Graduate Women NZ Mid-Year Report 2020

Kathryn (Kate) Connolly

GWNZ Susan Byrne Awardee 2019/2020

Kia ora koutou

May I begin this report by first expressing my absolute gratitude at having been awarded the Susan Byrne award for 2019/2020. I am so humbled to have received this as I am sure there were many worthy candidates in the running.

You will be pleased to hear that my study is progressing well. The latter part of 2019 and early 2020 was spent completing my placement in the Massey Wellington Psychology Clinic, having my doctoral research endorsed by the University at my confirmation event, sitting (and passing) my first-year oral exam, and submitting my ethics application to Health and Disability Ethics Committee (HDEC). I might talk about each of those in a little more detail, and then orient my report to the purpose of this specific award, being an ‘older’ student who is changing career.

My time on placement was without question the most enjoyable part of my first year of study. I was fortunate to work with several different psychologists, each of whom I learned a great deal from. I was also grateful to have worked with a diverse range of clients. I was able to join them on their own unique journeys and form lovely working relationships with each one of them. The placement in the clinic was my first hands on experience as a trainee clinical psychologist and it really motivated me – and in many respects ‘reassured’ me that this career change is going to be positive and rewarding in ways I hadn’t even realised. Reflecting back over my time on placement, it is encouraging for me to realise that there are many strengths that I bring to the role of a practitioner.

My research is looking at whether an intervention of bright light exposure can help reduce fatigue following a mild traumatic brain injury. My confirmation event was help in November 2019. This is an event that all Doctoral students prepare themselves for and must be completed within the first year of study. It involved my submission of a 10,000 word document detailing my proposed research and progress to date, delivering this as a 30 minute presentation to students and staff, and then meeting with an academic panel who are tasked with critiquing the research and either approving it to continue, or requesting changes are made before moving forward. I was fortunate in that my research was confirmed during the panel discussion – who were impressed by my work and excited about the possibility of effecting meaningful change for people recovering from injury.

The first-year oral exam is an opportunity for the programme facilitators to review a portfolio of my work (including a full psychological report as well as self-reflections from throughout the year) and a video recording of my assessment of a role-play client. I was nervous going into my exam because I felt I had not done well with my role-play client. To my surprise however, staff took the opposite view and told me that they thought my video was great – reassuring me that I have many qualities that will serve me well in this career. The exam is a simple pass or fail and is designed almost with the primary purpose of preparing students for Board exams at the conclusion of our studies (eeek).

The next step for me in my research journey is to recruit participants and begin my trial intervention as soon as possible. To enable this, I need HDEC approval which I have completed the application for and now await a decision. I understand that the committee will meet in Wellington on March 24, and I hope to be able to attend.

The Susan Byrne Award is specifically for women over the age of 35. Having recently turned 38, I do occasionally feel my age when I am with my cohort (we are a small group of four students in my year group). It can feel at times like being a mature student sets me apart from the group. We certainly spend our weekends doing different things, and I notice that sometimes the perspective I bring to discussions can be a little different at times - which I am sure relates at least in part to my age. Age can be construed as a point of difference of course, however generally speaking, I think the experiences I have had across my life are helpful in many ways. For example, my experience as a mother gives me some insight about the struggles and fears of the parents that come in as clients.

Finally, I wanted to talk about the career change aspect of this award. I initially studied economics before embarking on a career in Marketing with several large corporate companies. The break I took from work while having children allowed me to rethink what a meaningful career might look like in the future – and psychology was the very top of my list. It was daunting to begin, because the study journey is long (it will be nearly 10 years by the time I don my gown and cross the stage) and because the path to registration is so competitive that there were never any guarantees I would make it. But here I am, with just 2 years until graduation – with a wonderful career awaiting me.

Thank you again for this award. It has not only helped me financially (which has been instrumental in me being able to make ends meet) but has also been a huge confidence boost.

All the best

Ngā mihi nui

Kate Connolly