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Debbie Shearring

Debbie graduated in July 2011 from the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences and is currently working as a Research Assistant for Breakthrough Breast Cancer in the Research Management Department at the organisation's head office in London.

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Can you describe what you are doing professionally at the moment? How did the job come about?

Shortly after finishing my degree I did voluntary research work at Coventry University. I worked in a team of health psychologists investigating physical activity and obesity interventions. I was then employed there on a short-term contract as a Research Assistant in the same team. When this job ended I searched for other research posts on various job websites. Currently, after applying online, I am now working part-time as a Research Assistant for Breakthrough Breast Cancer in the Research Management Department at the organisation's head office in London. My main responsibilities are to help manage the research grant application process, to analyse and present data on all research funded by the charity and to provide general research support, such as assisting with reviews of research units. I also have another part-time job as a Receptionist with a health and fitness organisation, which I began before university. I am spending the rest of my time doing and looking for work experience in other areas of public health. Recently I shadowed and assisted with the work of the latter organisation's health promotion programmes aimed at weight management for children, ethnic minority groups, and adults at risk of cardiovascular disease.

How have you been able to use the degree in your job role?

The research and analytical skills that I learnt during my degree, particularly from the research project, have proved very useful for my role as a Research Assistant. The degree taught me how to effectively organise, present and interpret scientific data, which I now frequently do in my job with Breakthrough Breast Cancer. I also acquired a basic understanding of cancer while studying for the immunology module in my final year, which really helps with this job. My degree has also given me a strong awareness and understanding of how exercise and other behavioural factors influence health, which helps with work that I have done and intend to do in health promotion.

What has been the most useful element of the degree that you have used in your career?

So far, as a Research Assistant, the ability to analyse and interpret scientific data, which I developed at university, has been the most useful for my job.

What stands out as personal highlights during the degree?

The research project that I did in my final year was particularly interesting and engaging. This gave me a real insight into sport and exercise science research and allowed me to understand and develop a greater depth of knowledge in a specific area of these sciences. The literature review also helped with this part of the course as I learnt about the background to the research that I was involved in. Earlier in the course I enjoyed doing the laboratory practicals as they gave the course more variety and helped me to understand theories and studies.

Why should prospective students choose to study Sport and Exercise Sciences at the University of Birmingham?

It is a brilliant place to learn about sport and exercise sciences due to the facilities, staff and the way the course is taught. There is a wealth of very high-quality research carried out at the school and the enthusiasm of the staff engages and inspires students. Core sciences are taught as well as a variety of more specific modules so you can gain a very good breadth and depth of knowledge. During the course of the final year of the degree, everyone gets involved in a real research project, which is supervised by research and academic staff; this is a unique and invaluable part of the degree. The many modern sport and exercise laboratories that the university has allow for students to learn practically as well as by listening and reading.

What are your aspirations for the future?

I want to gain more experience in a range of public health areas such as policy and health promotion over the next year, while working part-time as a Research Assistant at Breakthrough Breast Cancer. I am also considering studying for a Masters in Public Health next year at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. As I am only just beginning my career as a graduate, I am not certain on what job I wish to be doing in several years time, though I am sure that I want to work in public health. In this area, I aim to either work in research or more directly with the public in a health promotion role. I think that the work experience I gain now will give me a greater understanding of these types of jobs and how they relate to each other, which will help with my future work.

What are your three top tips or advice to current students that might help them succeed during and following the degree?

- Talk to staff about their research and work while you have the chance.
- Read around areas of interest that you study on the course, particularly in your final year.
- Seek relevant work experience to fit in around your studies.

What do you think a degree from University of Birmingham brings you that you might not otherwise get elsewhere?

The University of Birmingham is a well-renowned university and is regarded highly by employers. It attracts many knowledgeable and interesting academics, which creates a unique learning environment. It is a traditional university that still recognises the value of learning for its own sake, yet is modern and at the forefront of research in many subject areas.

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