



Alumna Subject Graduated Place of Work Position
Sophie von Stumm
Psychology
2006
University of Edinburgh
Lecturer

On completion of her studies at Royal Holloway, Sophie has developed her career in academia and was awarded an ESRC post doctoral fellowship at University of Edinburgh where she now lectures. She is also currently writing her first book explaining the role of education in society and determinants of educational success.

Did you apply to other universities, and what were your reasons for choosing RHBNC?

I applied to five universities overall. Royal Holloway was the highest ranking one that made me an offer and I was also charmed by the photos of Founder's Hall and its relative proximity to London. It's location was not too far from London and I fell in love with Surrey and its beautiful landscape but priority was the course – I was determined to study Psychology.

Why did you choose to study your particular course? What were your favourite aspects?

I wanted to learn why people behave the way they do. Since completing my undergraduate degree at RHUL, I have done a MSc, a PhD and a research fellowship in psychology. I still don't know why people behave the way they do. However, my studies at RHUL intrigued my curiosity to pursue psychology further and gave me the skills (especially statistics – not that I liked them back then) to do so. The psychology degree allowed students a lot of choices in terms of classes within and outside psychology (I did a class in screen writing in my last year) and in terms of assignments. I liked the choice of essay questions that enabled students to follow their personal interests within a given course module. For my thesis, I chose a topic different to the research interests of my supervisor (Dr Kai Thilo)

but he was nonetheless enthusiastic and absolutely supportive (I even presented the thesis project results later at a conference).

What are your fondest memories of being a student/being in your department?

My head of the department – Professor Johannes Zanker – was a great support to me from the beginning of my degree to the end. He was the first to explain to me how British universities worked in a language I could understand (i.e. German – my English was not very good when I arrived at Holloway). He always had time to discuss international relations and the politics of academia with me and also wrote countless letters of reference for me with immovable patience. Of course, I also recall my favourite classes, where we discussed the philosophy of science, the definition and meaning of psychopathology, and the issue of religion and psychology. Taken together and in hindsight, my undergraduate studies seem to have played a crucial role for my choice of a career as an academic.

What is the most important thing that RHUL has taught you either as a person or in your career?

The psychology department offered a lot of support to its students to help them adjust to university life and make the most out of their degree. As a student I felt appreciated, heard and warmly

taken care of. I have learned since then that not all universities are so embracing and caring, and that made me value my education here even more. Also in my professional career as an academic and teacher, I try to care and look after my students like I was taken care of.

Was your passion for your career field found whilst at the College?

After getting over the first shock of the statistics, I fell irremediably in love with the subject. I continued my studies at Edinburgh and Goldsmiths University of London, where I am now about to take a position as lecturer in psychology. Not only were my studies at Royal Holloway the foundation of my career, it also allowed me to explore alternatives, so that I learned quickly what I liked doing, and therefore what I wanted to make my living with.

What was your favourite part of the course? Why?

One of my favourite parts was the 3rd year project/ undergraduate dissertation. I designed my first experimental study, together with my excellent supervisors Professor Mike Eysenck and Dr Kai Thilo, and tested students in the department's labs. They completed an intelligence test and reported their results back to me after receiving positive or false negative feedback. I very much enjoyed the

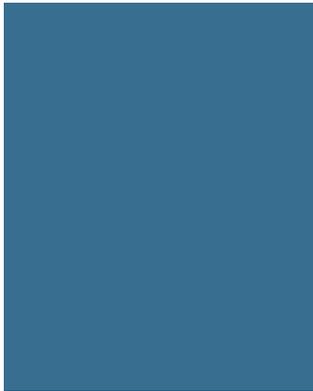
Great minds *go on to* great places





people *with* passion

“I was provided with excellent statistics skills, a broad knowledge base of psychology and a passion for research”



independence I was given to run this study, while I received all possible support when I needed it or got stuck with something. All the staff were extremely helpful and encouraging throughout the project. The experience truly inspired me to continue with psychology and to choose a research career.

Do you think your studies have helped you in your career?

My studies gave me a fantastic and robust understanding in statistics, which helped me throughout my Masters and PhD training. Many parts of the degree were very research oriented – we conducted little experiments in stats class and collected the data we then analysed – and provided an excellent basis for me to continue working in academia. Independent thinking and working were emphasized and supported, something that I learned to appreciate and practice. The most practical element was probably my research thesis, for which I tested 50 students in a lab – I loved it. It was a brilliant experience to test your own ideas and hypotheses.

What has been your career path since graduating?

After graduating from in 2006, I went on to do an MSc in the Psychology of Individual Differences, which I completed with distinction in 2007. Subsequently, I did a PhD in Psychology, for

which I won a full stipend and that I completed in summer 2010. Afterwards I became a Senior Lecturer before being awarded an ESRC post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Edinburgh, where I am currently working.

What are your favourite aspects of the job?

My job offers a lot of autonomy. A research career always allows you to follow your curiosity and explore new topics. You get to read a lot and to develop your own ideas, which you then get to test. And hopefully your curiosity and its tests contribute to a better understanding of why people behave the way they do. Besides that, you get to teach students and inspire their curiosity and research questions.

What is the best project that you have been involved in recently?

I am writing my first book. It explains the role of education in society and determinants of educational success. It's a terrifying project and very different to what I normally write about and I tremendously enjoy the challenge.

Do you have any tips for people considering a career in research in psychology?

Jobs in academia tend to come with a high level of autonomy. That is, you have to conduct research

but usually it's up to you when you do that as long as you get it done. It is also usually up to you what the content of your research is; thus, you design your own question that you think important to be answered rather than answering what someone else was curious about. Ultimately you contribute to the scientific knowledge which mankind relies on to understand, organise and plan the world.

Why would you recommend us as a place to study? Do you recommend us to your contacts?

I very much enjoyed my time here and I recommend it without hesitation. Its campus life has its own very specific flair and it is a unique experience to be part of such a close-knit community. I was provided with excellent statistics skills, a broad knowledge base of psychology and a passion for research. These three are probably the most important aspects of a degree.

Academically Royal Holloway is one of the top institutions in this country that offers students a lot of opportunities and support.

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Royal Holloway, University of London
Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX
T: 01784 434455
www.rhul.ac.uk