

Transcript: Career Options with a Health and Social Care Degree

What matters to me and what can I offer?

As a first step I'd advise you to take some time to get clearer on what kinds of things you want from a next job. Career options: it's a bit similar to going to a superstore to buy something for your evening meal. It's much easier when you've got a few clear criteria (which may well change). But your criteria for example for a meal could be: ok, I need something that can be cooked in 10 minutes, that's healthy, and that's not fish because we had fish last night and the kids don't like it much.

So what could your criteria be with your next job? Well some of the questions you could be asking yourself are: which skills and experience do I have? Which skills am I keen to be using much of all day and to be developing further, and which roles are there out there seeking them? Or you could be particularly motivated by some of the issues you've touched on in your studies, or elsewhere, or a client group that really draws you.

And be thinking, so, this is the issue I'm interested in working on, and how do my skills and experience overlap with what's needed; what might I need to develop further? Or you could be asking yourself: what can I do with this pathway or degree? Or you could be reacting against certain bits of your current role – thinking well, I know I'd like in my next job more control of my own workload, to work more with research and ideas building on what I've developed in my degree. I'm clear I'm willing to do further professional training; I'd be keen to take on a management role in the next few years.

But it's individual and it's personal and most likely it's a process where you try out some bits and you think, "hmm, not quite sure about this bit of that" and you try another bit of something else. Our careers website and our careers advisers can help with the process.

And a good rule of thumb is that as you get clearer on some of your criteria, it helps to explore beyond the 'usual suspect' options where the majority of other people interested in the same issues as you will explore and then stop.

So for example, if you've got an interest in working with people with mental health difficulties, yes of course there are lots of opportunities in the National Health Service. But think a bit further – you could apply that interest, you could work on those issues, also in children's services, in youth work, in social housing, in homelessness issues, in academic research, in counselling and wellbeing, in family support, in probation, and in universities.

So don't just stop with the first place where you could think of working on these things. Get a bit of a sense of the spread of where these issues can be applied and how it feels in the different settings, to work on these issues.

And then often students and graduates say: "but I just want to do what jobs I can do!" I think the thing that's important to bear in mind is that, often it's not a permission thing; it's about you and other applicants making a case. The key thing in job applications is about persuading the employer

you've got the key skills and experience that they want, that you will be a safe pair of hands in their setting.

Employers obviously often have a very clear idea of what they want and you may meet that very well, or you may have alternative experience, and then quite often it's about using your alternative evidence to back up how you also can meet their needs, and this is what you offer, which kind of pushes their understanding of actually what they might want in a person who's doing that role.

So it's like doing an essay: it may be very clear from the topic and from the question that they're expecting you to answer in a certain way, and that may be the way that you choose to do it, but it's also fine to take your evidence and argue against that. And that's something that comes with confidence and it comes with greater confidence in the setting that you're hoping to work in.

So the key thing is: what do you offer? Which skills do you have? And thinking that through isn't a one-off process. Personally what I like to do is to sit on the floor with a range of post-its around me and to think through different bits of my life, and the different roles that I play, and the different things that I've needed to do, that I've chosen to do in those different roles and the bits of skills and experiences that they have given me.

It doesn't need to be high-level stuff although I think you often surprise yourself with what one's done when one stands back. So for example, the other roles in your life: you could be a foster carer, a parent, a carer, a user of health services, a volunteer in a youth club. You could be giving examples from your work, from your time as an OU student.

For example if you're a care assistant, you could be talking about having adapted your practice to the different needs and preferences of your different, highly vulnerable clients. You could be talking of ways in which you multi-task, how you work independently, and are a safe pair of hands for very vulnerable clients, how you show real resilience in a time-pressurised environment. As a carer, for example, one of the key skills you could have developed is about advocating for others, by looking at legislation, by having drawn on the evidence you've got, and by making a case for greater support in competition against others.

As a parent, for example, you could be talking about how you've coordinated a community organisation which was the toddler group, how you've facilitated fun events for up to 70 people, 50 of them who were under 3, how you were responsible for risk management and health and safety procedures.

So I think it's not that it necessarily comes out in that language as a first step but it's really useful to step back from our life and see what we've done that would scare others, and the skills that we take for granted, from another's perspective. For example if you're a member of the PTA you may well have led on a fundraising campaign, you may have written letters to local businesses, have maybe raised £5000 which has been used to support low-income kids to participate in external activities like swimming lessons.

It may not have felt like that when you were doing it, but when you stand back and think how you can articulate it, it shows who you are, what you're at ease with and what you can do with your skills. It's not just about having the skills but what can you do with them; what have you already achieved with them?

So, you could be looking at the skills that you've got from your roles in life. Obviously another source of the skills that you've got is through your studies, from your degree. And one way that you can look at these is by checking in the qualification learning outcomes, and I'll signpost to that link at the end.

But again just to run through them briefly so you can be impressed by what you've achieved already: you've been learning, for example, to understand and critique concepts and debates; to work across boundaries and collaborate; you've been observing others describing and assessing practice; influencing and empowering others, and bringing about change; you've learned a range of research methods in health and social care and applied them to practice; you've learned to analyse and evaluate effectiveness.

And again, for you, there will be lots of individual, personal things that you have learned, challenges that you've overcome. I think it's really worth thinking about what *you're* proud of as an OU student; how *you've* gone about juggling your home responsibilities, sometimes isolation of being a distance learning student, and of doing these at a different stage of life to many students who may do it as part of a conveyor belt. So again, standing back from your experiences as a student and thinking which are the skills that I've developed? What evidence can I provide?

You may well want to take a pause at that point. And we're then going to be coming back and looking at the concrete jobs that I've found by looking on one day: what they're looking for, what you would be doing, and to give you a real sense of the different flavours in which in different settings the skills that you've got can be applied.