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Maria Christodoulou

EU Exit Policy Advisor

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**Royal
Geographical
Society**
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Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: EU Exit Policy Advisor
Organisation: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, UK Government
Location: London, UK

How did you get to where you are now?

I studied biology, geography and music at A Level and always assumed I would take the biological sciences route. It wasn't until I started A Level geography that I realised just how diverse and rewarding it can be. I applied to study Human Geography at Leeds University and luckily achieved the necessary grades.

I knew I wanted to pursue a career in the public sector, and ideally in central government, so in my penultimate year of university I began to look for summer internships to gain some experience. I successfully gained a place on the Civil Service Summer Diversity Internship Programme, and was placed in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. This provided invaluable insight into how the civil service operates, and really cemented my desire to pursue a career in this field.

After the successful completion of my internship, I was awarded a 'fast pass' to the civil service fast stream assessment centre (missing all the initial

steps/application). Despite being unsuccessful on the fast stream, I was offered a place in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on the Direct Appointment Scheme; an alternative, direct-entry graduate programme.

Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?

Before starting university, I completed the Access to Leeds (A2L) scheme which played a huge role in achieving my academic goals. A2L is a widening access scheme that allows applicants to take part in a number of activities and courses to help your transition to university life.

Successful completion of A2L offers special consideration from admissions tutors and an alternative offer for your course. This meant I only needed ABB instead of AAA to get onto my course. Many Russell Group universities offer access schemes so it is worth taking a look if you think it applies to you.

What do you do as part of your role?

I am a Policy Adviser in Defra's EU exit chemicals, pesticides and hazardous waste team (focusing specifically on EU-exit chemicals). My team is responsible for delivering a new policy and framework for chemical management and use in the UK post-Brexit. This may seem to be a very niche area, however I have come to learn how important the proper management of chemicals and other toxic substances is for the wider environment.

My role within the team has varied, I have been responsible for producing a full business case for UK chemicals to seek funding approval from the Treasury, and I also deal with issues relating to chemicals governance and working with the devolved administrations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). My day-to-day responsibilities vary, I could be in back-to-back meetings with

W: www.rgs.org/iamageographer

representatives from the Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish governments, or at my desk working on policy papers. Either way, no two days are the same which makes it super interesting!

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

My role is people-facing, so it is essential to have good communication and interpersonal skills. From engaging with stakeholders, to representatives in other governments, it is essential that I am able to form effective relationships with everyone I work with. Despite not being in a management role, the civil service values the ability to lead and make effective decisions at all levels, so strong leadership skills are essential, along with the ability to use your initiative.

How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?

The main goal of my team is to manage exposure of chemicals to protect the environment, so an understanding of environmental matters is important. On a wider scale, understanding the geopolitical climate is also key when negotiating chemical matters internationally. My team deals with numerous international conventions, such as the Stockholm and Minamata convention, as well as the Climate Conference of Parties: all things I remember learning about in school/university, so it is really cool to now be working on these!

What is the most interesting project you have worked on?

The most interesting project I've worked on is a worldwide review of chemical regulatory regimes. As project manager for this, I was in charge of engaging internationally with representatives in Australia, Turkey, South Korea, Japan and the USA to produce a report comparing these five chemical regimes to the current EU regime. The opportunity to engage with officials in these countries and understand how their regimes operate was really interesting.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?

My biggest piece of advice is to try and get some prior experience. The civil service offers a range of internships and work experience opportunities and this is the best way to know if a career in this field is right for you. Aside from this, any experience in related fields will be beneficial as they offer the same transferable skills; this could be anything from local government to NGOs.

Why did you choose geography? Why should others choose geography?

I chose geography because I am passionate about finding solutions to real world problems. Geography is all around us, and experts in the field are always coming up with innovative solutions to better the world. I always knew I wanted a career that would make a positive difference to people, so studying geography seemed like the best place to start. Given how broad the subject is, I knew I would gain a wealth of transferable skills that could be applied to any career, making it a very employable subject. I find the interaction between people and the natural environment super interesting, and this is the very foundation of geography; so if you're interested in this and learning about contemporary issues then geography might be the subject for you!