

Career Case Studies from the Student Section



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Where/what did you study?

I started a nutrition degree at Robert Gordon Institute of Technology but switched half way through to Kings, London. I also studied for a PhD at the Department of Social Medicine at the University of Bristol.

Did you have an idea of what career you wanted when you started university?

I was particularly interested in the policy and social aspects of my degree course and my final year dissertation focused on nutrition in Scotland, where I had grown up, rather than one of the more exotic countries my peers focused on.

During one of the University summer breaks I undertook some work experience at the Health Education Authority. That confirmed to me that I didn't want to be a dietitian, I wanted to find a job that considered population dietary intake.

I was also interested in working in academia / research so for my first job I worked as a research assistant at Kings, coding diet diaries and collecting spit samples women taking part in a trial in North London. I then worked at the British Nutrition Foundation for about 3 years – I worked on the first iteration of Food a Fact of Life and answered media enquiries. I had a brief foray into health promotion in Camden and Islington; it wasn't for me but helped convince me to apply for a PhD.

My PhD was on the Barry-Caerphilly cohort in South Wales – I was interested in the dietary aspects of obesity risk and had a chance to follow up the parents of the cohort who were then in their mid 20s.

How did you come to be in your current job?

When I finished my PhD I wasn't sure what to do next, but my old boss from my days as a research assistant offered me a few weeks work at the Department of Health. I ended up staying 3 years, working with the then new Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) and taking forward DH work on obesity. I followed the work and my interest and moved to the Health Development Agency (HDA) to lead the public health aspects of the first NICE guideline on obesity. A day after I moved to HDA it was announced that it would be moving into NICE. Although I started on a 6 month contract I ended up staying 13 years working on many different public health guidelines that focused on diet and obesity.

I moved to PHE to lead the SACN secretariat in 2017 and in 2020 became Head of Nutrition Science. Our team has since moved into the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) since the closure of PHE.

What does a typical day in your role look like?

The best thing about my role is it is incredibly varied – I may attend a committee or working group meeting for SACN or our UK Nutrition and Health Claims Committee, a project group meeting about one of our dietary surveys or the National Child Measurement Programme. The day can be interrupted by requests for input to urgent ministerial briefings or parliamentary questions or debates. The SACN team undertake evidence reviews and draft papers and reports for the committee so I might also meet with the team to chat through different aspects of the work. I work closely with the Chief Nutritionist and so may attend various meetings with her – these can be with other teams in OHID, other government departments or the devolved administrations.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I have fantastic colleagues who are enormously talented and committed to what they do. Many of us have worked together for a long time and worked through many different political administrations and organisations. I most enjoy mulling, debating and laughing things over with them. Second to that, I absolutely love working with scientific committees - getting to know them as a group and as individuals, helping them find what it is that they want to say and supporting them to make recommendations that may make a tangible difference. Finally, I think all of us working on high profile government projects love a bit of a crisis – being suddenly asked to brief a minister or support a parliamentary debate is stressful but keeps you on your toes.

Any advice to current students for the future?

- If you are interested in working as a nutritionist in government you may need to think about short term roles or something that isn't exactly what you want to start with. However, once you are in a role you might find that you are able to transfer internally and gain the wider experience you need for your ideal position. You might also find it easier to find a role by applying for a post that is a similar grade to the one you are on rather than trying to get a promotion initially.
- Take a punt on short term posts if you are able.
- Don't burn your bridges – nutrition is still a relatively small field and you might find future work through an old boss or colleague
- Civil service interviews can be daunting – be sure to find out about success profiles, the form the interview will take etc.
- If you are interested in nutrition in government there is lots of info online that can help you find out more about the work eg look at the SACN webpages, observe an open SACN or COT meeting, watch debates on BBC parliament, read responses to parliamentary questions <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/>

If you know of anyone who has an interesting career path or an inspiring job, and who might make a good case study, then please let us know at studentsection@nutrition society.org

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