

Ellie Slakova, MSci Psychology and Psychological Practice

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Ellie Slakova talks about getting relevant experience to pursue a career as a research associate, and how her degree in the School of Psychology has benefited her.

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Read the transcript

My name's Ellie and I work as a research associate at the moment. Umm I work in the cognitive and neuropsychology centre in the experimental psychology department at the University of Oxford.

[Can you give a brief description of what you did from graduation up until now?]

Graduation was amazing so after that I took a month off, I went to Bulgaria on holiday, it was lovely. Then I went to Germany on a conference with nightline, it's a voluntary organisation. Then I came back here and I have to say it all hit me, it hit me that: I am not at Uni anymore, there was no structure and things were a bit vague... so I have to say I did struggle a little bit. I started applying for jobs, and I got a part time job that I use to do when I was still a student. And I applied for a total of three jobs and got one of them.

[Can you give a brief description of the course you studied and how it benefited you?]

So I did the MSci Psychology and Psychological Practice course. In the first three years, I did different types of Psychology like cognitive Psychology, developmental Psychology, applied Psychology and so on. Umm, that was really interesting and it was very research focused, we had to write a lot of reports, which I really enjoyed. And, in my final year I got hands on experience, working for the NHS, I worked with an organisation called *Youthspace* with Birmingham Solihull mental health trust. And, I was interviewing teachers of their understanding of mental health and how they would help students who have mental health problems and how they would support them. So, I did qualitative research in my final year, it was fascinating.

[What would be the range of typical starting salaries and potential for progression within your career?]

Well I think it's a bit difficult to say, because it depends a lot on your experience, what area of Psychology you want to go into, on your degree. Because obviously, masters students have a better chance of getting a higher position and a better paid one. So, I was told at the end of my course that I would be lucky to get a voluntary position and three months after that I got a position that was a band six, and the top end of band six. So, I think it's really difficult to say. The usual starting salaries are around £20,000 a year.

[Would you say you have used any of the transferable skills that you developed within your undergraduate course later on in life?]

I think mainly my critical thinking. I remember in first year we had to write this essay, it was the first piece of work that we had to do and submit. Umm and the question was something to do with biology about the brain, the neurones and how they function. I remember reading one article and thinking 'yeah that's definitely the case', and the next article I read said almost the opposite thing and I thought these two articles say different things, they can't be. And I have to say I was very confused. So, I think my critical thinking has developed lots throughout the years. This is very helpful in my job, for example when I test a patient and look at the results after that, I have to think about them and decide how to further investigate what underlies these results.

[What were your reasons for pursuing a career in your chosen field?]

Well I'm just generally very interested in Psychology. If I have to be honest, when I was little I was very scared of snakes and my Mum suggested I went to the school Psychologist. So I did, and she was really nice, she spoke to me a lot about snakes and what is it about them that scares me: is it the colour or the size. And gradually, she helped me get rid of my phobia of snakes. And a few years after that I actually touched one of my friend's pet snakes and held it in my hand and I wasn't scared at all. So, I just saw how much she helped me and how nice she was and how understanding she was of my fear. So, I just wanted to do this for other people. So, that's the main reason, but I also think Psychology's one of the most delicate sciences; because you work with people who might be under a lot of stress and your ultimate aim is to improve their Psychological and emotional wellbeing. And, this is sometimes very difficult, I just the most difficult thing sometimes to do, umm so that's why I think Psychology is a really valuable career to do, to go into.

[What activities did you undertake at university to enhance your chances to get into your chosen career and with hindsight would you have done anything differently?]

Well, when I was in my second year I started looking for experience. And, I was looking for absolutely anything; it could have been voluntary in any area of Psychology. I just emailed some researchers from the department, this proved to be the best strategy really. Professor Glen Humphreys who was then the head of the department, emailed me back saying that he would need a research assistant. So I started voluntary and a year after that I was offered a part time job as a research assistant at the department. So I was working with patients and stroke patients and it was a really valuable experience, I've learned so much and I've got so much experience; it's been amazing. And after that with my 3rd year supervisor, I did a fellowship in infant studies, so that's with children as well and we investigated their gestures and how their related to language. That was very interesting and though it was very different from working with patients, it was great that it was different, because I learned very different skills and very different lessons from that experience.

[Could you describe the typical day for you at work?]

That's quite hard, because the job is so varied! I usually start with when I arrive at 9'o clock I usually start with checking my emails and replying to my emails; I usually have quite a lot, so that takes about an hour. Umm, and then I start thinking about possible rehabilitation strategies I start thinking about results and depending on what the results are, I usually think about new tests to do with them. We have quite a lot of meetings discussing patients, what should we do with them next, which patients we need to invite for future research to the university. We have quite a lot of seminars as well, which are all in the area of cognitive and neuropsychology, which are absolutely very interesting because some of them differ from what we do. So it's a really good way to broaden your thinking and knowledge about Psychology. Umm, when I go to...I sometimes go to hospitals and test stroke patients there. We administer a very short test on their cognitive ability that takes quite a long time, usually about half a day and the rest of the time I would spend analysing the results, doing data entry. We sometimes do follow ups in people's homes about 6 months later they've had a stroke, that takes a lot of time usually, and again I spend the rest of the day entering the data and analysing it. And usually writing a report on their cognitive abilities and sending to them. On Thursdays, I work with a patient with aphasia and that's usually from 9:30-4:30, again rest of the day its data entry, analysis and then discuss what further tests we can do. Quite a lot of administrative skills like administrative tasks to do, like applying for ethics approvals. One of my main goals is to recruit controls so we can match the patient's results to someone at the same age but who hasn't had a stroke. So, I design a lot of leaflets, I go to lunch clubs and speak to elderly people to explain what we do at the university, what research they can take a part in, find out whether they're interested in it really.

[Can you outline your likes and dislikes about your job?]

I can't say (pauses). I like everything I do, there isn't anything I dislike. My favourite thing is definitely working with patients, interacting with them, talking with them. I think it's sometimes really difficult, some stroke patients can't do things that are really simple to us and obviously they were simple to them before they had the stroke. So it can be very discouraging and sometimes it is difficult to know whether to stop a test or carry on. Obviously as a researcher you want to get the data, but you know you still have to think about the patient and stop if they get discouraged. You have to do your best to encourage them and to show understanding and just compassion that you know you don't really understand how they feel but you understand that it's difficult. It's really good when you explain to people why you're doing this test, what you're hoping to find. I've found out through the years of working with stroke patients it's really important to tell them that this will directly benefit people in the future. You know, we used to think we do this research here, but it's all very abstract, we only publish it and who takes it into account? Well, you know people do take it into account and it really directly benefits other people in the future. And, our understanding of stroke, what happens after it will help people and design rehabilitation strategies, would really help other people. That's the only way to help people who are really struggling with cognitive tasks to carry on and come to the university. Most of them really want to help other people and of course gets better themselves, and they have hope that this can happen. So, I think it's (pauses), you can't help to get close to your patients, you know you know each other really well and I really enjoy that.

[What are your aspirations for the future?]

I want to do a doctorate in clinical psychology, so I've just finished my masters and to do a doctorate you usually need to have quite a lot of experience. Usually a year or two of full time work as a research assistant or a psychologist, and this is what I'm doing at the moment. I want to (pauses) the doctorate in clinical psychology will give me the chance to work with all sorts of populations: children, adults and of course elderly people; so this is what I want to do.

[Do you have any words of wisdom, or advice for anyone looking to get into this type of career?]

I think the most important thing is to be proactive. Psychology is very competitive, no one is going to come along and offer you a job. Just because as I've said people's mental health depends on you sometimes. Even if you work with subjects in a psychology experiment, they're still people and they want to know that the data will be confidential and if you find out that they have some sort of a problem, they usually want to know, they trust you. And because psychology is that important, you need to be very qualified in order to work directly with people. So, the main thing is to be proactive get as many different types of experience as possible with people, with as many different populations: children, adults and elderly people. And once somebody gives you a chance to get some experience, work really hard if you do people will appreciate it and they will ask you to work with them again. They would want to work with you again because they will know how you work, maybe you two worked together very well, you complement each other in terms of careers goals and just everyday tasks at the job. They will invite you to work with them again. And of course try your best to learn, so even from very simple things ; things like learning the formula in excel that allows you to randomise words just learn and remember because its very likely that you'll need them again in the future.