

# Career View

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## Social Science Research

According to the Oxford English Dictionary social science is 'the scientific study of human society and social relationships.' Typical areas for research include ethnicity and gender, employment and leisure, recreation & tourism, population health, lifestyle & well-being. Social science research is the gathering and analysis of this social data using scientific methods. Research methods can be classified in various ways and one of the most common, although increasingly blurred, distinctions is between qualitative and quantitative research methods.

*Quantitative research methods are distinguished from qualitative research methods by their emphasis upon the use of mathematical and statistical techniques in gathering, analysing, interpreting and reporting upon, research data. They originally developed in the natural sciences to study natural phenomena. Examples of quantitative methods now well accepted in the social sciences include surveys and laboratory experiments.*

*Qualitative research methods are typically non-numerical and were developed in the social sciences to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena. Examples of qualitative methods are in-depth interviews and questionnaires, the analysis of documents and texts, and value being placed upon the researcher's impressions and reactions and research results in the form of narrative description. Increasingly, researchers are required to use more than one method in a study.*

### **Where do Social Science Researchers Work?**

Social science researchers are employed in a range of central government departments, including Statistics New Zealand, National

Library, Internal Affairs, Parliamentary Services, and in government ministries including the Ministries of Transport, Health, Education, Justice and Social Development. They are also employed in local government, NGOs (non-government organisations) and related organisations.

Social science researchers also work in the private sector, in market research, broadcasting, management consultancy, banking and insurance. Experienced researchers often work independently as consultants. Some choose to have academic careers - as university lecturers and researchers.

### **What do Social Science Researchers do?**

Researchers often work as evaluators, policy analysts or advisory officers in government departments. Research, however, is only one component of a wide job brief. Advisory work tends to focus on developing policy, providing advice to the Minister and monitoring and evaluating policy implementation, impact and outcomes. Research work tends to be more concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and the

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*Your comments and suggestions always welcomed.*



production of appropriate, accurate and timely data for decision- and policy-makers and those advising them. They are skilled in the design, management, delivery and interpretation of research programmes. Researchers are generally required to adhere to the appropriate scientific methodology and standards. The selection of an appropriate process will depend upon the data to be collected, how it will be evaluated, the format in which results will be presented, the degree of technical scrutiny that the process and results will need to withstand and finally the financial cost and actionability of the knowledge that will result. Researchers must have the interpersonal and public speaking skills to discuss their research with colleagues, the client that commissioned the research, the public and the media. They may publish reports, or provide papers for senior managers and Ministers to consider when making policy decisions. Some research teams in government departments operate as independent business units and offer research services and advice on research methods to external clients as well as to those within their own department.

### **Tasks and Responsibilities:**

- **Design and Implement Surveys**

Surveys are generally used to collect data for policy decision-making, to predict future conditions, to evaluate social programmes, or to collect quantitative data. They can be conducted by mail, telephone, face-to-face or via the Internet. A survey of a 'total' population relating to one particular area is a *census*. This is an expensive and time consuming project and alternatives like surveying a representative group or a random sample of the population may be appropriate to reduce the amount of data to be collected and therefore time and cost. Researchers may assemble a list of experts in a particular field and survey them either individually or collectively.

- **Analyse Data**

There is an element of 'number-crunching' in all social science research and quantitative research requires a good knowledge of statistics and the ability to process large amounts of raw data. This is important for the collating and coding of surveys or census forms and their analysis using statistical analysis software or mathematical modelling techniques. Researchers produce and interpret tables or graphs.

- **Compile and Evaluate Information**

Researchers may summarise, analyse and draw conclusions from information they have gathered from a variety of sources like libraries and archives, or from interviewing people. For example, a client may request a review of literature on the causes and prevalence of infertility (Ministry of Health) in order to know what current thinking and theory is. Researchers may also be asked to monitor the impacts of government policies on different groups or sectors of the economy or evaluate government programmes to assess their effectiveness e.g. the review of youth justice supervision orders (Ministry of Social Development). Both are examples of non-numerical or qualitative research.

- **Present their Results**

As well as presenting statistics in an easily digestible form (graphs, models, spreadsheets), researchers write reports in language that can be easily understood and read quickly by busy decision-makers. They may also present their findings verbally to the client, or at conferences and seminars. Work is almost always in the form of specific projects with definite (and often quite tight) deadlines. Forget the image of 'bookworms' and statisticians locked away in a back room for months on end. Social science research demands a diversity of skills.

## What makes a good Social Science Researcher?

### • The Skills

**“Quantitative” Skills.** The ability to understand and apply the tools of statistical analysis. Unless you want to concentrate on the statistical side of research, you don't have to be a mathematician, just comfortable with numbers and able to apply statistical methods.

**Communication Skills.** Spoken and written. You need to be able to establish exactly what your client wants to find out and to explain your research methods clearly. Good listening skills are essential as well as the ability to write in a range of styles.

**Analytical and Conceptual Skills.** You need to be able to analyse complex problems and suggest appropriate solutions.

**Organisational Skills.** Good time management is essential. You will often work on more than one project at a time.

**Good Judgement.** The ability to choose the method of research most appropriate to the situation and to know when to change direction if the process is not achieving the desired result.

**Creativity.** An interest in looking for new and better ways of doing things and not simply following customary methods and processes.

**Computer Literacy.** Familiarity with the standard word processing software and adequate keyboard skills. Knowledge of software used for statistical data analysis.

**Understanding of Treaty of Waitangi and Bicultural Issues.** The ability to recognise the implications of these for existing or proposed policy directions.

**A Business-like Approach.** Doing the job the client needs, on time, within budget, and to their satisfaction. It helps to understand the constraints and realities that managers work

under. There are often security issues to be managed during a research project where you may have access to highly sensitive client and participant data and must ensure that confidentiality is maintained at all times.

**Self-motivation.** Some projects last a long time, so you need to be able to stick with it; others may change course part way so you must be flexible enough to adapt.

**Teamwork.** You may work closely with another person on a shared project, and contribute your ideas to other people's work.

### • Qualifications and Helpful Experience

Social science subjects studied at university level include psychology, sociology, social policy, criminology, social work, human geography, anthropology, nursing studies, world religions and women's studies. Other related subjects are politics, economics, economic history, maori studies, pacific studies and statistics. Employers of social science researchers find that a postgraduate qualification e.g. a Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Bachelor of Science (Honours), Postgraduate Diploma or Master's Degree in a social science discipline is most useful. When planning your degree, you may find it helpful to start thinking about your long-term goals. Ask yourself:

- What people do I most enjoy being with e.g. young, older, artistic, practical, social ... ?
- What fields interest me most e.g. the arts, community work, statistics, criminal justice, social welfare, health?
- What work environments would I like to be in e.g. a large organisation, working at home with a fax and a PC or working in archives with manuscripts and books?

At the early stages of your degree, select a variety of courses in order to develop your writing and analytical skills. Choose a subject you enjoy, as good marks in any subject indicate that you think and write well. If you are majoring in an arts or social science subject, it is sensible to

include at least one statistics paper in your degree so that you become familiar with the 'quantitative' side of research. Completing Honours, Masters or Doctorate degrees offer opportunities to complete research projects of your own. It proves to prospective employers that you have been able to stick with a large piece of work at advanced levels and present your findings.

### **What Other Experience is Useful?**

- Voluntary work - for example undertaking research projects for community and welfare organisations.
- Paid work - particularly in a research role.
- Any experience in the sector in which you would like to conduct research, e.g. health, social welfare, working with iwi, or in the community.
- Field work - practical street survey and interviewing experience such as for a market research firm is also valuable.

## **Graduate Profiles**

### **Paula Martin**

*1993 - Advisor Special Projects (part-time), Te Puni Kokiri*

*2002 - Senior Strategic Policy Analyst and Researcher, Strategic Policy Group, Ministry of Social Policy; moving into Senior Analyst, Social Policy Branch, The Treasury*

Paula completed her Masters degree - MA (Applied) in Social Science Research - at Victoria while working part-time at Te Puni Kokiri. Previous to that she had undertaken a BA (Honours) in psychology. The major subject for her Bachelor of Arts was



anthropology, to which she also added a wide selection of other subjects—women's studies, Maori language, classics, sociology, social policy and English. To change from anthropology to psychology for her Honours year she completed what is known as a 'Transitional Certificate'. This year-long postgraduate course enabled her to do post-graduate study in a subject that she had not taken to an advanced level in her BA.

"The MA has been important for the research work I do. A useful aspect of the MA is the practical experience, working with different organisations and different people. It has also helped me to develop project management skills. Having a good understanding of research and policy procedures means I can see how the two fit together (or should!)"

Paula's advice to anyone considering a career in the social science field is that "training and experience in a range of methodologies are important. You need to be able to choose the most appropriate method for whatever research question you have to answer. Too often people are limited by only knowing how to do one type of research".

Overall, Paula has found she has developed strong skills in writing and information-gathering and the ability to consult widely. She enjoys the fact that she has to complete a wide-range of tasks, and has contact with a lot of different people.

Since finishing her Masters degree, Paula moved from Te Puni Kokiri into a part-time position with the Social Policy Agency as a policy analyst in the Family Violence Unit. Her particular responsibility was dealing with any of the research-related aspects of the unit's work. She combined this with contract work ranging from oral history projects to surveys, evaluations and writing jobs. In much of this, she was able to specialise in projects at the interface of research and policy - for example, managing the development of a family violence research agenda based on the needs of the end users of

the research ie policy makers and practitioners. Paula also had several lecturing jobs of up to a year each teaching research methods papers, including a couple of stints teaching the first year of the MA in Social Science Research.

Between 1993 and 2000, Paula continued this very varied “portfolio” career (apart from a year or so overseas travelling and teaching English in Poland) and got to do a whole range of really interesting things. At the end of 2000, she tired of contracting and took up a position as a Senior Strategic Policy Analyst and Researcher in the Strategic Policy Group of the Ministry of Social Policy, a job that enabled her to combine both research and policy skills. Paula will be leaving the Ministry shortly to take up a position as a Senior Analyst in the Social Policy Branch of Treasury - not somewhere she ever thought she'd be working!

“I don't do much pure research any more but the skills and experience I picked up as a researcher have served me well. This includes project management, relationship management, writing, organising and analysing information and so on. A good knowledge of a whole range of research methods has also made me a better policy analyst - I'm able to distil information and assess what information is worth using and what isn't. Knowing how to define a research question is a skill that transfers well into policy where problem definition is needed. Some of the tools I've acquired along the way have also translated well into policy. For example, a few years ago I had to learn about programme logic, a tool which is more commonly used in evaluations but is actually really useful for policy development as well. For the last year or so, I've been managing the establishment of a social indicators programme for the Ministry - a project that has been almost the perfect fit for my mix of research and policy skills.”

A diversity of skills has been Paula's greatest asset, particularly having a core set of basic skills like the ability to write and analyse. “Sometimes I wonder if I should have specialised in only

one thing but then I wouldn't have had all the variety and opportunities that I've had. These days I feel less like my career has been too “bitsy” and instead see all the opportunities for bringing it all together.”

Paula's ambition to do contracting full-time has changed. “For now I feel like I've enough of contracting. It provides great variety, freedom and flexibility but it can also get a bit isolating and it's difficult to get the opportunities for training and development. Treasury will be quite a challenge and I'll definitely have to upskill in economics, but I'm looking forward to this next phase of my career.”

### Chris Spence

*1993 - Research Officer, Labour Research Unit, Parliament,*

*2002 - Team Leader and Editor, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Canada*



In 1993 Chris was working as a Research Officer in Parliament's Labour Research Unit. His responsibilities at that time included advising, ghostwriting, researching and developing policy

papers and briefing notes for politicians on a range of portfolios including foreign affairs, defence, environment and conservation, typically working to very tight time constraints. Chris found that the job enhanced his communication and technical research skills. He enjoyed the challenge of working directly with politicians and being near the centre of the political system. He also found it fulfilling seeing his work and ideas translated into action.

Completing a BA and then an MA at Victoria laid the foundations for what has been an amazingly interesting careers to date. Chris began with a BA, majoring in history and politics. Additional papers included classical

studies, philosophy and law. His politics papers covered international political economy and international relations giving him a useful background to political and electoral systems. He then went on to complete an MA (Honours) in politics in 1992, concentrating on international politics and electoral systems. His MA thesis entitled, “Adversary Politics in the Post-Muldoon Era” looked at the first-past-the-post system (FPP) and its impact on NZ politics.

Chris believes that the university “system” helped him to develop his general research skills and his advice to anyone considering a career in the social science research field is to avoid specialising too early. Develop generic research skills and the ability to research in a wide range of fields as good research skills are very marketable.

In mid-1995, Chris was offered work as an investigative journalist for Consumer magazine. During his time with the publication, he penned feature articles on a wide range of issues, including environmental sponsorships and reforms to the pharmaceutical sector. He also exposed a number of consumer “scams” and “rip-off” schemes. In 1997, he won the ‘TUANZ Award for Best Investigative Article’, a New Zealand-based journalism award received by one reporter each year.

That year, he accepted the position of Executive Director for the New Zealand Drug Foundation, a non-profit group representing a range of research, treatment and educational organizations and institutions active in the drug and alcohol sector. During his year-and-half in the post, he led intensive public relations work, political lobbying, and policy development, taking a public health perspective. This included developing sound policies on drug and alcohol issues, preparing communications strategies and managing successful media and advocacy campaigns.

In mid-1998 Chris left New Zealand to seek opportunities abroad, and for the past three

years has been a Team Leader and Editor with the International Institute for Sustainable Development, a Canadian non-profit organization. He is involved in the production of two widely respected publications reporting on high profile international development and environment negotiations, including the climate change talks. These publications have a specialist global readership that includes senior politicians, diplomats, government officials, United Nations staff, academics and business leaders.

### **Katie Nimmo**

*Researcher (part-time), School of Social and Cultural Studies, Victoria University of Wellington*

*Researcher (part-time), Centre of Research, Evaluation and Social Assessment*

“My academic career was a bit all over the place. I completed the first year of Parks and Recreation Management (Lincoln University) in 1988, straight after finishing school. I liked the idea of working outside with people, but found that I was sick of learning, didn’t really know what I wanted to do, and wanted a break from education. I took a couple of years off - nannying, labouring, waitressing, bar work, tourism, apple packing and then went to Canterbury University and did a BA with papers in geography, sociology, feminist studies and philosophy. Social sciences interested me because I felt passionate about creating a just world, and these subjects helped me to articulate that passion in an effective way. I was also interested in environmental issues, but instead of focusing on the symptoms of some of these issues (pollution, waste, etc), I was more interested in the causes - people. I felt that an understanding of how society did or didn’t work would be more effective in ameliorating environmental problems. I majored eventually in feminist studies and sociology. These two subjects proved indispensable in providing me with a broad, analytical framework which can be applied both in daily life (reading newspapers, listening to the radio etc), and in a professional capacity.

“After finishing my undergraduate degree, I spent a few years working, paying off my student loan and enjoying a non-student life. I also got involved in some community work, working for the Housing for Women Trust, and conducting research for Campaign for a Better City. This research included a pedestrian count, and interviewing key community service providers located in the area. The findings were collated to submit to the Environment Court in a bid to stop the construction of a bypass through southern Te Aro, Wellington. I also presented this evidence as a witness. I was mentored through this process by some very experienced researchers, who subsequently inspired me to do the MA(Applied) in Social Science Research at Victoria. The mix of intellectual stimulation, contact with people, and potential for practical application to help improve the quality of people’s lives or a small corner of the world also appealed. I also realised that you really need to have post graduate qualifications to get a decent job these days.

“The course itself is challenging but also extremely rewarding. You must be prepared to manage a range of different projects using different research methods and to get up to speed reasonably quickly on a range of topics. In the last three years I have worked as a research assistant at Victoria University, the Parliamentary Commission for the Environment, the market research unit at Te Papa, the Lower Hutt Family Centre, UNESCO, and the Development Resource Centre. The course enables you to get a wide range of research experience, and develop useful contacts for future job opportunities. It also allows you to try out working in different fields if you want to, in order to explore your own interests.

“Currently I am working in two half-time jobs - one for the School of Social and Cultural Studies investigating issues of privacy, secrecy, and surveillance on the Internet. This is primarily qualitative research, interviewing people who are experts on building or maintaining security

systems for the Internet, and legal issues related to the Internet. My other half-time job is working in the Centre of Research, Evaluation and Social Assessment, which is a private research company. In the last five months some of the projects I have worked on for CRESA include evaluating regional tourism plans, scoping for a project on boutique tourism, assisting with an evaluation of a program designed to support people applying for the DPB, doing a literature review on community participation in planning, interviewing policy and research managers on their information needs on multiple job holding, literature search on social costs and benefits of housing and assisting with copy editing books and reports. I am currently responsible for updating social indicators for the Wellington Regional Council, which involves quantitative analysis working the census tables.

“Always learning, always challenged. The best researchers are always a little bit nosy, and love finding out about stuff. It’s a bit like always wanting to see what’s just around the next corner. You have to be persistent, thorough, and prepared to wade through mountains of information, and synthesise it effectively and efficiently. Almost like detective work.

“It’s been very important to me to gain both qualitative and quantitative research experience and also to build and maintain my personal network, so when people have work that needs to be done, they approach me.”



### **Josie Roberts**

*Student - MA in Social Science Research*

“While living briefly in London, I saw a position advertised for a researcher within a community agency focused on youth issues. This was when it first dawned on me that research might be a career I would enjoy. To me it seemed to offer a

great balance between ‘academic’ work and ‘people’ work. Yet I felt that the BA in psychology and sociology that I’d recently completed at Victoria, would not give me access to this work at the level I was interested in. The MA (Applied) in Social Science Research appeared to be a great way to build on the knowledge and skills from my undergraduate studies whilst offering more of a practical base.

“I arrived back in the country with two weeks to spare until my first classes began. By midway through that year I had accepted part-time work within the Evaluation Team of what was then called the Ministry of Social Policy. There, as a research assistant, I maintain the national database on Strengthening Families and generate monitoring reports. By the end of the year I was also working as a research assistant at the university on a project about positive ageing. Here I am looking at the factors that might assist people to grow older in their own home rather than in an institution. This year I have opted to return to my Masters part-time in order to make the most of paid research experience. Fixed-term contracts are relatively common early on in this type of work. I am presently negotiating a contract with another government agency, to be an assistant analyst.

“Although government seems to be an obvious starting point for researchers in Wellington, in the future I hope to work for a community agency in New Zealand or overseas and eventually to be self-employed. I also expect that I will use my research skills to complement

something a little more proactive. For this reason I am particularly looking forward to this year’s practicum where I will do a piece of research for a community organisation. I have not decided who I will approach yet, but my research will involve women’s, youth or environmental issues. I believe that social research, when used appropriately, can be a tool for social change.”

### ***Social Science Research Study at Victoria***

As well as a range of social science major subjects, Victoria University offers the Graduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate and the Master of Arts (Applied) in Social Science Research. The MA (Applied) which the graduates featured in this publication have completed, is open to graduates of any discipline (but most suited to social science graduates) without work experience, or experienced graduates who may want to change career direction or deepen their understanding of the theoretical and applied side of social science research. Being located close to the head offices of government and many private sector organisations, means that this course is oriented towards developing skills useful in a policy-making situation.

The MA (Applied) can be studied for two years full-time or up to four years part-time. The degree includes two practical placements: one in a government policy or research unit and the other in a community or voluntary organisation where students can become familiar with how an organisation works, and participate in its research activities.

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