduate with international experience and a diverse background in politics and policy, his story demonstrates the value of a combination of research, analytical and professional skills in the public sector. Jack's open-minded approach to embracing opportunities is compelling.

I went to a comprehensive school in Bradford and was always changing my mind about what career I wanted, ranging from law, academia, to research chemist. I am naturally curious and have always been a bit of a polymath, so chose a mixture of science and humanities subjects at A-Level. While at that point I wished I'd had more certainty about my future I have no regrets about this adaptability, which has stayed with me since, giving me resilience and a unique set of skills.

Inspired by some exceptional teachers at my school, I took a Bachelor's degree in history and German. The degree, and particularly the essays and tutorial groups, gave me academic discipline and honed my skills in writing and critical thinking. In fact, engaging in tutorials and seminars and not being afraid to explore lines of enquiry I knew may not go anywhere has done the most to drive my career since. I also took advantage of all the opportunities the university environment had to offer to engage with different ideas and subjects. During my year abroad at the University of Bonn, I took courses in other languages, economics, and politics. I became involved in political party societies and the Model United Nations and took advantage of lots of speaker and discussion events.

Following his Bachelor's degree Jack spent a year living and working in Poland, and then chose to pursue a Master's degree at The University of Manchester. He was motivated by a keen awareness of regional inequalities, the urgency of the climate crisis, and the desire to have a career where he could help tackle these problems. His Master's degree provided a detailed understanding of how policymaking and legislation works, and quantitative and qualitative research methods courses helped him develop a valuable practical research toolkit. The application of knowledge from his research dissertation on European energy and climate policy gave him the confidence that he had successfully made the leap from the humanities into the social sciences.

Jack also reflects on the importance of extracurricular and work experience activities, especially in understanding how research is conducted and communicated in a policy environment. While studying for his Master's he held a part-time market research position, which gave him an appreciation of survey design - good and bad! He also participated in a policy bootcamp, which provided a 'fascinating and practical snapshot' into the world of policymaking. This led to a three-month paid internship working at the GMCA (Greater Manchester Combined Authority) where he led on two very different research projects. He engaged in the process of 'bricolage', combining stakeholder interviews, secondary data analysis, and rapid evidence reviews to deliver new policy insights. It also gave him experience in communicating key policy messages, verbally and in writing, to senior officers, which would prove invaluable in future roles.

It was through a follow-on position as a data analyst at Stockport Council that Jack understood the importance of the application of research and analytical skills to the evaluation of policy interventions.

I took on a data analysis role - my first opportunity to learn programming (SQL) and dashboarding (Tableau) software. I am glad I was able to learn on the job, but it would be ideal if coding and data visualisation skills, which are highly in demand in many areas, were more integrated into university and school curricula. One of my key tasks was to compile evidence to inform evaluations of social care interventions. This experience gave me an appreciation of evaluation as a discipline that bridges policy, research and delivery and ensures that decisions are based on 'what works', helping to drive better decision making. I realised that this area of work would suit me, engaging my curiosity and inquisitiveness and helping foster a culture of learning in settings where I could help make a genuine difference.

Before completing his Master's, Jack gained a position in monitoring and evaluation at Transport for the North. This role - how to transform the transport network in the North of England - sitting firmly between policy, strategy, and research

With a higher focus than ever on the need to rapidly decarbonise the transport system, it is vital that we understand not only what works, but why and how, to achieve this goal. My only regret is that I had not discovered evaluation earlier.

in an area he cares deeply about, was ideal for him. It was very broad: from analysing monitoring data to mapping the effects of transport interventions, working with academics and consultants, and providing direct input into the policymaking process. Leading an important area of work, he also gained vast experience developing an evaluation strategy and persuading key stakeholders to get behind this. This experience led directly to his current role.

[My role] provides an opportunity to champion evaluation in the development of a major programme and ensure that it is considered early and done well when developing and delivering on transport projects. With a higher focus than ever on the need to rapidly decarbonise the transport system, it is vital that we understand not only what works, but why and how, to achieve this goal. My only regret is that I had not discovered evaluation earlier. It is certainly an area university courses should promote more. It is a cross-cutting discipline which suits anyone with research skills and a knack for critical thinking, and getting evaluation right is critical to enable good policymaking.

Jack's combination of the research, analytical and professional skills set out in this publication provide a convincing case for the high value placed on social science graduates in the public policy space.

JACK'S THREE WORDS:  
**CURIOUS  
ADAPTIVE  
REFLECTIVE**





# DR KATIE BENSON

BSc Pharmacology, MSc Criminology, MRes Criminology and Socio-Legal Studies, PhD Criminology  
Current role: Lecturer in Criminology, The University of Manchester

Katie set out studying natural sciences and is now a lecturer in criminology. She has taken four degrees, starting at the University of Dundee with a BSc in pharmacology, two Master's degrees (one at Leicester, one at Manchester) and finally her PhD at The University of Manchester where she is now a lecturer and researcher.

Katie's story covers her atypical career trajectory from her undergraduate degree in pharmacology at the University of Dundee to her current role as a lecturer in criminology at The University of Manchester. She has also gained two Master's degrees, one in criminology from the University of Leicester and the other in criminology and socio-legal Studies at Manchester, where she studied for her PhD.

Her studies have been interspersed with periods of employment, in fields that interest her and align with her subject expertise and technical skills. But how did she make the step from the natural sciences into the social sciences?

I loved my undergraduate degree. We learned about the study of drug design and development, and the role that medicines and other drugs play in researching and treating disease. Understanding how therapeutics could be developed to target specific points of a disease process was fascinating and it gave me the opportunity to spend a summer working in a research laboratory in the US.

After my degree, I spent four years as a medical sales rep for a pharmaceutical company. While I enjoyed working with medical professionals and continuing to learn about drug development, after a change in my personal life, I decided to pursue a long-held fascination with criminology and interest in becoming an intelligence analyst. I got a place on an MSc in criminology and, while writing essays on everything from the politics of punishment to global security and terrorism prevention, I felt like I had found my place.

Katie graduated with a distinction, a love of writing, and a new-found respect for Starbucks baristas after working part-time to support her studies. She determinedly pursued her goal

of working as an intelligence analyst. Experiencing several unsuccessful interviews - which were demoralising at the time but, with hindsight, taught her a lot about resilience, listening to feedback, understanding her weaknesses, and building on her strengths - she was then appointed as an intelligence analyst working for a national intelligence unit focused on distraction burglary, a form of criminality that is often highly organised and crosses multiple force areas. Her role was to identify patterns in offending in order to link cases and support multi-force investigations. She was trained in the National Intelligence Model and the various skills needed to be a tactical and strategic analyst.

Her next role as Knowledge Manager at the SCDEA, Scotland's national organised crime policing and intelligence agency, provided the opportunity to put into practice many of the skills she had acquired both through her studies and her intelligence analyst post. She needed to work across multiple teams and was involved in developing or supporting research projects with universities across Scotland, including on online child abuse, cybercrime and forced labour. She developed and managed collaborations between the SCDEA, Scottish Centre for Criminal Justice Research, Scottish Institute for Policing Research, and individual universities, to share knowledge and expertise, facilitate joint research projects, and shape research agendas.

This was a fascinating job. My role was, first, to develop a more effective knowledge management strategy and processes for the agency to ensure we made use of the vast institutional knowledge that existed across different parts of the organisation, and second, to develop links between law enforcement, academia and others to build our knowledge and understanding of organised crime and its policing. I was involved in projects on the policing of organised crime, threat assessment, and knowledge transfer between



academia and law enforcement with members of the Scottish Centre for Criminal Justice Research. I worked with the Scottish Government Organised Crime Unit on developing the national Organised Crime Task Force Research Plan and organising a research forum, involving law enforcement, government and academia.

As the financial crisis hit Katie decided that given the resulting uncertainty of continued employment the time was right to pursue her next challenge – a PhD. She had no plans to have an academic career, but wanted to challenge herself again, and to research in depth an issue that had begun to fascinate her in her work. She was awarded an ESRC studentship to do an MRes in Criminology and Socio-Legal Studies and a subsequent PhD in Criminology at Manchester (a 1+3 studentship).

After completing her PhD she worked as a Research Associate in the Department of Criminology at Manchester, then gained her first lectureship at Lancaster University. She returned to Manchester to take up a lectureship focused on financial crime. She has co-developed a new distance-learning Master's degree in Financial Crime and Compliance in Digital Societies for experienced financial crime risk, governance and compliance professionals working in financial services and other sectors.

My research focuses primarily on money laundering and its prevention. This is the perfect fit for both my research expertise and varied work experience, building on my ability to integrate academic perspectives with practical applications.

My research focuses primarily on money laundering and its prevention. This is the perfect fit for both my research expertise and varied work experience, building on my ability to integrate academic perspectives with practical applications. I have provided expert advice on this subject to regulators, government departments, NGOs and the media in various countries; spoken on panels and at conferences for policymakers, practitioners and financial crime experts; and given expert testimony to a Commission of Inquiry into Money Laundering in British Columbia, Canada. I have also been lucky enough to present my research at various academic conferences around the world.

Katie has enjoyed her varied and interesting career path and feels lucky to be in a job that satisfies her endless curiosity and love of learning.

The expectations placed on academics to excel at research, scholarship, external engagement, teaching, supervision, administrative roles, project management and more, can feel overwhelming. I hope that my varied experience has given me a broad perspective and the ability to work with people from different backgrounds and sectors, and an understanding of what is important to me and what I value in my working life.

KATIE'S THREE WORDS:

**VARIED  
INTERESTING  
UNCONVENTIONAL**



# MAJID BASTAN-HAGH

BA Criminology, MRes Criminology  
Current role: Senior Research Officer, HMRC

Majid did his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in criminology at The University of Manchester and is currently a senior researcher in HMRC, a government department with offices nationwide. Majid is a very proactive alumnus of the university, constantly reaching out to create partnerships and opportunities and giving back to the university where he gained so much.

Majid recalls that when he started his criminology degree, he still had the aim of becoming a barrister. Along the way, however, this idea appealed less, and he was unsure of what he wanted to do upon graduating. In the middle of his degree, as he was learning more about data analysis and criminological research, the notion of becoming a social researcher opened up.

During the second year of my undergraduate degree – where we began to cover the basics of research design and statistical data analysis with R Studio – something kind of clicked. Data analysis, in particular, was incredibly interesting for me. That module gave me the ability to rigorously manipulate, interpret, and analyse data in a way that I hadn't done before. The undergrad course had an invaluable focus on data skills and that second year of study gave me the foundations of being a competent social researcher.

Having taken a statistical analysis module in his second year he applied for and got a Q-Step Data Fellowship. Q-Step is a programme which supports social science students to gain real-world experience through a paid placement completing quantitative data analysis in a professional setting. Majid was placed in the Civil Service and got to understand first hand what it was like to work as a government analyst – the good, the bad, and the bureaucratic. He had the chance to apply his knowledge to real-world datasets and produce insights that could have an impact on policy. He got a peek at what it might be like to pursue this as a career and gained a better understanding of what analytical and research skills he would need to develop to pursue this.

He recognised that his undergraduate degree was broadly really good at providing an understanding of the theoretical basis for designing and conducting social research, albeit with limited chances to apply this theory in practice. Through his modules he learned about formulating a research question, deciding what evidence is necessary, ethical considerations, synthesising existing literature and identifying gaps, collecting data, analysing it, and drawing conclusions based on a critical assessment of the data. But he also saw – through both of his degrees – the limitations in learning how to do research in a purely academic setting.

The problem is, when you learn about research in a theoretical, and more specifically, an academic context, I think it is easy to develop a somewhat 'rose-tinted' view of how research is developed and deployed. In reality, once you begin a career in research you learn very quickly that it becomes even more important to continually consider costs and finances, staffing and resources, procurement, and in a governmental setting – how your work may be influenced and impacted by changes in ministers, or government priorities.



My degrees were great in giving me the knowledge and understanding of social research but didn't do much in the way of giving me a great deal of experience of using them in a practical setting. Realistically, these opportunities come when you're in work. That's why I think it's so valuable to get work experience early on while you're studying.

Majid says he kept his options open by continuing to do a second degree. His work placement experience, coupled with his interests in social research, opened up a pathway into taking a PhD or gaining more research experience, in his case, in the public sector. His current role involves him conducting in-house research on tax issues, as a senior research officer, just five years after completing his Master's. The variability in Civil Service careers has been one of the biggest pulls for Majid, together with his appetite to keep learning.

Being able to move between departments and utilise your skillset in a new context is a way to keep things fresh and continually develop. Reflecting back, I am really glad I did my postgraduate degree, as it has definitely had a positive effect on my capabilities as a government researcher - more programming experience, qualitative research techniques, more advanced research design awareness, learning how to evaluate policy and practice – these skills have all been used during my Civil Service career to date, and were capabilities that built on my foundational knowledge from

Critically, my degrees were both really useful in preparing me for a job in social research and the work experiences – both good and bad – have been crucial in getting me into, and preparing me for, a career I am really enjoying.

undergraduate study. I might have had a steeper learning curve without the MRes.

Majid also points out that learning what you don't want to do is as important as finding out what you do want to do. He pursued a 12-month graduate internship in a university which did not leave him wanting more, and a brief stint in a market research agency which left him unfulfilled. Both, however, left him reflecting on what he did want and gave him the experience of refining his career search.

I don't regret doing either. I was able to rule out a couple of career paths that weren't the right fit for me. Additionally, the role at the market research agency heavily motivated me to seek out a role in government research, which led to my first job at the Office of the Sentencing Council and then the rest of my career to date.

Critically, my degrees were both really useful in preparing me for a job in social research and the work experiences – both good and bad – have been crucial in getting me into, and preparing me for, a career I am really enjoying. Things not working out in a certain role or sector of work is not the end of the world. There isn't anything wrong with trying something out and it not being the right fit for you – this can often end up leading to a career you will find much more fulfilling.

MAJID'S THREE WORDS  
**VARIED  
FLEXIBLE  
FULFILLING**

# MIA STRAND

BSocSc Politics and International Relations, MPhil African Studies

Current role: PhD Student, Development Studies, South Africa

Mia took her Bachelor's degree at The University of Manchester in politics and international relations and an MPhil in African Studies in South Africa. She is currently a PhD student in development studies at Nelson Mandela University (NMU) in South Africa. Before coming to university Mia had studied for six months in Ghana, followed by a further six months in India.

Mia is a truly international student and now researcher. She took courses in global environmental management in Ghana and peace and conflict studies in India before studying her Bachelor's in politics and international relations at The University of Manchester. Since graduating she has pursued an MPhil in South Africa and is now completing a PhD in ocean management, using arts-based participatory methods. She is also an early career researcher on the Algoa Bay Project, at the Institute for Coastal and Marine Research at NMU, and the international research programme One Ocean Hub, based at the University of Strathclyde.

Although she actually decided that she would not go into environmental management, she now finds herself immersed in it through her research. Being willing to relearn — and reassess — is one of Mia's core strengths.

My PhD is a beautiful mesh of all my previous experiences, combining qualitative and participatory research methodologies with decolonial theory and social justice in ocean management. In my current role and transdisciplinary research approaches, I am quickly learning the need to unlearn things we may take for granted or that we have been

taught throughout our contextual experiences, education and positionalities. To be able to properly immerse yourself in participatory research and knowledge co-production processes, we must in fact be open to unlearn and be vulnerable with our colleagues and co-researchers. I am deeply and thoroughly grateful for the opportunities, mentorship and lessons my current and previous mentors and degrees have provided to get me to where I am today.

How did she get from her Bachelor's degree to her PhD? At The University of Manchester Mia was actively involved in several different extracurricular activities, such as UNICEF on Campus and the Politics Society. She also applied for and took a Q-Step paid work placement between her second and third year, attending a summer school in political data analysis at the University of Essex and gaining first-hand experience with political research at YouGov UK in London. Although Mia enjoyed quantitative methodologies and data analysis, and even brought this knowledge back to help in teaching first-year politics students, she says her heart always remained with qualitative methodologies. Determined to continue her studies at graduate level, Mia was proactive in seeking help to take her to the next step of her studies.

I knew I wanted to pursue a Master's degree that critically examined the continued coloniality of the development industry and development relationships between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South', but I did not know where or what would be the best place for this. After conversations with several of my mentors at UoM, specifically incredible guidance and suggestions by Dr Carl Death, I reached out to two professors at the University of Cape Town. After a brief conversation with them there was no doubt, I had to move to Cape Town.

**To be able to properly immerse yourself in participatory research and knowledge co-production processes, we must in fact be open to unlearn and be vulnerable with our colleagues and co-researchers.**

MIA'S THREE WORDS

# EXPERIMENTAL UNLEARNING QUALITATIVE

Mia moved to Cape Town and found herself hugely motivated both by her studies and the environment she was living in. Her first degree had taught her how to think critically, and how to conduct research using appropriate methodologies. At the University of Cape Town, surrounded by theories and political thought, particularly informed by the historical context of violence and institutionalised racism of colonial and apartheid rule, she found that her passion for methodologies was quickly replaced by a passion for decolonial theories. Shortly into her arrival in Cape Town what she was studying in many ways became reality, and she was exercised by how, practically speaking, the university where she was studying could be decolonised. She took up tutoring and teaching positions again and was excited to have these conversations directly with first- and second-year students.

I really believe taking on the opportunities the universities provided in extracurricular activities and tutoring helped me understand what kind of work I enjoy outside of my methods-obsession, as well as making me stand out when applying for roles including my PhD. Following my two initial degrees, I worked in community-based participatory research and with non-governmental organisations for a couple of years before working in diplomacy and then for a start-up for twelve months. During this period however, my interest in pursuing a PhD continued to be at the back of my mind and I even reached out to former mentors at The University of Manchester for guidance and advice (a shout out to Dr Carl Death in particular!).

The experiences Mia reflects on have been instrumental in helping her find her passion for research in environmental management. Using her networks, maintaining links with her former supervisors, and being focused on her purpose and willingness to critically reflect on her learning has brought her to where she is now. She would counsel that her best advice for anyone wanting to pursue a PhD is to follow your heart when it comes to your choice of topic and methods. She also advises that it's important to choose your university based on the supervisors you want to work with, projects you want to be part of, and research methods you want to use.

My PhD project focuses on the usefulness of arts-based participatory research approaches to better recognise Indigenous and local knowledge systems in area-based ocean management. I must admit I did not expect to be back where I started with environmental management, but with the global environmental crisis we are facing and my personal growing love for the ocean, this seemed like the only viable option.



# NANDITHA PLAKAZHI

BA Social Science: Social Anthropology and Criminology  
Current role: Associate Data Analyst, Trilateral Research

Nanditha gained her Bachelor's in Social Sciences (BASS) degree at The University of Manchester, following a pathway in Social Anthropology and Criminology. Her Data Fellowship work placement experience helped her enter a graduate role as a data analyst at Trilateral Research, the organisation that hosted her.

Nanditha's story draws collectively on the experiences she gained as part of her Bachelor's degree together with her work placement experience through a Data Fellowship at the end of her second year, and her various extracurricular activities. She is crystal clear about how her social science degree helped her to think critically, develop an open mind, and learn to listen to others' points of view.

Collaborating with others becomes much easier if the other party feels like you have taken the time to really listen to their concerns and challenges. When there is an opportunity for group work, this is a way to develop your collaborative voice and persona! And beyond academic modules, peer mentoring and volunteering also helps to foster this collaborative skill.

She encourages others to consider the reasons and context that has inspired a certain response from someone. She has found that this becomes extremely relevant in a workplace in which professionals might have different academic backgrounds, levels of experience and team priorities. If you want to excel at your job, she says, you have to display a level of understanding and compassion that reflects the way you communicate your own work, expectations and deadlines.

Reflecting on her social science studies she says it's important to not stress about the 'value' or title of the degree. At times, Nanditha did question whether she had made the most practical choice studying social anthropology and criminology, saying

this was further compounded by her Indian background where she feels most young people are expected to become doctors, engineers or lawyers.

I was encouraged (by my mum) to pursue a non-traditional degree path and so if there are any parents reading this, please back your children. Trust me, it will pay off.

She is in no doubt that her social sciences degree provided her with the ability to think analytically and critically about research questions. She wrote many essays, recalling how she was taught to dissect the research question, define and explain the foundational theories and critique who created them and in what context. Identifying bias in the research question, and/or the analytical methods used to answer it, is an important skill. Something particularly valuable as a data analyst with a social sciences background is that you bring critical thinking into process-oriented work. You [might think] that if you have data and you have the tools to analyse it then you can discover the most factually accurate results. But data is not free from bias. You always have to question who collected the data, in what circumstances and for what purposes, and the social sciences really help highlight this.

Nanditha talks about valuable employability skills she gained too. Her focus on analytical and research skills (especially in the form of programming) and professional skills (especially communication) are particularly prominent. She wishes, looking back, that there might have been a greater emphasis on the communication skills.

What I particularly enjoyed and was really valuable in my degree was the focus on developing quantitative skills. The adaptability of these skills has also turned out to

NANDITHA'S THREE WORDS  
**EXCITED  
CURIOUS  
DETERMINED**

be important. I used Excel, R and NVivo exclusively for quantitative crime analysis, from calculating crime rates in neighbourhoods to creating different types of crime maps. Now I use the basic coding principles to clean and process data for public health research projects. It's so much easier to learn a new coding language once you have one in your toolkit. In my current job I had to learn to code in Python which I had never done at university but knowing R was a huge help and made the learning curve much smoother.

Something I do, and a common professional skill, is to communicate results. At university, it's important to not only learn the theories and methods of doing something but think about how you can translate the analysis into communicable outputs. Brush up on your public speaking skills, presentation skills, visualisation skills etc. I wish this was something that was included a bit more in our academic modules. The dissemination and communication of work in practical and easy-to-understand formats to multiple audiences is highly important.

She gives her younger self the excellent advice of 'to not feel intimidated' when starting out. Her work placement and her current experience have taught her there will always be people more qualified than you. There are times when she has felt like an imposter – noting how easy it is for this to happen. She encourages curiosity.

A common professional skill, is to communicate results. At university, it's important to not only learn the theories and methods of doing something but think about how you can translate the analysis into communicable outputs.

Most research projects are made up of numerous parts from writing proposals, planning resources, collecting data and conducting research to analysis and presenting the results. Even if it is not strictly part of your job role, try to get involved in the various parts or even just talk to others who are involved. Most people, especially those with more academic experience, are often more than happy to indulge your curiosity and welcome questions about their research.

She highly recommends doing a work placement given the opportunity, acknowledging what a wonderful experience she had in developing skills beyond university through hers. The Data Fellowship she did at the end of her second year changed the course of her career. It gave her a 'pressure-free introduction to a professional life' and helped her decide that she wanted to be a data analyst.

Those two months helped me visualise how I could practically use my university degree. Everything I learned at university, like evaluating data sources, identifying and analysing potential data bias, using Excel and R and NVivo was finally being put into use and I could showcase results beyond my university grades.

The company where she did the Data Fellowship kept her on as a part-time intern throughout her final year. This gave her the experience of balancing both work and studying, provided some financial freedom and confidence in job hunting after graduation. These skills, the experience she gained and the relationships she developed at the company opened the doors for her to step into a role as a graduate data analyst.



# NICOLA SAGAY

BA Philosophy, Politics and Economics, PGDE Teach First Secondary Mathematics  
Current role: Data Analyst at a speciality insurance firm

Nicola took two degrees at The University of Manchester and has shown the adaptability of her skills and knowledge by moving from the social sciences into a technical role as a data analyst. She is now a self-described data scientist and has navigated her way into a career that plays to her strengths.

Nicola's story reflects how her tenacity, drive and motivation helped her to find her career path. It also illustrates how subjects and topics that students discover in their undergraduate degree, can be explored in depth through the final-year research dissertation and then beyond graduating. Opening the door into an area that fascinates a student enables opportunities to unfold. Nicola's story reveals how your time at university can open your eyes to careers that you might never have envisaged. In her case, Nicola discovered what artificial intelligence (AI) was in her first year, heard about data science in her second year, and pursued her interest in the ethics of artificial intelligence (AI) in her final year, which directly led her into her current role as a data analyst.

I was introduced to AI during my first year of university, and to data science in my second year as I frequented the University's careers talks. The political landscape [while I was studying] was highly partisan; it was an exciting time with Brexit, Trump's election, and The Cambridge Analytica scandal. These events left a lasting impression on me and partly inspired my dissertation topic. In 2019, I finished my PPE degree. My research dissertation examined the ethics of using AI-powered micro-advertising and the impact of this on internet users.

Nicola describes herself as a very proactive student who attended a lot of the University's Careers Service talks given by alumni. During these networking opportunities she talked to a Master's student studying data science, and this piqued her interest in a career area she hitherto did not know much about. She interned at an events company in the summer between her second and final year of her undergraduate degree, during which she attended the SEO (search engine optimisation) business conference in Liverpool. She was hugely motivated by the topics discussed there, describing them as 'mind-blowingly interesting'. She particularly remembers the talks about data funnelling and analysing millions of data points (big data) to target users. She discovered that at that time Google wasn't the biggest search engine, it was in fact Amazon. She attributes that internship to leading to her dissertation topic and her current role.

If I had never done this internship, I wouldn't have written my dissertation on micro-advertising and wouldn't be working in my current role.

During the final year of her undergraduate degree following a module on inequality she became passionate about educational inequality. She decided she wanted to dedicate the first few





NICOLA'S THREE WORDS:

## LIMITLESS EVOLVING FORMING

years of her career to helping students from disadvantaged areas. She succeeded in being appointed to the highly competitive Teach First programme. Teach First is a charity that develops and supports teachers and leaders who are determined to make a difference where it's needed the most. During that time Nicola had the option to do practitioner-based research, and with her interest in data analysis and her dissertation knowledge, was drawn to the idea of using data points collected through ed tech products to apply micro-advertising through personalised education.

I was intrigued to see how customised recommendations could enhance my teaching. From that moment, I wanted to explore data more and have a career in that domain. I have always been motivated by what is considered ethical, so this prompted me to take a boot camp by Code First Girls, and I then started a career in data analytics. I had never coded before and felt I could not join the male-dominated coding clubs. I wish I had been more confident and kept going to the coding club. For some reason, I had decided this was not my space, as I couldn't find anyone who looked like me.

She says that although her degree had options to take quantitative modules, she never thought she could have a career in data science and artificial intelligence. Indeed, she wishes there had been modules during her degree that would have taught data visualisation, using software and tools like Python and Numpy, which she has since learned how to use. She thinks that there is scope to add this type of module to the degree she took and feels that this would benefit those students who might want to enter a career in data science. Her reflections on the coding clubs being male dominated, and not finding people there who 'looked like me' is a common utterance, but her solution to find a female coding club appears to have paid off.

Nicola's story speaks to the power of being proactive in finding out about career options and developing your networking and communication skills. Her PPE degree gave her the foundational knowledge and skills on which to build, and the intellectual motivation to specialise in an area that fascinated her – AI and data analysis. She found opportunities outside of her formal studies to expand her skills and to build the bridge between her substantive interests (initially in educational inequality) and her technical interests in data science. These were underpinned by her wanting to use data analysis to make a difference. Her final reflection is highly motivating.

Since graduating, it has been a whirlwind, but I have learned that the only limitation to your degree opening doors for you is yourself and your knowledge of careers.

Since graduating, it has been a whirlwind, but I have learned that the only limitation to your degree opening doors for you is yourself and your knowledge of careers. I dedicated a lot of my time to the Careers Service - it helped me ace my interview with Teach First. I was proactive, messaging people on LinkedIn and attending careers events. My degrees can take me anywhere. I work in the Leadenhall Building (The Cheesegrater), which I first visited at 16 when I was on a work placement. I told myself then I would work in a building like this, and now I work there. I am precisely where my 16-year-old self expected me to be.



# OLIVER ERTUK

BSocSc Politics and International Relations  
Current role: Data and Intelligence Assistant at Bury Council

Oliver gained his Bachelor's degree in Politics and International Relations from The University of Manchester. While there, he also undertook a Data Fellowship work placement experience at a Manchester-based charity organisation. He works in the public sector at Bury Council, in the Adult and Social Care data team, as a data and intelligence assistant.

Oliver's story reflects how dedication to finding a role in a chosen sector can pay off and illustrates how perseverance is a skill worth acquiring. Although Oliver is just at the start of his career, he has taken opportunities that have arisen throughout his studies both in the courses he chose to enrol on, and the extracurricular activities he engaged with. His own background has also played a large part in helping him to understand the type of role he wants to pursue, and how his interests in conducting research can be met. His story is a great combination of how he has been able to elicit his analytical, research and professional skills and use them to enter a role as a data and intelligence assistant undertaking research in a local council in one of the ten boroughs in Greater Manchester.

There were many ways in which my degree equipped me with the skills for a career in social research. The first was the first-year module - Making Sense of Politics. Working with data and having IT and numerical skills had not occurred to me as something a politics undergraduate would learn about. Nonetheless, even though it was a challenging course, my interest never wavered, and I found data analysis a very useful way to influence politics. I developed skills in organising data in SPSS (statistical software) and then transferring the data to Excel to build visualisations. It taught me familiarity with large survey datasets and provided me with some very practical skills that I still use to this day within my research role.

OLIVER'S THREE WORDS  
**EXCITED  
COMMITTED  
DETERMINED**

**My degree not only taught me research skills but also equipped me with ideas and understanding on how I could use research to help address social issues.**

Oliver went on to do more data analysis modules in his degree. In his second year he chose to focus on polarisation in the UK and was able to grow his quantitative research skills using SPSS and Excel as well as his qualitative analysis skills through NVivo. He uses these in his current role. While these modules gave him the research skills that enabled him to learn more about the sector he works in, other modules which focused on social issues gave him a grounding in social theories.

The Social Justice module in my second year taught me about understanding how people become disadvantaged and the possible options that can be taken to reduce the disadvantages they face. Another second-year module educated me about the harsh experiences that many people face in war-torn or poverty-stricken countries and helped me understand their personal experiences. These modules provided me with the background knowledge to inform causes I care about, and showed how research can help with advocacy, protection and progression for those affected. Therefore, my degree not only taught me research skills but also equipped me with ideas and understanding on how I could use research to help address social issues.

During his time as an undergraduate, Oliver explored a number of possible career routes. He was interested in having a role within politics that was behind the scenes and that could influence policy. Having enjoyed his research and statistics modules he contemplated a career in data analytics and social research. At the end of his second year, Oliver successfully secured a paid internship as a Data Fellow with the charity Greater Manchester Poverty Action. He says this was 'the pivotal experience' that helped him consider a career in data within a policy/politically-focused environment. He especially enjoyed how an organisation like GMPA could influence policy through the research it conducted. This Data Fellowship opened up a future career path and gave Oliver an edge in his interviews and applications for a graduate role. While he had dropped maths at the age of 16, he did not let this stop him from pursuing his chosen career path.

While I had realised what sector I wanted to go into and the career path I wanted to take, there were many challenges that I faced in the way to my current role. I frequently reminded myself that I needed to be patient and remain driven as while it may have been more difficult for me it was still very possible. I would recommend that anyone who does not have a formal background in data or research but wants a career in it, identifies and overcomes any barriers. Just make sure to gain as much experience as possible and find a way to express your passion and desire to work in research.

Even after acquiring the work experience, and with a good degree outcome, Oliver did not find his dream job immediately. Initially he found a role in the private sector and used this to hone his analytical and research skills further. This role also made him more determined to pursue his wish to make a societal difference and he continued to look for a role in the

public sector. By now he was able to elicit and communicate the skills he had acquired through his education and work experience and he used his networks to explore possible future roles. This led to the successful application for his current role.

When I got the role, I felt my hard work and determination had finally been recognised. Now I am part of the Adult and Social Care data team doing some incredibly valuable work monitoring and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of care services within Bury and Greater Manchester. The research we do is so important for helping frontline workers provide their services and giving them the support they need. Furthermore, the research skills I am gaining are keeping me incredibly motivated. While this is only the beginning of my career, I feel so happy to be in a role that provides everything I was seeking and hopefully in the future I will be able to specialise in my research interests with the skills I have gained.



# DR PATTY DORAN

BA in Māori Studies, Graduate Diploma in Community and Family Studies, MSc Social Change, PhD in Social Change.  
Current role: Research Associate, Sociology Department, The University of Manchester

Patty took her Bachelor's degree and Graduate Diploma at Otago University in Dunedin, New Zealand. Later — after several years of working — she took a part-time Master's at The University of Manchester which led to her taking a PhD at the same university. Now she is a Research Associate in the Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group.

Patty is currently in a research post that is funded for five years (which is a relatively long time in research funding), in a prestigious research group led by the Department of Sociology at The University of Manchester. The focus of the group's research is understanding the development of age-friendly cities from a spatial justice perspective. Her route to this position has been non-linear.

Her story, which started in New Zealand, reflects how she got from growing up in a working-class family of seven to becoming an academic researcher.

I had grown up in a socially sheltered, low-income, Catholic family (the middle of five children), and although my parents were supportive and encouraged us all to be ambitious, by the time I left home and went to university I had a very limited world view. The whole experience of going to university was a huge growth experience. I was constantly learning about life, about people and society, and not just from lectures. It was a very formative time and probably the first time I had been encouraged to critically think about, well, everything.

My four years at Otago were a mix of sociology and Māori studies, a bit of statistics, family law and theatre studies. I read Robert Putnam and liked the concept of social capital (his book *Bowling Alone* came out in my last year at Otago). Māori Studies was not what I thought I would major in when I started my degree. Although I am Pākehā (non-Māori), I had grown up with a diverse range of friends, and to me understanding New Zealand

society meant respecting and understanding Māori culture and heritage. Although I left New Zealand at the end of my degree, the lessons I learnt about diversity, equity, social justice, colonisation and social policy remained relevant in all the countries I have lived.

These formative experiences as an undergraduate, and her learning to think critically, have stayed with Patty. She left New Zealand moving to Australia where she worked for four years. During this time, she worked at McDonalds, took on a traineeship at Centrelink (Australia's equivalent of Job Centre Plus), and worked her way into roles that offered information, advice and guidance to people looking for work. Alongside this she became a trustee for a local women's refuge, and recalls being invited to attend a conference about women in leadership that she found inspiring. She then spent a year in Stockholm working in an international nursery school.



Living in a diverse town like Manchester and having a university that was a world leader in the social sciences is a great combination.

PATTY'S THREE WORDS  
**FLEXIBLE  
CURIOUS  
BRAVE**

Patty then moved to the UK and got a position at Manchester Libraries as a community-based project manager. She worked for seven years in many of the more deprived neighbourhoods of Manchester providing advice, individual support and connecting people with a wide network of community organisations. She worked on a European funded project focused on employment, then on a project funded by Macmillan Cancer Support to support people affected by cancer.

The community engagement element of her work is the golden thread that weaves Patty's story together. That and her interests in older people, social justice, and an approach to thinking critically.

Through my work with Macmillan I began to focus on older people and health inequalities. I attended seminars and workshops held by MICRA (Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing) and my interest in further study and research was ignited. Living in a diverse town like Manchester and having a university that was a world leader in the social sciences is a great combination. I signed up to study for my MSc in social change, while still working full time. Macmillan funded my MSc and my study continued to develop my interest in ageing. I was very impressed by the people who taught on my Master's, the way we were encouraged to think critically about the changes we were seeing in our neighbourhoods, cities, countries and globally and to challenge ourselves to think in new ways.

She was asked by a lecturer if she thought she would do a PhD. Her response was to laugh, but it planted a seed in her mind. Feeling like she needed a change in her life, when the opportunity came, she applied for and obtained PhD funding. She began her PhD just before her son turned one and submitted it just before he went to school. While acknowledging

that it wasn't always easy, Patty has no regrets about those years of her life. Her substantive interests and the research methods and analytical skills she had learned came together in her PhD.

My PhD study was in applied social statistics and I used a mixed-methods approach. I used qualitative methods to explore the stories of people living with cancer, and a large social survey to quantitatively examine the variables associated with social support and quality of life for older people living beyond cancer. I have always valued people and their stories, but my PhD study reinforced a commitment to telling the stories behind the numbers.

Nearing the end of her PhD Patty started to pick up short-term research contracts which developed into longer fixed-term research contracts post PhD. This is common due to the way in which research projects are funded. While she acknowledges that fixed term work isn't ideal, it has allowed her to broaden her research skills, experience and knowledge. Her adaptable and flexible approach to developing her research career helped her navigate to her current role. Patty believes that all her work experience, life experience and studying has contributed to her career in research.

Most important [to building my research career] have been the people I have met along the way: residents, service users, community activists, leaders, managers, researchers, colleagues and friends. And what I have enjoyed most during my studies has been the opportunity to discuss new ideas, meet new people and listen to a diverse range of stories. And then to use these connections to reimagine the future landscape together.

# DR PETE JONES

BA Social Science: Sociology, MSc Social Research Methods and Statistics, PhD Social Statistics  
Current role: Postdoctoral Fellow, Faculty of Arts – Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Alberta

Pete did all three of his degrees at The University of Manchester and is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Alberta. He is the only social scientist in the research team which is working on a large multinational and interdisciplinary project aimed at analysing gender equity policies in the global screen industries from the perspective of labour networks.

Pete's story looks back on the decade since he started his Bachelor's degree, revealing how he has demonstrated flexibility in his approach to studying and becoming an early career researcher. It took him a while to think of himself as a social scientist, and to appreciate the skills he brings to the table because of the pathway he has taken. He wishes he had understood the value of these skills a little earlier as it has helped him appreciate what it means to study in a social research field.

Being able to formulate research questions, find appropriate methods for answering them, and communicate results and their importance clearly are not skills that can be taken for granted. I now find myself in the fortunate position of researching the topic I am most interested in using the methods I prefer to work with and know the best. I get to do this because a social sciences education provides the platform to simultaneously focus on the social issues that you're interested in while also gaining the critical and technical skills to work on finding solutions to those issues.

Being able to formulate research questions, find appropriate methods for answering them, and communicate results and their importance clearly are not skills that can be taken for granted. I now find myself in the fortunate position of researching the topic I am most interested in using the methods I prefer to work with and know the best.

How did Pete achieve this? He is keen to point out that while his academic success suggests a consistent and coherent plan, this was not how it felt. His BA in social sciences (BASS) degree certainly provided the foundation, giving him the flexibility to discover what interested him most. He started studying politics and philosophy, changed to politics and sociology, and then graduated with a sociology degree. What helped him find some focus was that between his second and third years he was successfully placed, through the Q-Step Data Fellows programme, into a project which helped him develop his quantitative data skills. This landed him an eight-week placement in the Age Friendly Manchester team at Manchester City Council working on a report evaluating data sources for monitoring the age-friendliness of the city.

Seeing how quantitative skills unlocked research job opportunities encouraged me to take more quantitative courses in my third year. At the same time, I decided to write a mostly theoretical final dissertation about postmodernism, feminist theory and video game players' identities. I was still figuring out how to apply the research skills I was gaining to the kinds of topics I found most interesting.

Towards the end of his undergraduate degree Pete was starting to discover what areas of social research he was interested in substantively, as well as the research methods that could be used to explore these topics. After completing his Bachelor's, he applied for and won a scholarship for a Master's degree in quantitative research methods, through which he learned more about research design and further improved his analytical skills. Most importantly, he cemented his interest in social network analysis (SNA) and the study of relational social phenomena, which led him to his PhD research using network methods to study the representation of women in popular film narratives.

PETE'S THREE WORDS

## INTERDISCIPLINARY SKILLS-ORIENTED FLEXIBLE

Pete's PhD has taken him to Edmonton, Canada (where he points out temperatures regularly go below -25°C during the winter). He continues to work on using network methods to research gender inequities in the film industry. However, getting a postdoc was not straightforward and he admits that after completing his PhD he was somewhat at a loss to understand his employability prospects. He had spent some time after gaining his PhD travelling, and on his return to the UK desperately needed a paid position.

After closely monitoring academic job ads, I found a short-term research assistant position on a project focused on developing statistical and data literacies in Latin American higher education through workplace learning opportunities. The role wasn't related to the area I'd been specialising in, and I was unfamiliar with several of the issues and fields that the project was drawing on. Nevertheless, I knew from each of my degrees that I had the ability to read and review literature, manage my own time, and communicate in an interdisciplinary environment. I stated this honestly in my application and was thrilled to get the job.

His approach to being flexible in applying for - and getting - this role paid off. It also resulted in Pete co-authoring an academic article and gave him a baseline from which to successfully apply for a postdoctoral position. Most importantly, though, he says it enabled him to prove to himself that many of the research and analytical skills he had gained were broadly applicable even beyond the settings and contexts in which he had imagined he would apply them.

Looking back Pete sees that his career trajectory and where he is now makes a lot of sense. He'd studied for a general social sciences degree and a Master's degree in social research

methods - a pathway which by design offers a general and discipline-agnostic overview of how to do social research. However, he acknowledges that by the end of his doctoral research, he had somehow lost sight of that and convinced himself that, while everyone around him seemed to have deep disciplinary expertise that he felt he lacked, he only really knew about his narrow PhD topic.

Some of this is almost certainly impostor syndrome, but I wonder if part of it is also the way subjects such as sociology are thought of in UK universities. Many of my international friends and colleagues tell me that they have always been taught to think of sociology as a skills-based technical vocation, but I never felt like my courses were presented that way to me when I was taking them. I was lucky to find programmes (such as Q-Step) and supervisors and mentors who pointed out the value of a skills-based approach. If I hadn't, I don't think I would have this career.





# RUTH NEVILLE

BA Philosophy, Politics and Economics, MA Political Science: Democracy and Elections (research route),  
MSc Data Analytics and Society  
Current role: PhD student in Geographic Data Science at the University of Liverpool

Ruth did her undergraduate degree in politics, philosophy and economics at Lancaster University, followed by a research Master's in political science at The University of Manchester. She gained an MSc in data analytics and society at the University of Liverpool, the first year of a 1+3 programme where she is now a PhD student in the Department of Geographic Data Sciences.

Although Ruth had been motivated to do a PhD during her studies, she did not do this straight after her first degree. Her story reveals how she has built on her interests and developed her research and analytical skills to enable her to do the PhD which she is now pursuing. Ruth has progressed from her first degree in philosophy, politics and economics (at Lancaster University) to her PhD at the University of Liverpool via an MA in political science (research route) which she studied with the Democracy and Election team at The University of Manchester. Collectively, these degrees, plus her Master's in data analytics and society at Liverpool (the year before her PhD) have helped her hone her analytical and research skills, especially in quantitative methods. She has surprised herself in what she is capable of.

I learn new quantitative skills every day and complete analyses I never would have thought possible a few years ago. If you had told me I would be able to write code in R and Python and be presenting my research at international conferences I would

If you had told me I would be able to write code in R and Python and be presenting my research at international conferences I would not have believed you, but I am proud to be where I am and do not think it would have been possible without studying at The University of Manchester.

## RUTH'S THREE WORDS

**OPEN-MINDED  
LEARNING  
GROWTH**

not have believed you, but I am proud to be where I am and do not think it would have been possible without studying at The University of Manchester. Although the techniques I learned in my MA were perhaps not the most advanced, they lay a firm foundation for my future development.

Ruth enjoyed her undergraduate degree and developed a particular interest in quantitative methods and political science through studying about electoral behaviour in the UK and Europe. This led her to find the political science with a focus on democracy and elections MA course at Manchester, which she describes as 'the perfect fit'. Not only did it focus on her favourite area of the subject and was taught by highly established academics in the field, it also offered an opportunity to further specialise in quantitative research methods.

The course at Manchester was set up in such a way as to provide training in both qualitative and quantitative methods, while the research community in the democracy and elections cohort held a wealth of expertise in quantitative methods – housing the highly respected British Election Study. I was excited to be accepted and commenced my studies in 2017 after taking a year out to save up money and relax.

Ruth recalls being made to feel extremely welcome by the academics in the department and as there were only six students on the same course, they created a strong community of practice and became good friends. In the first semester they studied a module on quantitative methods, which took a cross-disciplinary approach and were taught how to use SPSS software and statistical techniques including linear regression. Although it was the first time Ruth had encountered these concepts, she enjoyed learning them. She went on to apply these methods to her research dissertation and this opened her mind to the possibility of using quantitative methods in future research. It also assisted her in engaging with the literature around her course. When she completed her MA she was encouraged to do a PhD at Manchester, but felt that for her the time was not quite right. Instead she secured a role on The University of Manchester's Graduate Internship Programme, as a Management Information Assistant in the Faculty of Humanities.

I was hired based on the quantitative research skills I had developed in the Master's programme. I analysed the University's teaching and learning data, gained skills in new programmes such as Power BI, and learned more about analysing data for business needs. I also learned a great deal about presenting data and findings to stakeholders. After the internship was complete, I was hired as an analyst working with the Business Intelligence Team. In this role my focus became analysing data around widening participation and other key metrics the University is measured on. I built dashboards using Power BI to convey these statistics to key senior stakeholders at the University. Moreover, I began using regression analysis and SPSS to complete more complicated projects. There is no doubt that these roles enhanced my skillset immensely.

Having spent time developing her research and analytical skills, and two years working in a professional environment, Ruth felt it was time to scratch the itch she had to do a PhD. She also had concerns that she might be getting left behind, and that her skills might soon be outdated for future research roles she might wish to pursue. She decided to be proactive about moving on from her current role, which had no secure future.

I looked up PhD studentships and found an opportunity at the University of Liverpool to work on a project entitled 'Predicting Demand for UK Higher Education within the Global Higher Education Market'. The project included a Master's degree to provide training on more advanced quantitative methods and software skills (Machine Learning, multilevel modelling, Python and R). It was a dream come true. I applied and was accepted, with the supervisors quoting my professional background as one of the key reasons that they were keen to take me on board. Although this project has moved me away from Political Science, it has put me into an exciting and developing area of study.

Ruth's story shows how combining academic study, and work experience, can help students differentiate themselves from the crowd. The need for an understanding of the application domain of research is highly sought after both in academia and industry. Ruth doesn't know what her future holds for when she completes her PhD, but she speaks warmly of Manchester allowing her to build an incredible network of colleagues, friends, and mentors through both her academic and professional work experience. Her career is taking new and exciting turns all the time, and she feels very lucky and privileged to have had these opportunities.

My advice would be to be open to new opportunities and new areas of study, and that learning is a journey that you continue throughout your life.





# RUY SCALAMANDRÉ

BSocSc Politics and International Relations

Current role: MSc student in Public Policy and Administration at the London School of Economics and Political Science

Ruy did his first degree in politics and international relations at The University of Manchester and is currently studying at the London School of Economics and Political Science for an MSc in public policy and administration. He is also a part-time research analyst with London Politica writing articles, leading research projects and working on client projects.

Ruy's story reveals how he is pursuing a pathway that will enable him to build on his knowledge gained through his politics and international relations degree and learn more skills that will open up a career into public administration, strategic consulting, government affairs or business development. Although still studying Ruy undertakes independent research, often on his own initiative. One of the most enjoyable research projects he has undertaken was on geopolitics and sport, where he evaluated comparative business strategies in specific political contexts. His focus was on Formula One and the Olympic Committee. The report is available online (<https://londonpolitica.com/s/Geopolitics-x-Sport-Report.pdf>). He enjoys research and is using this experience to keep his options open for his future career, and to hone his research skills.

He is highly motivated by his own background. He has dual nationality and having lived away from his home country has really opened his eyes to the way states operate, how they interact with their citizens and behave with other states. He also thinks this has helped him cherish diversity and tolerance.

His reflections on what has brought him to where he is now start with his consideration of what it was about his Bachelor's degree that he found useful.

What is useful from any degree in the social sciences, in my view, is that it gives you the opportunity to develop profound awareness of the world around you beyond the surface. Specifically, politics and international relations helped me see the political landscape of the world in a more nuanced way – things that didn't 'make sense' before, I now make a link between the normative/ideological, to practical/institutional .... so what was useful was learning how to be critical of the world around me and to make sense of why things are the way they are.

As well as the critical thinking skills he developed during his studies, he says that his degree also gave him the opportunity to develop other transferable skills, for example, using software such as SPSS or R to quantify and analyse the world empirically. He acknowledges that this skillset is something which is particularly useful in the workplace and can help in understanding academic research beyond politics or social sciences, and that learning this [to code] supports evidence of acquiring the professional skills of needing to be adaptable and creative.

Building on this theme of the need to be an adaptable graduate, Ruy speaks honestly and compellingly about what he has learned from failing as well as succeeding, and how working while studying has helped him reflect on this. Dealing with failure is a really important skill to develop and Ruy sums up his thoughts in explaining what he has learned from his own experiences, and how these have helped him with communication, collaboration and teamwork, time management and networking skills through his activities beyond studying. He speaks about how failure – as he defines it – has always helped him grow and achieve some of his best successes.

RUY'S THREE WORDS  
**ANXIOUS  
GOAL-ORIENTED  
CONFIDENT**



The failure. The difficult moments and the struggles...for better or worse, all my best successes began with failure – and remember, that is perfectly fine!

The failure. The difficult moments and the struggles. Whether it is looking for work and not getting responses, getting feedback at work and realising I could have done so much better or having mental blockages that last weeks – in those moments I learned where I could improve or to ask what I want from myself. Working in my final year was a mixed experience, but it helped me realise a lot of my short-term goals and so putting yourself 'out there' even in small ways helps you grow – on a personal level – in ways that aren't possible in the classroom. However, for better or worse, all my best successes began with failure – and remember, that is perfectly fine!

A common finding with students is lack of confidence in their studies or in the application of knowledge and skills beyond their subject expertise. Ruy too wishes he had been more confident in his own ability while studying at Manchester. He recalls being anxious or unsure about his university work most of the time and puts it down to not trusting in his abilities. He realises that at the worst times, when he could not convince himself of the quality of some essays, he could go to his professors or tutors for further guidance. Now he acknowledges that recognising his own abilities has allowed him to actively engage with material from beyond his own field with greater confidence and appreciation for the text, dataset or experiments he encounters. And he goes on to use 'confident' as one of the words to describe how he feels now.

If I had had self-confidence in the early stages of my undergraduate studies, I feel that I would have been able to take more risks and maximise my learning at The University of Manchester. Now my best skills are probably my triangulation of knowledge and versatility in research. I am always motivated to learn, help, and grow with the people around me and this fundamentally gives me insight and knowledge in matters that may be outside my area of expertise.

Finally, in reflecting on what he thinks might have been improved in his undergraduate studies, he says he tried to create a diverse curriculum by taking courses outside of his main subject. He especially values the quantitative and critical thinking skills that he developed – which have contributed to his current research – and wishes they had been introduced in more depth earlier in his degree. In particular he thinks a unit on the guiding principles on argumentation and using data in social science would have been valuable in the first year.

# SUMMARY

## PROFESSOR JACKIE CARTER

This publication provides a collection of stories told by alumni to help you understand that what you learn in your social science degree at The University of Manchester has relevance to graduate careers in research. The analytical, research and professional skills presented through the voices of those included are based on a framework that will help you make sense of the knowledge, skills and experiences you acquire as a student.

All of the alumni included in this booklet reflect on what it was about their degree – Bachelor's, Master's or PhD – that has helped them in the research role they are now in. Many also refer to the extracurricular activities they pursued while studying, that enabled them to evidence the application of skills and knowledge beyond their academic studies.

Of the eighteen alumni featured four are academics, two are enrolled on a PhD and two on a Master's course undertaking research. Three work as government researchers at national, regional or local level, while one has entered a career in academic publishing. Three are data analysts and another three are social/medical/economics researchers.

They all reflect on the rigorous research training they received at The University of Manchester as well as the opportunities they

had to build on their learning through activities outside of the curriculum and classroom. They demonstrate compellingly how a social science degree can position you for an interesting, fulfilling and challenging role in research and evidence how they are all contributing through their research to changing society.

Each story contains three words, or phrases, which sum up their job or their approach to their role. You only have to flick through this collection to see the strong, uplifting and energising words they use to reflect their roles. Some of the words they chose will undoubtedly apply to you too.

The stories included here reflect how the research careers that these alumni are now in were not necessarily the ones they expected to pursue. Indeed, many of these alumni have followed non-linear paths into their current roles, sometimes changing disciplines too. What is clear is their commitment to studying, to gaining qualifications and honing their research skills and to value the extracurricular experiences – such as jobs and work experience – they had. They have also learned from setbacks.

This collection of stories has brought to life the experiences of eighteen alumni interested and involved in research careers. It has described the pathways into their current roles. Hopefully this has opened your eyes into what is possible with a social science degree from The University of Manchester for those curious about a career in research.

**Strength Perseverance Enthusiasm Optimistic**  
**Gritty Representative Inquisitive Reflective**  
**Adaptive Collaborative Innovative Flexible Challenge**  
**Opportunity Adaptability Value-driven Serendipity**  
**Always learning Creative Non-traditional Broad**

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## FURTHER READING

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## THINGS YOU CAN DO NEXT

- 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. You can start by connecting to me at <https://uk.linkedin.com/drjackiecarter>
- Use your award-winning careers service at [www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/](http://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

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