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Catherine Jenkins, MSc Air Pollution Management and Control

I am currently an Environment Officer with the Environment Agency, in Kidderminster. My team covers the whole of Worcestershire and our general remit is to protect the environment. We regulate the waste industry, protect controlled waters, respond to pollution incidents and take enforcement action where necessary.

In my 15 months of working here, I have been involved in numerous pollution incidents, from fly tipping, to large oil pollutions in the river Severn. I have been in court several times, and I am currently working towards my own case file.

Before getting this job in May 2009, after I graduated, I worked for Severn Trent Laboratories as a Chemist. I was responsible for analysing waste water for levels of pesticides, for large and small, global and local companies.

My first degree was a BSc (Hons) in Chemistry – this was a great foundation for my MSc, and helps me in my job today both for technical knowledge and logical reasoning.

My MSc in Air Pollution Management and Control was a programme in the causes and effects, physics and chemistry and management of air pollution. It was a very detailed, but also much applied course, and provided me with blanket knowledge of air quality issues. This has been invaluable to my job. For instance, this morning, an incident came to our team of a chemical factory going up in flames. We were quickly provided with CHEMET data and a modelled plume. Because I understood the implications, thanks to my MSc, I was able to make a quick assessment. Our involvement in major air quality incidents such as Buncefield is becoming greater, and already I am seen as the air quality lead for our area, because I have this MSc, which is nationally unique to the University of Birmingham.

At the moment, I love my job. I want to advance quickly, preferably down the technical route rather than the managerial. I'm not overly concerned about how high up the ladder I will be, or how much money I am making, but more that people will see me as an expert in something, and that I will have a 'can-do' reputation. To be honest, I haven't thought much about where I will be in 10 years time or anything, because I am only 24 and doing something I am passionate about- long may that last!

University has given me the tools to shape my life so that I can do the things I want to do. On the technical side, it has given me the skills and knowledge needed to get a career which I love. Studying science has forced me to think logically and to effectively problem solve, which has been commented on by my managers. Because my MSc is so rare, it has added to the skill set not only of my team, but to other area teams within the Environment Agency.

On the other side of the coin, University developed me as a person. It gave me the challenges like managing my own time, which has helped me to become successful in my job. It gave me the opportunity to meet hundreds of interesting people from different backgrounds. My best friends today are still those I met at University. University gave me the freedom to choose what I wanted from it and to aim high, and it gave me the confidence to go for it.

My advice to other students considering applying for this course is "Just do it". Whether you think you will directly use your degree or not, a degree from the University of Birmingham really impresses employers. Everybody has those days where they think 'what am I doing here?', but at least if you're at a good University, you always know in the back of your mind that you are doing something worth while. Once at University make sure you take every available opportunity, write everything down and also, listen to your lecturers. Their advice is free, they know how you feel, and they want you to succeed.

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