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Master's graduate (WiSe 2022)



Why should you take a master's degree in social anthropology? And, perhaps more importantly, what can you use it for after?

Before moving to Hamburg, I completed a BA in Social Anthropology and International Relations in the UK. I quickly realised that my passion lay with anthropology. Its qualitative and empathetic approach provided a perspective on current global challenges which I found often missing in political debates. I grew up in Norway, but my family is German, and I wanted to pursue a master's degree in my birth-country. The faculty of ethnology at the University of Hamburg stood out due to its thematic and regional breadth. However, it is the methodological emphasis of the master's programme I have come to value the most. I had the opportunity to work and research in Myanmar during my bachelor's studies and was eager to further develop my research-skills. The courses on data collection, methodology and ethnographic writing provided us with tools to succeed in our own MA research endeavours and encouraged reflection on research ethics and how to communicate our findings to different audiences.

During my second semester, the COVID-pandemic rapidly changed everyday realities across the world. For me, like many other anthropologists, the lockdowns meant not only the cancellation of research trips, but a rethinking of ethnographic research methods. Rather than returning to Myanmar as planned, I ended up doing fieldwork close to "home". Staying with friends in England during lockdown, I conducted online interviews with interlocutors from

across the UK. I was interested in understanding the generational gap which supposedly “revealed” itself in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Titled “We Grew Up British”, my thesis explores senior white British voters’ attitudes towards Brexit and its implications 5 years after the referendum. Through my research, I have gained extensive knowledge about European and British politics, as well as current debates on populism, xenophobia and democratic practices. These are issues which are not limited to the specific context of my research, but that are intrinsically linked to global political trends.

Thanks to the support of the faculty, I attended the 2022 EASA conference in Belfast alongside a group of MA students and PhD candidates from Hamburg. This experience and the opportunity to present some of the findings of my thesis at a conference panel was certainly a highlight of my master’s experience!

Today, I am part of a Norwegian trainee-programme. Aimed at recent master-level graduates from different disciplines, the programme consists of three paid 6-month-placements. In my first placement at the County Council, I worked with a project on sustainable tourism which involved a variety of regional actors, including boat-builders, volunteer groups and museums. In my current placement at the Kristiansand City Administration, I work with international projects on issues ranging from online hate-speech, European politics, Norway-Ukraine relations, and sustainable city development.

When I tell people that I studied anthropology, I am often asked “...but what do you *do* with this degree?” **Anthropology is not a degree that comes with a clear job description. However, I think it is important to remember that there are also a lot of jobs with no clear degree requirement.** Many employers are more interested in the skills and knowledge you possess than what discipline you are trained in.

In my opinion, anthropologists are masters of what in CV-language is called “transferrable skills”. Firstly, while you gain a lot of specialist knowledge through your degree, anthropology also trains you to see how certain issues are connected, from the local to the national to the international level. What most of the topics I have worked with so far have in common, is that they are fundamentally about democratic participation and grassroots involvement. Anthropology is about seeing the large issues at stake when working with “small places” (as anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen famously put it). By pointing out

these connections, anthropologists can offer perspectives necessary to create more fair and sustainable societies.

Secondly, anthropologists are trained to find solutions by listening to people and understanding what is important to them and why. Studying anthropology teaches you to be curious about others. In my case: boatbuilders, senior volunteers and heritage enthusiasts, or diplomats, activists and city planners. Moreover, anthropologists are trained to detect underlying tensions or miscommunications – and to address these respectfully. This is extremely useful and important in work environments where you encounter people with different professional, social, political or economic backgrounds.

Of course, there are also more concrete skills you gain as an anthropologist, e.g. within research, communication and writing. Anthropologists can complement quantitative trend analyses with qualitative understandings of what these trends mean. This is useful, for instance, when it comes to mapping out societal issues or evaluating a project. However, I think your most important skill as an anthropologist is to not take anything for granted, to be critical of simplistic solutions to complex social issues. This can be challenging in contexts where people may prefer a more black-and-white answer. However, as current global developments show, it is necessary to be comfortable with things not being either one way or another, but somewhere in-between. These skills are of course not as easy to “sell” in a job interview. Yet, be confident that what you know and what you can do is important – whether you choose to pursue an academic career or wish to work in the public or private sector!