



Case study

GCHQ Leadership Development Scheme

Name:	Zara
University:	Cambridge University
Course:	BSc Biochemistry PhD Oncology
Age:	27
Current Job Title:	Graduate Leadership Development Scheme member



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How did you get your current job – what were the steps you took whilst studying?

“Having seen the Graduate Leadership Development Scheme (GLDS) advertised on GCHQ’s website earlier, I kept an eye on their website and applied the following year when the vacancies became available. The assessment involved an online form, online tests, a telephone interview, online psychological test and finally a one-day assessment centre, which involved various exercises (I can certainly recall a couple of interviews and a group exercise).”

Why did you decide to join GCHQ?

“Firstly I’ve always been interested in world affairs. Plus, I wanted a job that was interesting and that would actually make a difference. GCHQ ticked every box! Intelligence production isn’t anything like James Bond or Spooks, but it is exciting and satisfying to know your work can influence decisions made in very senior areas of Government. The GLDS really appealed to me because I wasn’t sure exactly what I wanted to do when I finished my PhD: the opportunity to work in many different areas of an organisation and develop management and leadership skills was really too good to turn down. Finally there’s the location: I wouldn’t say it played a massive part in my decision about where to work but I really appreciate it now I’m here. If you like the bright lights of a big city, Cheltenham probably isn’t for you (although we are less than an hour from Birmingham and Bristol, and only two from London). However, if you like having stunning countryside on your doorstep, an easy journey to work, and house prices half those you’d pay in London, then it probably is!”

How relevant was your subject of study in securing your current job?

“My subjects (biochemistry and oncology) weren’t very relevant at all! However, the more general skills my science degrees taught me – data handling, analysis, communication, etc., have been very useful. GCHQ is a technical organisation, so although I might not use my technical background in my day-to-day job very much, I do feel right at home.”

Describe a typical working day in your current job/placement.

“It’s worth pointing out that there really is no ‘typical day’ on the GLDS as we do such a wide variety of posts. My current job is very different to my last job, and I expect it will be very different to my next one too.”

I’m currently working in our Internal Audit Unit (more interesting than it sounds, really!). We review teams and projects in GCHQ to ensure that they are functioning as effectively and efficiently as possible. I have several audits ongoing at any one time, and we look at all parts of the business, so there’s a lot of variety. Typically this involves interviewing staff at all levels, analysing documentation, then drawing conclusions from this and writing them up into reports. Sometimes I’ll be working in a team of auditors and other times on my own.”

I’m just in discussion with the GLDS manager to consider my next posting. I’m keen to consider a staff officer role for a member of GCHQ’s directorate. In this position I’ll provide critical support to a senior member of the department, so it will really give me a good overview of the challenges we face.”



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What skills are necessary to perform well in the role?

“To get a place on the GLDS you need to show promise as a leader – you won’t be thrown into managing staff in your first placement and you will get a lot of help developing your skills, but you do need to demonstrate that you have the ability to develop into GCHQ’s future senior leadership. We change posts regularly and do a range of jobs across the whole Department – you therefore need to be adaptable and comfortable doing new things and working with different people. It’s beneficial if you enjoy a challenge!”

What’s the training like?

“GCHQ invests a lot of time and money in training. A lot of what we do is obviously very specialised, so some of the training is designed and run internally. For other things the Department brings in external providers or sends people out to externally run courses, such as the National School of Government courses. The training you’ll receive is obviously very job-dependent. As a member of the GLDS, you will get the basic training you need to do the job you’re in, but also leadership and management coaching. There isn’t a standard ‘production line’ approach to training; exactly what you need will depend on your personal strengths and weaknesses.”

What do you enjoy most about your job?

“It’s great to see something on the news and think ‘wow, I contributed to that’! You can’t say that to people outside work of course but it does always make me feel very privileged. Above all though it’s great to have a job which is interesting and challenging.”

What are the best things about working in this sector?

“Working in intelligence is fascinating and with cyber being such a big issue GCHQ’s blend of intelligence and information assurance has never been so important. I like the GLDS because you get experience of working at the cutting edge of intelligence production and information assurance, but also experience of the essential corporate functions of any big organisation – HR, finance, corporate strategy, etc.”

Finally, what advice do you have for other students and graduates who would like to get into this career?

“GCHQ recruits on competencies, which look at a variety of skills such as your team work and leadership skills, analysis and decision making and communications and knowledge sharing – it doesn’t matter what your degree is in or what experience you have so long as you can demonstrate the skills the interviewers are looking for. Research the organisation and demonstrate your motivation and commitment to their ‘mission’.”