

DEVELOPMENT STUDIES GRADUATE

RACHEL DONNELLY



CURRENT ROLE: COORDINATION OFFICER, DEPARTMENT OF REGIONAL NSW ILLAWARRA-SHOALHAVEN REGION

PAST ROLE: ADVISOR, OFFICE OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA NORTHERN TERRITORY

DEGREE: BACHELOR OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

FUTURE PLANS: 4CITIES – MASTER PROGRAM IN URBAN STUDIES EUROPE

I was given the opportunity to speak with Rachel Donnelly who we interviewed previously in 2016. During our chat, I found out that Rachel enjoys change, has fantastic networking skills and is constantly looking for new challenges to develop her career.

WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN UP TO SINCE WE LAST SPOKE?

After our last interview, Rachel took a six-month secondment, and worked with the Office of Northern Australia. Here she worked on implementing the [White Paper on Developing Northern Australia](#) which contained recommendations across a number of different themes for the development of Northern Australia (top of Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland). Rachel was responsible for coordinating progress across Northern Australia by communicating with various bodies such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), tourism industry and farmers to deliver the recommendations.

HOW RELEVANT HAS YOUR DEGREE BEEN SINCE YOU GRADUATED?

“Different parts of my degree are more relevant in different roles.”

After her work in the Northern Territory, Rachel made her way to the Kingdom of Tonga as an Office and Records Management Advisor with the Office of the Public Service Commission through the Australian Volunteers Program with DFAT. Here Rachel was able to see firsthand how a majority world country is affected by its history and geographical issues, themes she touched on during her degree.

Whilst in Tonga, it was fascinating for Rachel to see how political and social structures had influenced Tonga as a majority world country. Having only previously worked in Australia, she found the differences very stark. Rachel heard about this volunteering opportunity by signing up for the [Australian Volunteers Program monthly newsletter](#). From then on Rachel was kept in the loop about potential overseas volunteer positions that aligned with her skills set.

Rachel found that Tongan culture is built on relationships and networks, rather than key performance indicators (KPIs) and deliverables as she had experienced in Australia. Rachel said that building relationships so that you are able to make that quick five-minute phone call with another person working on a project can really change whether or not a project is delivering or not. If you have not put in the time to build those connections and maintain a positive professional environment, then it makes delivering a project more challenging.

Another communication skill Rachel was able to hone in on whilst in Tonga, was speaking in plain English. She has found that government has a tendency to be bureaucratic and can rely heavily on jargon. However, in order to be understood, Rachel realised that she needs to simply communicate plainly and clearly. Rachel was really able to test those skills as she was writing training manuals for how to deal with records management.



Image: Rachel (middle) at the Office of the Public Service Commission in the Kingdom of Tonga.

Rachel currently works as a Coordination Officer for the NSW Department of Regional NSW, managing cross government projects in the Illawarra-Shoalhaven region. In September 2019, they launched the

[Western Sydney and Illawarra Shoalhaven Roadmap to Collaboration](#)

This document looks between the two regions to build the social, employment and economic connections, and forecasts a 20 year strategy for how to achieve those goals. This was a very collaborative project, in which Rachel listened to various stakeholders, agencies and industries then merged all the ideas together to create a clear, concise and holistic strategy. In this role Rachel grapples with the ideas of what is urban and what is regional that she learnt in *Cities and Regions*, and classifying these in terms of population size and distance. These are important for Rachel as it allows her to identify what support the Illawarra-Shoalhaven region requires from the NSW Government.



Image: Rachel (middle), completed [Western Sydney and Illawarra Shoalhaven Roadmap to Collaboration](#)

Rachel's *Environmental Legislation and Planning* knowledge was crucial during a recent project working on scoping the feasibility of a mountain bike network in the Illawarra Escarpment. Rachel came prepared to meetings with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, as she already had knowledge about how the legislation works.

Armed with knowledge from her first and third year *Aboriginal Studies* courses, when Rachel was in the Northern Territory working with Aboriginal communities, she was already aware of some of the development challenges Indigenous communities face and applying strength-based approaches to development.

Finally, Rachel recommends the [Work Integrated Learning in Development Studies and Human Geography](#) which gives students an opportunity to work with a company of their choosing and apply the skills they have been developing in their degree. Rachel completed her work placement with [Regional Development Australia Hunter](#). Rachel sent RDA Hunter an email, set up a coffee with the Director and went from there.

The diversity of the subjects offered in the Development Studies degree can be incredibly exciting, but also daunting when it comes to selecting the right courses for you. When it comes to choosing subjects, Rachel recommends that to make the most of your degree, you should ideally choose subjects that you are interested in. If you're unsure about what direction you would like to go in, talk to your Program Convenor. They're working in a career because they absolutely love it and they're happy to talk to you about their subject day in and day out.

ADVICE: CREATE NETWORKS AND MAKE CONNECTIONS

Rachel places a massive importance on creating networks and fostering positive relationships. Be proactive and look for those mentoring opportunities, attend Alumni events, connect on LinkedIn, actively reach out and ask about volunteering. If you're interested in a company and you want to learn about how they operate, there is no harm in sending them an email asking for a volunteering opportunity or a coffee. People are unlikely to say no, they're too busy to have a coffee with you.

“It might take some time, but then you've got your name out and you're looking like you're somebody that puts their hand up and is proactive about their career.”

Making new friends can be intimidating, and this might be the first time away from home for many students. Fortunately the Development Studies program is interdisciplinary, and you will find yourself branching out and meeting people from various degrees. This is how Rachel made a lot of friends at university, as well as joining university clubs and living on campus for a year.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Rachel has now worked in government for around seven years, and she is ready to continue studying with a focus in urban and regional issues. Rachel has secured a place in the [4Cities Masters of Urban Studies with the Erasmus Mundus program](#). This extremely competitive program appealed to Rachel because it offers students an opportunity to live, breath and study in four different European cities. Rachel is excited to see how different cities have different personalities, and what role government legislation or planning legislation had in shaping the way those cities developed. Rachel believes her Masters will compound all her practical knowledge with an academic background to say,

“I'm here, I'm a subject matter expert and you can listen to me because I've put in the hours.”

Returning with a Masters, Rachel can picture herself being able to take that next step in her career which would place her in a position at the forefront of designing and implementing person-centred policy for Australian cities.

For more information about the [Bachelor of Development Studies](#) you can contact:

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