

Transcript – The student journey of an opportunist

Host: John McLuckie

Guest Speaker: Audrey Decou

John McLuckie: 0:16

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Island Careers and Employability Centre. In this episode we'll be talking to Audrey Decou, Curriculum Development Employer Engagement Officer at UHI, on how taking advantage of opportunities as a student could benefit your career journey. My name's John McLuckie and I'm joined today by Audrey Decou, welcome to the podcast Audrey.

Audrey Decou: 0:36

Thankyou John and thankyou for having me today.

John McLuckie: 0:40

Thanks for joining us Audrey. Do you want to tell us a bit about yourself?

Audrey Decou: 0:44

Yes, so my name is Audrey Decou and as you can probably hear, I'm French. I have been living in the UK for nearly ten years, actually next year is going to be my ten years anniversary, so that's going to be pretty good.

John McLuckie: 00:57

You've had a fascinating journey both as a student and starting off in the world of work. Do you want to talk about your experiences and the different opportunities you were able to take advantage of?

Audrey Decou: 1:06

Yeah, so I think it all started when I was in High School because in the French system you have to choose in High School for your last two years if you do scientific, economic or literature Baccalaureate. I chose the scientific one because I knew that with this one you can do whatever you want, since I had no clue what I wanted to do. But I thought okay I was really interested in astronomy and astrophysics so when I started University, I started to study Physics in the aim to be an astrophysicist. But I was probably very naïve at that point and realised very early on that there was more letters in the formulas than number and Maths became a little bit too abstract for me, let's say. I wanted to come back down to earth so I decided to change into study Geology. So that was for my first year I was doing that in La Rochelle and after that I had to choose in the second year a specialisation and in La Rochelle, the main topic is Marine Geology and I thought 'oh dear', I'm sea

sick, I don't really like that, what can I do? I always had in the back of my head I always just wanted to do something where I can travel. So what in Geology can take me to travel? Well, Vulcanology. So I looked up at the University of Clermont-Ferrand in the Massif Central, and I went there for an interview because they had to check the equivalence and then I had my undergrad, I did my undergrad in Vulcanology in Clermont-Ferrand, and after when I finished my undergrad, I still really didn't know what I really wanted to do because Vulcanology is really wide, so what do you do, magmatology or anything? And I was not really ready to enter a Master to just go into more detail, so I decided to just take on an Erasmus year, and I went one year at Trinity College in Dublin and I did a year there which would be the equivalent of the Honours year for the Scottish system. And that was brilliant actually because being in Erasmus gave me, well basically I was kind of the lucky child in the class because, it was an extra year for me, I already had an undergrad anyway, I had already graduated, so I really enjoyed it a lot. And my supervisor at the time was also very, very supportive and one great opportunity came up while I was in Dublin. So as field work, I was supposed to go with all the class in March-time to map on the Isle of Arran in Scotland, and everybody was saying, 'oh yeah, it's great, it's beautiful but it's tough because the weather is really quite harsh sometimes'. But in the meantime I was preparing for my summer job and as a summer job I wanted to go and work in a vulcanological observatory, and you know there are a lot of volcanos but I wanted to go to New Zealand, so I contacted the observatory there and said 'hey guys, I would like to come over the summer and see what you are doing' and obviously again very naïve, the guy came back to me and said, you know, 'for your summer it's our winter down here, therefore we don't have any work, I'm really sorry. But I can put you on a list of field assistants and they we see what comes out'. And it turns out that three weeks later I was contacted by a PhD student in Canada who needed four field assistants to help him do some geophysical survey on an active volcano in Nicaragua. Completely random, but I went to my supervisor and said, 'Look, it's in March. Can I switch, go to Nicaragua for a month instead of going mapping in Arran and still get some points for my module?' And my supervisor just laughed and said 'Yes, of course, you go to Nicaragua.' So, of course you can imagine the face of my Mum when I told her that I was going to Nicaragua. It was the first time I would have done a transatlantic flight, I was travelling with another girl who would be a field assistant, she was from London, a person I didn't know, but anyway it was fantastic for the month I was there, it was brilliant. Then I came back, finished my year, and on the day I was due to leave Dublin, to go back to France because the academic year was finished, my supervisor gave me a PhD proposal or advertisement, and said 'Look Audrey there is a PhD in Germany about sedimentology, you know, to work in the Andes, so you should apply.' And my first reaction was, I just laugh at his face, and I said 'Look, Germany, I don't speak a word of German, and I studied Vulcanology, not Sedimentology, which is very different. What the hell are you thinking?' And he was really serious and he looked at me and he said 'Don't be stupid Audrey, you have nothing to lose. Apply and you will see what comes out'. And I thought OK and I took the piece of paper, boarded the plane, went back home and I thought, OK, what am I going to do next here? Because in France, in the French system I would have to go through a 2-year Master's to be able to do a PhD, and here is a PhD offer. So, well, yeah, he's right and I have nothing to lose. So I did apply, then went to Germany for an interview which went really well and indeed, yes, it is sedimentology but all the rocks are from volcanoes, so at the end, yeah, it's pretty close. I got my interview and started my PhD in the following September in Germany, so I just bought a book, to try to learn how to say 'Hello', 'Thank you', 'Goodbye', you know, the essentials. And off I went to Germany, again, my Mum was like 'my goodness, what the hell is she doing'. And yes, so I was doing a PhD in Germany, I stayed there for three years and a half. Every year I was going to do fieldwork in Southern Peru and Northern Chile, I was there for about a month's time. And during that time, I travelled a lot because I went to a lot of conferences and so on, that was just fantastic. That ticked

the box that I wanted since I entered secondary school which was that I wanted to travel. So that was fantastic and then at the end of my PhD, well I had to kind of come down to earth and thought, OK I need a job now. So, what can I do as a geologist, so I applied to different oil companies and so on, didn't get anything, and then out of the blue, a new post doc student came at the University I was studying at in Gottingen, and that guy was using exactly the same technique as I was using during my PhD. And he told me, he said 'oh look, I was working in the UK in that company which hired only field geologists, which is extremely rare nowadays, because field geology is very, very expensive and it's dying. So, you want to be a field geologist but it's very rare to get a job like that, but he told me, well I've left, so they are probably going to replace me, so maybe you should consider sending an unsolicited application just on the off-chance. I thought, wow, that is totally random, coming out of nowhere but again I have nothing to lose. So I just send my unsolicited application and to my great surprise, I was invited for an interview. And I got the job, so initially I was hired to be a field geologist for the North Africa and Middle East area because of my French, that did help a lot, which I was really excited about. I was extremely scared at the prospect of camping in the desert because I absolutely hate scorpions and snakes so that was my biggest fear basically getting that job, I said 'how am I going to deal with the snakes, I don't know?', but anyway. The thing is, it happened, it was in early 2011 when sadly, happy for me, but sadly the Arab Spring war started, so we were supposed to do fieldwork in Libya, the war started there so we decided OK, let's go to Tunisia, no, no, no, the war started, they said OK, well we are going to start far, we're going to start in Syria and it's going to be better, no. So, basically the project has finished. I was only six months in, and we had to start the project because we couldn't go. And at that point I thought oh well, I suppose I can use the samples that my colleagues have collected before and carried on. But then one day I was called in to a meeting with my managers and they said, 'look Audrey, you can't go to North Africa and so on, it's not going to work but we want to keep you so what about you join the East Greenland team.' And that was like wow, I can go to the field, I can go to East Greenland. Are you kidding me? I said, 'yes, I'll take it, I take it'. And that was then the beginning of my career as a field geologist that every year, every summer I spent one or two months depending on the year camping in the middle of nowhere in East Greenland with my colleagues. And that was just fantastic, I got the job a kid could dream of as a field geologist and I never ever thought or planned that, whatsoever. I just jumped on the opportunity, it was there. I said 'yes, I'll do it, I have nothing to lose, I can try'. And that was fantastic. So yeah, that was basically it. I don't know if it was luck or just I will try it out and see if it works.

John McLuckie: 10:36

That's such a cool story Audrey. How much do you think your ability to be successful in the role as a field geologist was built on the chances you took a bit earlier when you were a student, like the PhD opportunity and going to Nicaragua. Do you think those chances helped you to become successful in the role as field geologist?

Audrey Decou: 10:53

To some extent I think it did in a way, because already the four weeks I spent in Nicaragua was field-based, so every single day we went to the field and were taking geophysical measurements like seismic measurements and gravity and so on. So I had already an experience of working every day in the field, so that was one, and also the fact that I didn't do it on purpose but I showed that I'm very

flexible and I could just jump on an opportunity, take the next plane and go, and not worry too much about what is on the other side, like the prospect of being there was just good enough for me to just go and then, well, you just wing it at the end. I suppose.

John McLuckie: 11:37

Brilliant, yeah. How much do you think luck was a factor because obviously when you were younger the opportunity to travel was something that you were particularly interested in, and obviously you took advantage of the opportunities to travel where you could, but do you think being in the right place at the right time played a part as well?

Audrey Decou: 11:51

Well, the right place at the right time I don't know because I'm sure that if I have not taken those opportunities some others would have showed up, but I think I did set the scene quite strongly in a way because I decided to study in a way volcanology which I knew, there are no active volcanoes in France. You know it's something I knew I would have to go somewhere else, so I kind of already set the scene that it would happen at some point. I had no idea which shape or form but that was kind of already in my mind and then for the opportunities, I suppose in a way luck as well, because I had no clue what to do, so I thought well, just do that, you know, the Erasmus and so on, but for that PhD position, yeah, it was probably luck. That was advertised basically the day I was leaving Dublin.

John McLuckie: 12:39

Maybe just moving a bit more up to the present time, how have all your experiences in taking opportunities and having an outline of a plan like wanting to travel in the future, helped in terms of your career and what you're doing today?

Audrey Decou: 12:51

Well it all helped a lot, so on the personal side, by travelling so much and then having that job as a field geologist, basically this is where I met my partner. And my partner is from the Highlands, so he took me to Scotland for the first time there and I just fell in love with Scotland. And so at some point, we decided like instead of going on holidays to Scotland all the time we just move there and we are here and we can go on holidays somewhere else. In terms of the career, I think it did help a lot in a way that I'm not really afraid of different challenges, always try to find a solution and try things out and if it doesn't work it doesn't matter, there will be something else coming up and it will always work out at some point. It's just basically not to be afraid to say, 'oh no I can't do that because it won't work'. No, you just try it out, you know and see how it goes. And I think now in my role as an Employer Engagement Officer at UHI, it does help me a lot in terms of communicating with the students and the employers to say, 'look, here's some ideas, if it doesn't work it doesn't matter. We can find something else, something will work out'. And I think it's quite important to have that way of thinking to be able to find yourself as well.

John McLuckie: 14:07

Yeah, that's great advice and I was going to ask as well in terms of how you would advise students thinking about their different career options. You mentioned Erasmus, and obviously there's a little bit of uncertainty about future exchange programmes, but is that type of activity something you would recommend and are there other things you would recommend students could look at?

Audrey Decou: 14:26

Yes, so as you mentioned Erasmus, it might be a little bit of a question at the moment, but you don't need to go abroad either, you know, just that fact that you go away for a bit. If you are Scottish you can just go down to England for a bit or Ireland, you know. You don't need to go very far, but try to go away for a bit because in my opinion I think this has been very important to me to build myself and to find myself and to also define what I wanted to do in life. It's just to try out and see how does it work in other places because that will broaden your spectrum and you will meet a lot of people, so all your connections, those connections, it might be just a 'Hi' in passing in a conference or a 'Hello' but that can bring you a long way sometimes. So, try to just get out a little bit and don't be afraid, try it, you know you can always go home if it doesn't work.

John McLuckie: 15:18

Audrey Decou thank you very much for taking part in the podcast.

Audrey Decou: 15:22

Thankyou very much John.

John McLuckie: 15:24

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