

Interview with two English graduates about their experiences of employability

Shantelle Million-Lawson - graduate of Newcastle University, English Language, 2016

During degree:

- Care Assistant, then Senior Care Worker, then Care Team Manager

After degree (in reverse order):

- Process Improvement Specialist
- Communication Support Worker
- Managing Director, Million Care Solutions
- Care Team Manager

Sheetal Mistry - graduate of Oxford Brookes University, English Language and Literature, 2011

After degree (in reverse order):

- Project Manager, UK Home Office
- Asylum Technical Specialist, UK Home Office
- Fraud Investigator, HM Revenue & Customs
- Asylum Decision Maker, UK Home Office
- Asylum Support Caseworker, UK Home Office
- PGCert, Education Studies (Brunel University)

1. What job are you doing now, and how did you get there?

Shantelle: I am a Process Improvement Specialist in a company that owns over 300 care homes throughout the UK – focusing on simplifying communication and documentation for our 24,000+ employees. Both before and during my degree I worked as a Care Assistant in a care home. On graduating, I joined Newcastle University's Foundership Programme which provided me with the funding to start my own business. MiCarePlan digitalised the documentation in care homes. After 3 years as Managing Director of the company, I took an opportunity to join my current company, in a role I love.

Sheetal: I am currently seconded as a Senior Executive Officer to Project Manager in the Home Office under UK Visas and Immigration. I am part of team which aims to make immigration decisions more sustainable in court, resulting in the decision being right first time. Prior to project managing, I decided I wanted to teach. 2 years later and following a PGCE I decided it wasn't for me. After a brief hiatus where I was signing on and volunteering at my local Citizens Advice Bureau, I landed a job at the Home Office as an Administration Officer processing financial and accommodation applications for Asylum seekers. After a year, I secured a temporary promotion to Executive Officer, interviewing Asylum seekers, establishing credibility and writing lengthy legal documents outlining asylum decisions. I then managed to secure an Executive Officer role in HMRC as a Fraud Investigation Officer. After 18 months I secured a role back in my old asylum decision making team as Asylum Technical Specialist at Higher Executive Officer level. I was given a team and I had to manage their quality outputs, checking each decision letter and reading through every interview transcript to ensure that the letters would be legally binding and that nothing was missed at interview. I then applied (through a talent scheme) for a secondment to project manage Minded to Refuse and was successful. Since January 2019 I have been on this project. I have learned a lot about governance, project management and this has equipped me with new skills for the future. I have also come to the realisation that project management is the career path I would love to continue on and plan to do so.

2. What aspects of your degree learning have helped/are helping you in your role?

Shantelle: During my degree, I learned how to analyse communication from various formats and numerous sources, to collate into a simple, intuitive format for multiple audiences to understand. This skill formed the basis of MiCarePlan and is integral to my current role. Additionally, I have learned how to navigate through complex and challenging situations with the effective use of language to persuade and demonstrate my perspective.

Sheetal: I would definitely say that my degree helped me to interpret text. I look at lengthy policy documents almost daily. I am able to find the most relevant information quickly in order to make my point, strengthening my argument. Being legal documents, they also need to be presented in an acceptable way and referencing is part of that. Structured writing was also essential at university. I have written Asylum Decision letters and more recently Project Initiation Documents, Terms of Reference and evaluation reports. I really feel that my degree helped me to write these documents in a structured format.

3. Looking back, what was the most valuable aspect of your degree course for your personal development?

Shantelle: I am a dyslexic with an English Degree! Completing my course was an extremely difficult challenge for me personally. In addition to my own self-belief, I have developed my organisation skills, time keeping and ability to prioritise.

Sheetal: I think that being forced to work autonomously was an aspect that definitely helped. When it came to writing my dissertation I was forced to work on my own as the theme I was exploring was personal to me. In my role as a Project Manager I have had to return to that autonomous way of working due to being part of a remote team.

4. When did you start to think of yourself as skilled and employable at a graduate level, during/after your degree, and what made that shift?

Shantelle: There was a period of time during second year when I began to really struggle with my degree. While I enjoyed modules such as Semantics and Pragmatics, I found it extremely difficult to comprehend Philosophy. During this time, I began to transfer knowledge from favoured subjects into those that were a challenge – this pulling of information from throughout my degree not only helped my learning massively, but improved my grades. The pieces of my degree began to fit together and my confidence grew enormously.

Sheetal: Mostly after my degree, after I had given up teaching. I was unemployed but needed to see myself as an employable graduate in order to find a job. Admittedly I did not need a degree for the job I started off with in the Home Office, however it was a way into the Civil Service. And following this, my degree has been helpful, at times an essential requirement for the role and it is at those times I have realised its importance.

5. If you could make one change to your degree course experience, looking back, what do you think could have helped you more in developing, recognising, being able to articulate and/or feeling confident about the transferable knowledge, skills and capabilities you developed during your degree?

Shantelle: I think an awareness of just where my degree could take me was lacking during my course itself. People expect you're either going to become a writer or teacher but there are so many other possibilities. Yes, your degree is about learning The Great Vowel Shift, Plato and subordinate clauses, but it is also about your ability to eloquently demonstrate your perspective, understanding of how to manage multiple data sets, and the adaptation of register to your situation.

Sheetal: I really regret not doing a joint honours with English as I feel that I would have potentially started my career sooner instead of going down the teaching route. I also feel that more information could have been given to us when we were looking to graduate as to what career paths we could potentially go down. An event with industry experts would have been beneficial, or a careers event, similar to the one I have been fortunate to speak about at Oxford Brookes in recent years. Even something as simple as a skills matrix would help. My English degree has most probably equipped me and my peers to be successful in any job, due to the broad set of skills you develop; analytical, listening, presenting, collaborative working etc. I think that it is not until you actually start working in a role, that you can identify the transferrable skills, I just think students probably should have more of an awareness and be as open minded as they can with their career aspirations.