Smitri interview transcript (draft 1)

Hi, how are you? Thanks so much for agreeing to be interviewed, how are you?

I'm good, thank you so much for asking.

So should we get started, do you want to tell me a bit about yourself?

Sure. I'm Smriti Safaya. I am based in Hong Kong so I'm a distance PhD student and I'm actually split between SEI York and the Education Department at the University of York. In their science education research group. So I get to straddle these two apartments and learn a lot from each. They each have their strengths and expertise, so I've been really enjoying that learning from across the two. Before I became a PhD student though I have been a teacher at schools here in Hong Kong for 13 years, so that's partly why I am also still in Hong Kong to do my PhD because my research is based here and it's about education in Hong Kong, which is the field that I'm really interested in.

So what specifically are you researching for your PhD?

I'm taking a look at the appetite that secondary school students have for environmental activism, and am especially looking at it through an experiential education approach called Citizen Science and it’s something that has only really started in Hong Kong at, say, seven and a half eight years ago and it's not even that pervasive across the schools, so I was quite keen to test, as much as one can test, the impact of these kinds of experiences on students in a bit more of a qualitative and quantitative way because I've been trying to incorporate citizen science in my teaching for a number of years. And anecdotally, I could see the impact, but when I was looking into the research, there hasn't been that much done about it, even globally, so I was quite keen just to find out more. Then it's never been done in Hong Kong, so I was quite keen to answer a burning question of my own. At the end of the day, I think teachers just want to be better teachers so that what they teach and how they teach has a greater impact on their students, so that's where the whole inputs, yeah, I'd say the source came from in terms of the question and why I'm doing whatever doing.

That's really interesting. What did you study previously to then get the point we are now doing PhD?

Oh, it's a bit wonky actually. I never wanted to be a teacher. That might be a common story for some teachers. I was really keen on research. I was a geography science kind of kid and so I did geology as my undergrad in California and was really interested in a lot of the earthquakes that were happening there. So I then did my masters in Hong Kong U, the University of Hong Kong, but I've always been a mountain person so I found out that they had a Tibet research team, so I was like yes, let me go. So my Masters was about earthquakes in Tibet and you know, I was kind of happy down the research road. But then there's some stuff that happened in the news that upset me a lot and it had nothing to do with earthquakes and it was more… It got me questioning what the point of my research was, and if I was thinking about doing more research in that field, would it have any kind of impact and be helpful to society and my conclusion at that time was that I don't think so, and so I thought: well, what would be useful? And at the same time had to do a lot of the field courses for undergrad students as a Masters student, would leave those, and I realised I enjoyed working with young people in the field. So I’m a big outdoorsy kind of person and so suddenly I was realising, ‘wait I think I like this thing that I'm just slowly discovering’ and so then I decided maybe I'll go get a teaching degree and so that's where the teaching thing came from. So initially was doing what science, teaching and geography teaching a lot of environmental education. So I was able to kind of nerd out with my students about earthquakes and geology and rocks as much as I could, which has been a lot of fun. So that's kind of the 13 years of teaching suddenly flew by and I still try to do as much field based work as possible, which then led to the citizen science and then getting me to question well, how impactful is it? Does it change student values towards environment? Does it change their behaviour? Are they becoming a little bit more active with and being mindful of and wanting to protect the environment? And so all these kinds of questions and it came from there. So it was a bit mish mash and windy. But I eventually got here.

Amazing so the final part of the get to know you section of this is the most important. What is your favourite colour?

My favourite colour ooh, gosh Dang it. So it's like a greeny bluey mix, is that? I don't know what the spectrum of colours is, but yeah, it's like a mish mash of green and blue.

Okay, okay. Right, we'll go back to the environmental based questions.

I like that the most important thing is the colour stuff.

So what attracted you to SEI in the 1st place? What made you apply for this PhD programme?

Well SEI, I’ve sort of been tracking SCI for little while, partly because even in my teaching we’re always looking for resources with information about a lot of environmental information from the geography side of teaching. But there were reports and data and a lot of global data too that was coming in so I was introduced to SEI that way and I was thinking there is this organisation that seems very trustworthy in terms of data collection and the kind of interpretations that are doing, but also the way they are applying the information that they have to create change that's positive for people and the planet. And there's not too many organisations that do that, it seems, effectively maybe is another adjective I should add. So they were on my radar, but I had no clue about PhD opportunities and it only happened much later when I was looking into citizen science and trying to understand what do we know about the impact of it, where I then found out that there was a particular researcher or a few researchers in that world, and they were doing really good work and it was coming out of SEI York and I was like, hey wait a second, I’ve heard of this group before and they do really cool stuff ,and wow they have people working on citizen science and has PhD opportunities. So I was just thinking wow, these worlds are colliding really nicely. And so I think I got really lucky that way, recognising that they're doing work that actually has real impact and a lot of times it’s not as an outside researcher kind of coming in. They build a lot of relationships with people locally and often lead, let them lead, that kind of project which I, especially with the whole citizen science aspect and interest that I have local voices is really important to me. It's kind of the same reason why I think student voice is also really important, and anything that teachers ever do or schools ever do. So that philosophy was also something that connected with my philosophy and I value that, so I think there's some similar values and so I appreciate their approach and I like the impact that it can have, and they're very humble about it, but also very explicit and hopeful. So all of those things I felt were fitting in with my hopes and vision was to.

Nice, so what's your experience been like studying here so far?

I have pretty… I have stepped foot once into the SEI office and literally that was for about 5 minutes, and I realised that the person I was supposed to meet was sick that day and I never managed to meet them and so I basically walked in and then walked out once I've found out that. So I physically don't have much of an experience there, other than just being in the building for some minutes, but, being a distance learner I think, and this was pre covid I had chosen to be a distance learner, so things were, I think not as easy as they are now because everybody has to live and work and study online. But I have to say that as soon as I kind of joined the SEI family, I was suddenly part of so many emails that was all about community building and even though we physically never seen each other, it suddenly felt like a little family and there were some people especially from the admin side who went out of their way to make me feel super comfortable, check in with me on a weekly basis, invite me to talk at speed talks and just get to know me too. Just little itty bitty things like that. So I thought that was really precious and help to just really, like you get thrown into the deep end, but this is like a nice cushion to have on your entire journey and nothing has changed, in fact, it's gotten even cosier, and there's more ways to engage and participate so it feels it feels really special. I've never had anything like that in the previous three degrees that I've done at three different universities, so this was very different and very, very unique.

That's really nice to hear actually. Yeah, has there been a standout experience for you?

Stand out experience. It would be hard to say, partly because I've not been able to join some of the very social things because those things to happen UK Evening Times, which ends up being off and my 2am 3am so I don't end up joining those. But I hear afterwards that they're a heckuva lot of fun, and so I know I’ve kind of missed out, but there's other small opportunities. I mean, I think they had – there was a Christmas one that I was able to join, which had a bunch of different games. Really, really wacky kind of games that I'd never thought you could do over zoom. I thought they were really clever and so that was a lot of fun. A lot of giggling, a lot of silliness, I'd say. Yeah, but I hear there’s lots of those so I'm really appreciative that I managed to join that one. They had it at friendlier time zones for me so I really appreciate that. And actually, I should say, there are lots of times when they check in with those of us who are in different parts of the world about can we join and I thought that inclusivity was special. So like we're not forgotten even though we're not there yet.

That's really nice. If you were to summarise SEI in three words, what would they be?

Oh, goodness. And I mean this in the best way possible: there is an eccentricity about them, about people in this group. Oh wait? I was going to use a Transformers quote of more than meets the eye that that's more than 3 words. Dang it. OK, so. Yeah, there's an east entry city, but then, there's a humility I would say as well. And. And yeah, great intelligence, those three things.

Nice. So the final thing we're going to be doing is: if you were speaking to somebody who is thinking about applying to do a PhD here, what would you say to them?

I would say that would be a very smart choice to do that. There is tremendous support from, not only your supervisor, if you have just the one, although I hear that many people have more than one, I've got more than one, but in a different department. There's a lot of breadth as well as depth in SEI, and I find that there's a lot of willingness to help you in that journey whether it is with maybe quantitative skills or qualitative skills that are or may be methodological or analytical. There's a lot of help, and it's not just coming from the experts, but it's also coming from the post docs and another PhD students. There is a lot of communities that are really helping in all sorts of ways and not just the sort of technical side of the PhD, but even the social emotional side of trying to get through a project that can hit a lot of bumpy roads, especially during covid times. So I feel like SEI is, you know, the perfect family to do a PhD in, stumble along the journey and figure it out as you go along. So I think would be a smart choice to consider SCI as the place to do PhD.

Would you have any advice for those applying? Is there anything they really need to know?

Well, it wouldn't hurt to really have a good sense of your own project, whatever that research question is, and in a way, I mean I know you have to write a bit of a proposal and have as much in a proposal as possible. I’d say one of the things, especially perhaps in the last two years where it’s taught us is to have Plan B's and maybe plan C’s and to have thought about that and even have some kind of mitigation plan, because that also shows your potential supervisor that you're thinking about how to be adaptive and that shows some innovative thinking that shows some creative problem solving and these are the kinds of skills that will need as you do your PhD anyway. So, because I think everyone generally who applies as the basic, here's my question here are my general methods that would be used, here is possibly the way I will analyse it, and maybe here's some literature about the topic. But if you can show that if things go wrong, because likely things won't go perfectly, then here's what I'm going to do about it. And those kinds of skills are, I think, going to put one in good stead.

That's really good, really good advice. These are all the questions I have for you right now. Is there anything else that you would like to mention? Anything else you think we've missed out?

Um? I mean, hopefully everything can be face to face and physical again, and it seems like this, I mean SEI as part of the Environment and Geography Department, it's a great space because SEI is such an amazing culture and then even the environment geography department has a great culture so it’s almost like you're part of two worlds that are happily coexisting and mingling together. And it makes for such a supportive environment that your PhD experience would be just so enriched by it. And you know, if people are questioning whether or not this would be a good decision, I would say you don't even have to question. It's just a matter of well, just be open to the wonderful people that are part of SEI and the environment and geography department. Yeah, I'd say you be hard pressed to ever find anything other than just really positive meaningful relationships and experiences so. Yeah, hopefully it can be face to face because I hear I'm missing out on some really cool things like picnics and looking for Long Boi who's some amazing goose out there. I don't know, there are all these cool things and mysteries to solve. So one day hopefully I'll even have a chance to be there. But I think those who get in on Super Lucky. So apply.

Okay, thank you very much. You've been amazing.

Wow, you're very welcome. Thanks again, Lucy.