**Video interview: Nicole Kennard**

**Transcript**

This interview was conducted by the Knowledge Exchange Unit in Summer 2021.

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**Please introduce yourself and tell us how you engaged with the UK Parliament.**

Hi, my name is Nicole Kennard. I’m a PhD student at the University of Sheffield and I’m studying sustainable agriculture and food systems. So, as a PhD student, I first engaged with Parliament by submitting written evidence to the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee on the topic of Covid-19 and food supply. So this was based on research that I conducted with a community food group that I also volunteer for, called Foodhall, in Sheffield, and we were just packing and delivering emergency food parcels to people during the pandemic last year.

But I also just recently completed a three-month fellowship with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, or POST, and I was writing a POSTbrief about pesticides, specifically focussing on their impacts on human health, and also about regulations and policy about pesticides post-Brexit.

**Was there any support for you to engage with Parliament, so either from the parliamentary team that you engaged with, or from your university, and if so, how did that help you?**

So I’m a PhD student at the University of Sheffield and my PhD is funded by the Grantham Centre for Sustainable Futures. As a Grantham Scholar, I am actually funded for four years, so that I can commit more time during my PhD to outreach activities and also for different trainings that they put on. And a lot of the outreach and training is really focused on science communication, and really, how to communicate and share your research effectively. We are also encouraged to attend trainings outside of those provided directly by the Grantham Centre, so I attended a webinar recently, put on by the Knowledge Exchange Unit, about how to engage with Parliament for Covid experts.

So that webinar’s actually what gave me the knowledge and tools and confidence to submit written evidence to the inquiry on Covid-19 and food supply, and I was even contacted again nine months later to provide updated evidence. It is therefore through the communication that I receive from the Grantham Centre about these opportunities that I found out about the POST fellowship and decided to apply. I was also able to talk to a past POST fellow about their experience, which helped me a lot to understand if it would be right for me, how I could fit it into my PhD and what skills I would need to be successful at the fellowship.

**Why did you engage with Parliament?**

Personally, I love research, because I love to discover and learn new things, and I, as well as probably the vast majority of researchers, I’m doing this to make a difference in the world, to make an impact, to bring new knowledge to light, to share the stories of others, and to make a change. But the issue with academic research is that a lot of knowledge just stays within those academic institutions and it never gets out to the people who could use it and learn from it to make decisions, even in everyday life or within policy. So personally, the reason that I decided to engage with Parliament and specifically to do a POST fellowship is because I really wanted to make an impact by doing research and by using my skills as a scientist and as a researcher. It was also important for me to learn how to present evidence in an objective, balanced and unbiased way so I can actually help people to understand what’s actually going on within a certain area or certain topic or situation and for them to feel confident to use that evidence to make decisions.

Finally, I was very interested to do a POST fellowship because, just because I love learning new things and investigating new topics and that’s what you get to do at POST. You can be thrown completely out of your element in a completely new topic that you may have never read about before, may have never looked at before, which was kind of the case for me with pesticides and impacts on human health - obviously I come from an agriculture background but I had never done much on the human health side, so that was really different for me. And you get to learn from the top experts in the field, so unlike a PhD, you’re able to become an expert on a wide range of very broad topics very quickly and that’s something that I really enjoyed about POST.

**What impact did you engagement have for you as a researcher and as an individual?**

So I learned so much from this POST fellowship, way more than I thought would be possible in such a short time. In just three months I was able to produce a very well-researched, heavily edited and polished six-page POSTbrief about very complicated topics. As well as stepping into the world of reading legislation and regulation for the first time, I learned a lot about how to do very quick, rapid summaries of evidence. Within the first four days at POST I had conducted a rapid literature review, written a scope document about my project, compiled a list of over a hundred and twenty stakeholders that I might want to interview, and drafted the questions that I would use whilst interviewing them, and by the second week I had already started interviewing experts and then in six weeks, I’d interviewed fifty-four stakeholders and experts, so you really learn how to do things very fast-paced for the very fast-paced world of Parliament which is obviously a lot different to academia where it might take a year to put a publication together and out. And as a PhD researcher, you are expected to be an expert in a very narrow topic, you’re expected to know to know everything about a very specific topic, so it was very different being thrown in the deep end and being on the other side, interviewing experts about something that you yourself may have only researched for a week. So this fellowship really gave me the confidence to step outside my comfort zone, you know, where I’m used to being the researcher and the expert in my topic, and instead, be very prepared to say, actually I don’t know anything about this, could you please explain it to me? But I really enjoyed it, and I loved being able to pick the brains of all these amazing scientists, and like I said it really did develop a different kind of confidence in myself as someone who’s not afraid to ask questions, and also as a science communicator, a scientific translator.

I also learned so much about how to write in a way that’s simple, clear, concise and understandable, so it was great just to be able to take the time and spend the time to edit my work, editing and re-editing, which maybe I don’t do as much of as a researcher and that was actually the bulk of this fellowship. You spend much, much more time editing your work than actually you do writing, and you learn how to make your publication as clear and accessible as possible. I think science communication is so important, and now, after this fellowship, I feel really skilled in that area, and that I’ve really developed professionally. And I can really take those skills to any job, if I stay in academia, if I go into science policy, if I work for a think tank or another company or a charity, these communication skills are vital everywhere. And the last thing that I would say that I really learned from my time in Parliament, is how much researchers actually can make a difference. People are interested in these topics, parliamentarians are interested. Parliament and policymakers, they want to have this evidence to use, so we as researchers just need to take the time and learn the best way to present that evidence to them.

So overall I have to say that I’ve learned so, so much at POST, and it’s really just built my skills as a science communicator, as a writer, as a researcher, but most importantly I know that I’ve been able to use these skills to actually make a real difference and a real impact in the world.