Rachel interview transcript

LM: So hi, how are you? And thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Should we get started?

 RH: Hi Lucy, great to see you. Great to be here.

LM: Aw, so nice. So tell me about yourself starting with your name, obviously.

RH: So my name is Rachel Headings. I am a current PhD student in my second year between politics and environment, and specifically here at SEI.

LM: Nice very interesting. So what are you actually doing for your PhD?

RH: So my kind of area of interest is in food policy. My Masters degree which I got in London is in food policy specifically and in my undergrad and throughout my professional year I kind of dabbled in food policy councils, food security, advocacy, business development that are like start ups around food, lots of farm work and things like that. So my PhD now is specifically focusing on food system transformation and especially kind of policy levers and looking at transformation in terms of policy.

LM: Nice, that's really interesting.

RH: I think so, that's why I'm doing four years on it.

LM: I hope you find it interesting. Right before we get into the proper questions, I do have one really tricky one. So brace yourself, this completely threw the last person I interviewed. What is your favourite colour?

RH: So, it's actually I don't know if you can see this T shirt. It's like a Forest Green colour, it was my school colour for undergrad and it just really reminds me of the pine trees from home. We had lots of them and we also had lots and lots of snow, so every winter you'd get the beautiful pristine snow and then the dark like green of the pine trees and I just love that contrast.

LM: Wow, that is a really nice story behind as well. So, where are you from then? Where's home?

RH: So, as my accent like portrays, I am American. I'm from the Midwest and Michigan specifically so people know Detroit and it's close to Chicago. That's a different state technically, and I'm from really far north in Michigan in the Upper Peninsula actually, which on the map looks like it's part of Wisconsin. And it's actually further north than some parts of Canada, and I consider home to be Marquette, which is where my university was up there, right on the lake, on the Lakeshore of Lake Superior.

LM: Nice, definitely quite far from York then.

RH: Yeah, Yup, I moved to York after the first lockdown in 2020, so about July. I've been here just over a year now and I moved up from London where I had spent a year and a half doing my masters.

LM: So you said before that you just kind of like fell into the Stockholm Environment Institute, it wasn't particularly pre planned because of your supervisor, so tell me what happened there. How did you end up here?

RH: So basically I finished my masters and didn't want to get deported and couldn't find work for a Tier 2 visa in the public sector because they don't generally have the money or resources to go through all the verification and things like that. So I decided to stay on in like the UK and do a PhD. I looked at several schools and York wasn't really on my radar, and then Bob Doherty, who is from the management school and Leeds, he led ‘I know food’ and is now leading ‘fix our food’ came and did kind of a guest lecture at City University where I was doing my MSc and I was just really impressed with what I heard, and his approach, and it seemed really similar to my interests and what I was learned in my kind of conceptions of food systems. So I reached out to him. He said that he's not actually a professor, so he couldn't be my supervisor and directed me to Tony Heron, who is my supervisor in the politics department. And I had a couple of meetings with him, worked on my proposal, and he recommended John Enzor as my secondary supervisor and John is in SEI. So it was very much just kind of flowing into these things and it's tricky because food systems - there are lots of ways that I could have gone. It's such an interdisciplinary kind of subject. There's loads going on in health, loads going on in the management school, loads in politics, and obviously loads here and environment and SEI, so I'm just thankful that I'm able to do kind of this interdisciplinary programme and that and specifically in SEI and environment because everybody has just been incredible and they're doing so much fascinating work around food.

LM: So what would you say your experience has been like working with SEI?

RH: So I think that is probably bad, quite different from people in previous years because of the lockdowns and because most of it has been virtual. Obviously a big part for SCI is not just the research but kind of the practicalities of it and implementing it through policies actually, but kind of having that use on the ground, which is so important to me. And I think that those opportunities, there's been loads of opportunities for webinars and like seminars to do that, but less so I think for me to contribute than maybe other people that had during their first like year or so just because, or less formal opportunity I should say, not that everybody isn't friendly. But just because of what's been going on with covid and lockdown. That being said, I was able to work out of the office for about a month and a half and start to get to know everybody. And then it's been great because there have been so many like organised virtual meetups just socially and then professionally. You know we have weekly team meetings and all of that which is incredible to feel like you're staying connected and then even as I've had lots of challenges financially and then also just personally, you know, moving to a new city feeling isolated not really knowing anybody. They have just always been really open and happy to support me and it's been really great to know that I have the department is a fall back in just a very personal and you know, comfortable way. I really feel like I'm part of something thanks to them.

LM: Would you say they’ve adapted well to kind of moving online then?

RH: I mean, there were definitely some hiccups in the beginning, as with everybody you know, zoom, learning the platform now, navigating the breakout rooms. Because we were, SEI were already committed to a very personal touch, like flexible working schedule and working with people with young families, and

LM: I'm so sorry my Internet cut out. So everything after being flexible and working with young families. Could you maybe repeat it, please?

RH: Yeah, so I was just saying that their flexible and adaptable to young families and that because of that they were really well equipped to adapt and as the I and some kind of individual microcosm, that's also balancing obviously the wider like Stockholm Institute with their kind of regulations and rules. I feel like SEI may have even been more proactive with some of their measures and adapting than the wider university about the times, which was really impressive.

LM: Brilliant, that’s so good to hear. Do you think that being - would you consider yourself an international student?

RH: Absolutely yeah.

LM: Do you think that that has had an effect on your studies?

RH: Absolutely yeah. When you talk access to finance and loans and even all the like support pots of money that's been going on, it's just not existent as a Tier 4 visa holder. I don't have access to public funds, meaning you know, even though there were times when I was really food insecure, which you know, irony, because that's my area of study, but even while it was happening, I was I think we knew the networks and things because that's where I work, but I couldn't. I couldn't just go to my GP and get a food bank kind of thing. I don't qualify for healthy start vouchers. I don't, you know, aren’t those mechanisms for me as an international student. And there's also very real like cultural things, you know. I've been in the UK for three years and there's still so much, especially as a grad student on this level where even me just like using words that are common there, like I remember and one SEI team meeting, I used one of those words and Sarah, the director actually, like had to say, you don't say that here. That's really offensive. Like in front of everybody. So there's still a little those kind of hiccups that even yeah, after living here for years, I still encounter and still face. And yeah, everybody at SCI has been really great about it and just really upfront and obviously I would much rather learn and have somebody tell me that so that we don't continue those kind of mistakes, and to help me like with recommendations, you know, even for where to go hiking and where to walk and how to get around the city centre and which buses are the best and all that kind of stuff. So yeah, I think I say he's been great in that respect.

 LM: So kind of looking back at your experience so far. What really stood out to you?

RH: So, thinking about my experiences with SEI in particular. I think there was a good couple of months at the beginning of this year, the beginning of 2021 between January and through the end of March, where I was really struggling on a personal level. I had to move because I couldn’t afford the place where I was living before, I couldn’t avoid the bills. As I said like, didn't have great access to food. I was like barely food insecurity. I wasn’t sure how I’d be eating for next week, I was really worried about paying my bills and I had a lot of health issues due to the stress - migraines and not being able to eat even when I did have food and all of those kinds of things and I remember I talked to one of the ECRs that I’m quite close with and she kind of discussed it with Sarah on my behalf because she has a great relationship with her. And then I also reached out to Trudy on the admin staff about it and they were so incredible and so kind and just so willing to offer support. Trudy actually went out of her way to get me a standing desk to help me with my back that's adjustable because I was having huge issues, even just staring at a computer between my migraines and everything and a like ergonomic office chair that I'm currently sitting in. You know, and had them delivered to my house because they don't have access to a car. And offering me resources for people that I could reach out to to help furnish my new house because it was unfurnished and I didn't have any of the things. And you know, just find people who really cared. The ECR, you know, met with me weekly, just like on a friend basis. She's now one of my closest friends, just to go walking in just to touch base and check in and see how I was. Obviously there's been all of the weekly meetings and things like that, so the support has just been incredible. It really has.

LM: That is so great to hear you were supported like that, that’s amazing.

RH: Yeah we have, I mean, it's a good team. We have a really great bunch of people around us here, I feel like.

LM: Right, if you had to summarise the Stockholm Environment Institute in three words, what do you think they would be? Quick fire.

RH: Sorry, can't do quick fire. I have to think about things. I would say genuine. I would say experienced. And I would say… This is hard. Genuine, experienced and flexible or adaptable and just like add a little asterisks there, not just in like work schedules and Covid and like that kind of stuff but also just in how we work with other departments and how we want to be interdisciplinary and inclusive and really challenge ourselves to get as many perspectives as possible when we're conducting research, so flexible both academically and then like logistically.

LM: Not to be nitpicky, but I do think you did go over 3 words there.

RH: Well, I did 3 words and then a clarification on one of them.

LM: OK. The final thing: if you were speaking to someone who is thinking about applying here to do their PhD and just kind of research in general, what would you say to them?

RH: Is this for SEI, or York, or both.

LM: SEI mainly, yeah.

RH: I would say that we are a great group of people that's pretty tight knit but really welcoming for anybody who's new and that the support is unparalleled, I think with any of the other departments, and that because of its unique position in this unique relationship to the wider kind of Stockholm Institute network, like Stockholm Research Institute at work, there's just loads of opportunities for professional development and mentorship, and to gain really hands on practical experience and see your research translated into kind of these practical mechanisms, whether its policy, whether it's workshops, whether it's a video interviews, or a blog article, there's just loads of opportunities specifically with SCI to really support you in doing those.

LM: Amazing and finally, would you have any advice for them? People applying that is.

RH: Yeah, I would say that the university like on a wider scale is quite complicated as an institution. There are lots of departments, lots of partnerships between things, so I would say as you're applying be really clear on what your interests are and what kind of your boundaries are, because it's really easy to be overwhelmed and you get kind of pulled into lots of different directions, which is great. But again, it's that kind of overload of choice, right? So know what you want. Be really clear about it and then look at all of these opportunities and with SEI in particular if you apply to this department, know that you'll be really supported and that there's lots of people you can go to for advice to help navigate all of those challenges.

LM: Brilliant, thank you very much. I have no more questions for you. But if there is anything else that you think is incredibly important, or just that you'd like to mention. Now is the time.

RH: I would just say regardless of if you’re in SEI or in the wider university, but I’m a little biased, especially to SEI, don't be afraid to get engaged, you know. Go to those meetings, meet the people, even under these more difficult circumstances where it’s all virtual. There are just loads and loads opportunities and people do genuinely want to get to know you, even with all the change over and things, so don't be afraid to go for those kinds of things, even though it can be really intimidating right at first.

LM: That's amazing advice. Thank you so much.

RH: Yeah, thank you so much for interviewing me. It's been a pleasure.