

Sensory

## From Aix-en-Provence to the UK market: a career in sensory and consumer research - a conversation with Estelle Berlingerie

*Estelle completed a Master's in Neuroscience at Université Claude Bernard, then joined SAM, a sensory and consumer research company, where she is now a Research Manager based in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. After several years on the French team, she transitioned to supporting the UK team and works internationally while remaining France-based. We talked to her about life at a sensory research company, the unexpected importance of client relationship management, work-life balance in industry, salary expectations after a neuroscience master's, and why no two days (or projects) are ever quite the same.*

*Other SNA Alumni: <https://masterneuro.univ-lyon1.fr/paths/m2sna-main/m2-sna-alumni/>*

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**INTERVIEWER:** The reason I wanted to talk to you is because you're working with SAM, which is a sensory and consumer research company, and that's one of the career paths that students want to know more about. Could you tell me a little bit about what you do in your role, and maybe how your time is divided?

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yeah, so currently I'm a research manager at SAM. I have a slightly different role now due to some reorganization within the company. Before, I was working for the French team, and now I'm working for the UK team — but still from France. I'm based in Aix-en-Provence, in the south of France.

**INTERVIEWER:** When did you make the switch from the French team to the UK team?

**PROFESSIONAL:** It was last year — about one year ago, actually today.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you're working internationally now?

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yes, I'm mainly working for the UK, but sometimes there are cross-team projects — for example, projects that involve the French team and the UK or German team. So it can be all over the world, really. And we also work globally with our clients, so they can come from anywhere.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Could you walk us through a typical day in your role?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yeah, so it really depends, I think every day is different. But the main thing is working on projects. I'm a project manager, so it's really about project management. First, you receive a test request from a client, because we're a service company. So we receive the brief, then we put together a proposal and share it with the client either by email or in a meeting, so they can ask any questions they have. If they say yes to the proposal, we then run the test. The

facility we use depends on the project. For example, if the request comes from the UK, we might still run the project in France if the facility there is better suited. We create all the documents to run the project, and then the fieldwork team runs it on the ground. After that, we have the data, and the data analysis team usually handles that part. Then we do a debrief with the client.

So I think the main focus of my role right now is client relationship management. I work closely with clients on understanding what they want from the test, what they want to learn from their project, and then debriefing them once it's done.

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**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, very interesting. It sounds like it's a good mix of soft skills and technical skills, but for your role specifically, the soft skills around client work seem really important. ***Could you tell me more about any skills you didn't expect to need coming into sensory analysis, but found were really important*** — technical or soft, either one?

**PROFESSIONAL:** I think the unexpected one is client relationship management. It's something you don't really discover during your studies or during a master's program. It's a very client-facing role, and you're not really prepared for that. In terms of soft skills more broadly, being organized and being honest are really important in this role.

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**INTERVIEWER:** Organization definitely comes up a lot when talking about project management. ***As far as work-life balance goes, are you happy with how much time you're dedicating to work versus your personal life?*** That's something students have been concerned about, especially comparing academia to industry.

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yes, I'm definitely happy with the work-life balance at SAM. Even when I was on the French team, I had a lot of freedom over my working hours. I organize myself, and I have flexibility in how, when, and where I work. So I'm really happy with it. I think SAM is a great company for that, though I imagine it can also depend on your manager. But overall, I think SAM does really well on this front.

**INTERVIEWER:** And did you always want to go into industry, or into sensory analysis specifically? You did the same neuroscience master's. When you started in your M1 year, did you already know you wanted industry over academia, or did that shift during the program?

**PROFESSIONAL:** No, once I was in the master's program, I definitely wanted to go into industry, just to have something more hands-on and technical, more on the ground. So I wanted that from the beginning, and I'm really happy I went that way. Like I said, every day is different and there's always so much going on, so you're never bored.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What was the most useful part of the master's degree for what you're doing now?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** That's a good question. The master's is mainly focused on neuroscience, and honestly, I don't use everything I learned. But I think it's useful to understand how consumers perceive a product, and what can influence that perception from a neuroscience perspective. That really helps when building methodology and designing test protocols. That's mainly where it's been useful. A lot of the master's was quite theoretical, so it's mostly been helpful in that methodological sense.

**INTERVIEWER:** So it sounds like the methodology is practically useful, but the neuroscience curriculum itself is more helpful for context rather than day-to-day work.

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yeah, it helps with protocols. You don't use it every day, to be honest. Though maybe there are things I'm applying without even being conscious of it.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Looking back at the master's program, is there anything you wish you'd done differently, or an opportunity you felt like you missed?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** I think when I was in the program, it was mainly focused on neuroscience. I think it could have benefited from having more professionals come in and teach courses on project management and the company side of things, because most of the courses and lessons were taught by researchers. Having more industry professionals come in would have helped us better understand how things actually work in a company. And also maybe some courses on how to do interviews and how to negotiate salary, more practical things like that. It was a bit too theoretical overall. But I think a lot of those things you can only really learn on the ground anyway.

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**INTERVIEWER:** That's really good feedback. I think a lot of students who want to go into industry feel the same way. I also wanted to ask — and you don't have to share if you're not comfortable — but *are you happy with your salary, and what are the compensation expectations in this field?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** To be honest, it could be better. Specifically because we're a services company, salaries tend to be lower than in industry on the brand side. But it really depends. After a master's like this one, you might start somewhere between 25k and 40k a year, with taxes included.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, thank you for your transparency.

**PROFESSIONAL:** I think most people start around 30 to 35k a year.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, that's good to know. I wish someone had told me that earlier too. Would you have made a different choice if you'd known more about the salary expectations going in?

**PROFESSIONAL:** No, I wouldn't have changed my path. But I think knowing that information is really useful when you're interviewing and looking for your first job, just so you know what to expect and what to ask for. I wouldn't change it though. I love what I do, because I love doing lots of different things and staying busy, but not overwhelmingly so. The workload really varies from week to week. One week can be lighter, and the next can be very busy. It really depends.

**INTERVIEWER:** It sounds like you really enjoy that variability and the dynamic nature of the work.

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yeah, definitely.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What would you say are your favorite and least favorite things about working in sensory analysis?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** My favorite thing is the client-facing side of the role. It's something I wasn't expecting to take up so much of my day — there are a lot of client meetings — but it's something I really enjoy. And also, every test is different. That's what I like about being at a services company like SAM: you have different clients, different projects, different tests. You always have to think carefully about each project's details, and you're always learning something new. I genuinely enjoy what I'm doing.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's great. And what about the least favorite parts?

**PROFESSIONAL:** I think there are some tasks in the day I don't really enjoy, but they usually only take five minutes or so. With so many different things going on, it's just a small part of everything else.

**INTERVIEWER:** No pressure to think of something specific — and honestly, the fact that nothing big comes to mind is a great sign that you really like your job.

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yeah, I do.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What would you recommend to a current master's student in terms of internships or electives?* And especially for students who aren't on the standard sensory track — for example, someone doing the computational or clinical track in M2 — is there potential for them to switch into sensory analysis if they change their mind?

**PROFESSIONAL:** You can definitely switch. Most of what I do today, I learned by doing it. School gave me a strong theoretical foundation, but a lot of what I actually do day-to-day I

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learned during my internship. When you're doing an internship, you learn so much on the ground. So yes, you can absolutely learn as you go and switch tracks whenever you want.

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, thank you — it's been so lovely talking to you.

# Scientific Communication

## From the lab to the newsroom: a career in science communication - a conversation with Nathalie Isorce

*Nathalie completed her PhD in Lyon, then moved to Lausanne for a postdoc in biology. Midway through, she began carving out a parallel path — organizing events through a postdoc association, running science mediation workshops for children, and contributing to Figure 1.A., a scientific art exhibition. A candid conversation with her supervisor opened the door to a 50/50 split between research and science communication at the University of Lausanne's Faculty of Biology and Medicine, where she now works full-time. We talked to her about the difference between science communication and mediation, what it means to be a "Swiss Army knife" in this field, how to break in with or without a PhD, and why the soft skills you build during a master's degree matter more than you might think.*

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**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you for meeting with me. I wanted to start with a very general question about how you transitioned from research into a more science communication-oriented role. ***Where did you start with your research experience, and how did you get to where you are now?***

**PROFESSIONAL:** I did a PhD — it was in Lyon. At the end of my PhD, which took four years, I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay in research and academia. It was a big question. But in the end, I did a postdoc. When I realized that I might quit research, I thought, "Oh no, not now." So I stayed in research for five more years. I did a postdoc in Lausanne, where I'm still working now.

But after a few years, maybe halfway through the postdoc, around two and a half years in, I realized I didn't want to stay in research. I really love science, and I also love research, but it becomes very niche when you study one specific thing for many, many years. I realized I wanted to explore more different fields of science.

I started getting involved, because in Lausanne I had the opportunity to join many associations. That's where I started organizing events. It was a postdoc association, and we organized events around career exploration, exactly like what you're doing now. We were inviting speakers and organizing events.

Then I joined another association connected to the postdoc association called Figure 1.A. — it's a scientific art exhibition — and I was still involved in event organizing. So I was starting to develop skills in that area.

I also had the opportunity to get involved in what's called *médiation scientifique* in French — scientific mediation. For me, mediation and science communication are actually quite different things, and I think we confuse them a lot.

**INTERVIEWER:** What is the difference?



**PROFESSIONAL:** Mediation is when you explain science to people who are not in science. Communication, for me, is a much broader field. It's really about the promotion of science. I think nowadays, because science communication has become so popular, we tend to put everything under that label, but they really are different.

So I started getting involved in this association and also did some mediation. I was running a workshop for children explaining how a microscope works, connected to the scientific art exhibition. I was also involved with something at the University of Lausanne called *L'éprouvette* — it's a public laboratory open to the general public, including high school students. I ran a workshop there on genetics, explaining how taste works, the genetics and the phenotypes, and how the two relate. It was a really great workshop.

Then COVID happened, so everything stopped. Events were completely shut down, as you may remember.

What I really wanted to do was mediation: explaining science to children. I truly loved it. But then another opportunity came up. I spoke with my boss, who I was still working with during my postdoc, and explained to him that I didn't want to stay in research and what I enjoyed doing. He said he would check with his network and see if anything came up. He was the vice dean of the faculty at the time, and there was a communication team for the Faculty of Biology and Medicine that was looking for someone to organize events and help with writing science popularization articles.

He offered me a deal: 50% of my time would remain on the postdoc, and the other 50% would go toward the communication role. I was really lucky, because you don't usually find opportunities like that. But the key is to stay open, to talk to people, and to network. In my case it was easy because it was my boss, but if I hadn't told him I wanted to leave research, he might never have thought of me for that role.

So one piece of advice I'd give is: don't be shy about speaking up, even to your boss. You might feel a bit ashamed to have invested so much time in research and then want to leave. But honesty can really open doors.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's great advice. And it's not always easy to do.

**PROFESSIONAL:** No, it can be hard. What also helped me was that the university has a career center where you can consult experts for free. They help you find your career path, whether you're a student or further along. It was really valuable to have that support — almost like coaching — and it helped me work up the courage to speak with my boss.

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**INTERVIEWER:** That's a great path into scientific communication. ***Do you know of people who have entered scientific communication with a master's degree, or is a PhD really a necessary requirement?***

**PROFESSIONAL:** No, no, not at all. Master's programs in science communication exist now. I know there are a few in France, possibly in Grenoble or Strasbourg. You can also find science communication integrated as part of a broader science master's curriculum. And of course, you could do a master's in neuroscience and complement it with other training.

Personally, I was lucky. But if you get involved in other activities alongside your studies, you develop soft skills beyond the technical ones from your degree. You could also consider journalism. If you combine a science background with journalism training, you can apply for jobs that require both. It doesn't have to be journalism specifically; a master's in communication paired with a science background would also make you a strong candidate for science communication roles.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What soft skills do you think are especially important for science communication?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Speaking skills, for one. But it really depends on what you do. In my role, I do many different things at the same time. You know the Swiss Army knife? That's the best image I can think of. For my job, you have to be like a Swiss Army knife, and it's funny to say that, being in Switzerland, but the idea applies anywhere.

I organize events, write articles, interview scientists about new research, and manage the faculty's social media: Instagram, LinkedIn. On the same day, I might be doing very administrative tasks like booking a room or ordering flowers for an event. Then an hour later I'm writing an article about how plants communicate with each other. So yes, we are all Swiss Army knives on the team.

Within my team, four colleagues come from journalism backgrounds: two journalists, one scientific journalist, and another, like me, came from science and then trained in journalism. I came purely from science and then did some short courses in writing and social media. So the team is roughly half science background, half journalism background, which is quite complementary.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What kinds of organizations hire for scientific communication roles, and what are the salary expectations?* That's something the students in the master's program were very curious about.

**PROFESSIONAL:** In which country?

**INTERVIEWER:** In France specifically, if you know, though Switzerland is also helpful.

**PROFESSIONAL:** For Switzerland, I can speak from my own experience. Since I work at a university, it's more like the public sector — *fonction publique* — rather than a private company.

In Switzerland, salaries in the public sector follow a grade system based on your level of education and experience. So the higher your degree, generally the higher the starting salary. I'm honestly not sure what someone with only a master's would earn, but the steps are relatively transparent.

In France, I can't give you exact figures, but you can look up job titles to get an idea. My position is called *assistant en communication*, and at that level the pay isn't very high. My boss is a *responsable de communication* or *chargé de communication*, which comes with more responsibility and therefore higher pay.

What I can say is that my own salary in Switzerland is around 5,000 Swiss francs net per month, but keep in mind that Switzerland pays roughly twice what France does for comparable roles. So in France, you might expect 1,450 to 1,950 euros net per month. My salary also reflects having a PhD and about ten years of seniority at the institution, so those factors matter too.

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**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you for sharing that. ***Would you say it's mostly labs and research organizations that hire for science communication, or are there other types of employers?***

**PROFESSIONAL:** Museums are a great example. Anywhere that communicates science to the public, such as science museums, universities, and research centers. Many universities now have a dedicated center bridging science and society. In Lyon, for example, there's a center called Pop Sciences. Do you know it?

**INTERVIEWER:** I don't.

**PROFESSIONAL:** You should look it up! They also have a newsletter. If you or your classmates are looking for people to interview in this field, they would be great contacts. It would be interesting to ask how they set up the center and what their backgrounds are. Generally, you can enter science communication either from a science background and then train in communication, or the other way around. Both paths are valid.

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**INTERVIEWER:** You come from a biology background, and there's a lot of biology in neuroscience. ***Where do you see neuroscience specifically playing a role in science communication?***

**PROFESSIONAL:** For me, every field of biology and the life sciences is important to communicate, and people are genuinely interested. But neuroscience tends to work especially well because people are fascinated by how the brain works. There's a lot of potential there. Maybe I'm a bit biased because I love neuroscience, but on the more biological side, it's different from psychology, though there are some overlaps in cognitive neuroscience. People also love

learning how the body works more generally. They may be slightly less drawn to topics like plant biology, but it really depends on how you present it.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *If you were to recommend a type of internship or early career experience to someone in their first or second year of a master's in a biological science, what would you suggest for breaking into science communication?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Honestly, I'm not sure how much access a neuroscience master's student has to internships in communication specifically. I don't know if those opportunities exist formally within your program. But outside of your program: if you have time, get involved in associations and do other activities to develop soft skills.

Career experts always say that, I know, but it's true. All the soft skills you build around your scientific training are valuable. That said, you can also develop them through your studies themselves. Writing and running experiments, these build organization skills, prioritization, and attention to detail. If you manage to complete a master's degree, you have organization skills. If you do a lab internship, you're learning to prioritize multiple tasks. You may not always realize it, but those are exactly the skills employers look for.

And beyond your program, getting involved in an association can help you develop new soft skills that your degree might not cover as directly. If there's a science museum you're really drawn to, just contact them. Tell them you'd love to learn more about how they work, and ask if you could shadow them for a day. Don't be shy about reaching out to people. Be bold and be honest.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's really insightful. Thank you so much for talking with me.

**PROFESSIONAL:** You're welcome.

Computational

## **From Neuroscience Master to Bioinformatics Engineer - A conversation with Grégory Acacia**

*Grégory did his M1 and M2 (FCN track) in the Master of Neuroscience at Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, before making the unconventional decision to join INSA Lyon's engineering school as a lateral entry student. He is now finishing his 5th year at INSA, doing his final internship at the CRCL (Centre de Recherche en Cancérologie de Lyon) in computational biology. We talked to him about his path, his decision not to do a PhD (for now), and what he'd say to students who are questioning what comes next.*

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Can you walk us through your path from the neuroscience master to where you are now?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** I did my bachelor's in physiology at Lyon 1 - there was no neuroscience bachelor at the time, that came later. Then I started the Master of Neuroscience because I wanted to do a PhD. I was really interested in computational neuroscience, statistics, and brain oscillations.

I did my M1 internship at the CRNL with the CPHY team, with Mathilde Bonnefond, working on brain oscillations. That was two months and I learned a lot. Then I went into the M2 FCN track and did a second, six-month internship at the same lab, this time focused more on data analysis.

During the M2, I started questioning whether a PhD was really what I wanted. I ended up applying to INSA Lyon, in the biosciences department, which has a path combining informatics, modeling, and biology. I was admitted into the 4th year, which is unusual since they normally recruit at 3rd year, but I made a case for myself. I'm now in my 5th year, doing my final internship at the CRCL working on neuroblastoma. It's bioinformatics, specifically transcriptome analysis on pediatric cancer of the peripheral nervous system.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *So you stayed connected to neuroscience throughout?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yes, that was important to me. During my 4th year internship, I worked on headache mechanisms in the brain, modeling how headaches are triggered as an adverse effect of treatments. And my current internship is peripheral neuroscience. My neuroscience background has been genuinely useful in both: it helped me do the literature reviews, understand the mechanisms, and make sense of the biology behind the data.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *You were planning a PhD during your master's. What changed?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** It was a difficult choice. I had always loved maths and statistics and throughout my bachelor's and master's I took every optional course related to those fields. And at some point during M2, I just felt inside me that the PhD was not for now. I want to be clear: I'm not closing the door on a PhD. I know people who do one after working for a while, and it's completely possible. But I didn't feel sure enough, and I think if you have a big doubt, you shouldn't do a PhD. You need to really want it.

When I found the INSA program and looked at the curriculum, I saw myself in it. I discussed it with Marion Richard and she told me: *if you want to do this, it's not for the diploma, it's to learn specific things*. That confirmed it for me. And honestly? It was the best decision of my life. I don't regret it at all.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Could you not have gone straight into a data-related job after finishing the master, without going back to school?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** It's possible, but it's not easy. After a research master's, you can find temporary positions, for example one-year data analysis contracts, but finding a stable, permanent job right away is very difficult. In Lyon especially, you'd really need to be open to moving, or even going abroad.

But beyond the practical side, that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to be autonomous, to bring something genuinely interesting to research, not just run the same manipulations over and over. I wanted to do real data analysis and have the standing to make decisions. An engineering diploma gives you that in a way a research master's alone doesn't, at least in the eyes of most employers.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *How did you actually get into INSA's 4th year? That sounds nearly impossible as there is only one spot per cohort.*

**PROFESSIONAL:** I pushed my application very far. Beyond the CV and cover letter, I got three recommendation letters. Additionally, I created a document that mapped every 3rd-year INSA course to equivalent work I had done during my bachelor's and master's: I connected their coursework to my internship reports, my lab practicals, everything.

Where I had genuine gaps, I was honest about it. I said: *I haven't covered this, but here are the resources I have access to, here are courses I've already started on my own, and here is what I plan to do over the summer to catch up*. I think that combination - showing I had the foundations and a real plan for the gaps - is what made the difference.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What do you think about the new Computational Neuroscience track? Can students from that track go into industry directly?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Honestly, I think it'll be difficult to get a permanent industry position directly after, just like it would be with the FCN track. Companies tend to prefer candidates with engineering diplomas, it's just how the system works in France, unfortunately. For industry, the computational track is probably more of a step toward a PhD or toward complementary training.

That said - and this is important - the statistics and data teaching in FCN and computational neuroscience is genuinely solid. The problem is that employers who see "Master of Neuroscience" on your CV won't necessarily know that. You have to put it front and center. Make sure your CV and cover letter clearly show what you've done in data, statistics, and programming. Don't assume people will figure it out.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What skills should students prioritize if they want to go into computational or data-heavy roles?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Python first. It's the standard everywhere: in research, in industry, everywhere. And even if you're not going computational, you need to know at least one programming language. Every researcher I know uses either Python or R. That's non-negotiable today.

After that: English. The neuroscience master being fully taught in English is a real asset. I improved enormously during those two years, and it matters for any scientific career. And then a bit of machine learning and AI doesn't hurt if you want to go further.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Does having a PhD make you overqualified for industry jobs?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** No, not at all. A lot of engineers do PhDs, and some companies (Sanofi is an example) actively want them. After about five years of work experience, you tend to reach a similar level of recognition to a PhD, but it depends on the role.

Where a PhD is strictly required is for permanent positions in public research: if you want to be a full research engineer (*ingénieur de recherche*) at a public lab, or sit the competitive exams (*concours*) to become a lecturer-researcher or CNRS researcher, you need a PhD. For those paths, there is no workaround. For private industry, it really depends on the company and the position.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What positions are available in public research without a PhD?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** With a research master's, you can reach the level of *ingénieur d'études* (IE): a study engineer. The step above that, *ingénieur de recherche* (IR), requires a PhD or an engineering diploma.

There's also a practical option that people don't always know about: sometimes a team loves you after your internship, and you love them, but the PhD funding isn't there yet. In that case, they can sometimes hire you as a study engineer for a year while funding becomes available. It's a way to stay embedded in the field while you wait. I've seen it happen.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What kind of salaries can students expect as PhD students, engineers, or in research?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** PhD student salaries in France are public and it's around €25,000 gross per year, which works out to roughly €1,800/month net. You can supplement this by teaching, which is common: my sister is doing a PhD in ecology and with teaching added she gets to around €2,000/month.

After engineering school, first jobs in France typically range between €32,000 and €41,000 gross per year - INSA publishes these statistics and they're easy to find.

One honest note: France pays public-sector researchers significantly less than most other countries. If salary matters to you, going abroad makes a real difference. But all public salaries in France are publicly available online - don't be embarrassed to look them up, or to ask the people you're doing your internship with. In the public field, it's not a sensitive question.

# Academic Research

## **From Lyon to Berkeley: a research career in neuroscience - a conversation with Lucia Rodriguez**

*Lucia did her Master of Neuroscience at Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, then went on to do a PhD in the neuroscience program at UC Berkeley, in Dan Feldman's lab, where she worked on somatosensory processing in mice. She is currently finishing a postdoc in the same lab. We talked to her about the US PhD system, choosing a lab, switching projects, work-life balance, and what comes after.*

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Can you tell us about what you're working on right now?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** I'm doing a postdoc in Dan Feldman's lab at UC Berkeley, where I also did my PhD. We work on somatosensory processing in mice, mostly whisker-related responses. Right now I'm finishing up a project that was a big part of my thesis, which was about looking at the dynamics of sensory processing after whisker deprivation, and seeing which mechanisms (homeostatic or Hebbian) occur at which point over a roughly 10-day span. I was looking at different features in S1, the somatosensory cortex: firing rates, tuning of neurons, and also population-level representations using decoders.

I'm writing the paper for that, and I'm also working on a separate postdoc project. It's a relatively short postdoc because my main goal is to close that chapter and get the paper out.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *You did the same master's we're doing. How did you choose your M2 track?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** After my M1 internship, which was in a lab working with humans and EEGs, I realized quite clearly that I didn't want to go in that direction. I wasn't interested in higher-level methods like EEG or fMRI. I was more drawn to circuits and systems, more microscopic questions. So I chose the track that was more fundamental and research-focused, rather than the industry-oriented one.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *How did you end up doing your PhD in the US rather than staying in France?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Honestly, it was more personal circumstances than a strategic decision. At the time, my partner was finishing her PhD in Argentina, and after my second year of master's I went there and did a one-year internship in the same lab as her. Then we were both looking for next steps, and we looked at options in both Europe and the US together. We ended up picking Berkeley because it was the best fit for both of us at the same time.

I want to be clear: it wasn't that I thought French research was bad. Actually, my M2 supervisor, Paul Salant, asked me if I wanted to stay and do my PhD with him. I could have. It just didn't work out that way.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *But do you think there are advantages to having done your PhD in the US?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yes, honestly. The US invests a huge amount of money in science, and you see it in the equipment, the technologies, the kind of experiments you can do. Right now, with the current administration cutting science funding, it's going through a hard time, but it's still one of the countries that puts the most into research. That's an advantage I won't pretend isn't real.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *How does the PhD system in the US actually work? It seems very different from France.*

**PROFESSIONAL:** It is different. You don't apply directly to a lab. You apply to a university program, go through interviews, and get accepted into the program itself. Once you're in, your first year is a rotation year: you do short internships (usually three) in different labs, to see if you like the science, get along with the PI, and get a feel for the lab environment. Then you pick the lab you want to do your PhD in.

After that it's four to five years, sometimes more if you're an international student on a visa. There's a qualification exam in the second year. And it's fully paid: the university covers your tuition and gives you a stipend. I was not going to pay tuition fees here, they're way too expensive.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *How did you choose your lab and your PhD topic specifically?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** I did my rotations in labs where I already knew I liked the science. From there, I weighed three things: was the science actually as interesting as I thought? Did I get along with the PI, could I see myself working with that person for five years? And what was the environment like in the lab, did people get along?

Dan Feldman was off-hands but available. I could just walk into his office and ask about things. He also encouraged me to build my own project from the literature, to go and find open questions myself. That really suited me. Some of the other labs I rotated in had a harsher mentoring style, or the people didn't get along well, and I wasn't going to spend five years in that kind of environment.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *You mentioned you had to switch projects mid-PhD. Can you talk about that?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yes. My first project was one I had built completely myself, and I was genuinely passionate about the question. But it involved a complicated behavioral task that mice had to learn, and nobody in the lab had done it before, so I had very little mentorship on that specific part. I was teaching myself how to do neuropixels recordings at the same time, setting up all the rigs myself. It was really hard to get the mice trained, and everything had to be perfect to get good recordings. After a while, it became clear that I wasn't going to have enough data to write a thesis.

Having to let go of that project was hard. It felt like a heartbreak, honestly, because I had built it and I cared about it. But I was also an international student on a visa, and you have a time limit, six years in my case. So around my third year I had to switch to a different project that could give me results faster. The new project was good, but I was less passionate about the question initially.

**INTERVIEWER:** *And that's the project you're now finishing writing up?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yes, exactly. And the postdoc project is actually different again: the lab has been moving toward autism models, working with mice that have gene knockouts related to autism. We look at what happens at the physiological level in somatosensory cortex in those brains, and see whether it makes sense given what we know about sensory sensitivities in autistic people. That's been genuinely interesting.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *One of the biggest fears students have about a PhD is burnout, and feeling trapped in something very niche. Did you experience that?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** You do get moments of that, yes. But here's what I'd say: even if you do a PhD, you are not locked into research for the rest of your life. I have friends who became teachers after their PhD, friends who work on the ethics and policy side of science, friends who moved into industry. A PhD opens doors, it doesn't close them. If you're certain you don't want academia or research, then maybe it's not the right path, but if you're just unsure or scared, that's different.

The six-month M2 internship you'll have next year will help a lot with this. Don't rush into the first offer you get: take your time, look at different options, see what fits, and that will give you a much clearer sense of whether you want to continue toward a PhD or not.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What comes after a PhD if you want to stay in academic research? How do you become a PI in the US?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** You do a postdoc first, which in neuroscience typically lasts around six years. During that time you can apply for fellowships and grants to fund your own research. Then you apply to open assistant professor positions at universities, go through interviews (first a Zoom call, then an in-person visit where you present your work and your vision for a future lab), and if you get hired, that's your lab. You're your own boss.

It's different from France, where you pass competitive exams (concours) to become a researcher or a director, and where the structure is more hierarchical, with big labs that have multiple PIs working under a broader theme. Here in the US, you have your lab, your postdocs and students, and that's it. There's no higher than that, unless you also become a department director, but you're still running your lab.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What about going into industry? Is it easy to find jobs there, especially in the US?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Even here in the Bay Area, which is one of the biggest biotech hubs in the world (right next to Silicon Valley), the competition is fierce. There are a lot of jobs, but there are even more people with the same skills competing for them. It's not easy.

That said, there are more options than people often realize: there's industry research, but there's also consulting (companies pay scientists for their expertise and judgment on a project), scientific writing and grant writing for labs or biotech companies, teaching, science communication. Europe is also growing quickly in biotech and AI, so that's worth keeping an eye on.

I'm personally keeping all those doors open. Research is my main thing, but I'm having conversations about consulting and other directions, because I don't know yet what my next position will be.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Let's talk about money. What can students expect to earn at different stages?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Postdoc salary at Berkeley is around \$70,000 per year, which works out to roughly \$4,000 a month. In the Bay Area, that's honestly not a lot. The cost of living here is so high that I'm technically below the poverty line for this region, which sounds absurd but is just the reality of living next to Silicon Valley. Someone at the same level in industry would earn about three times that amount.

That said, if you become a PI in the US academia, salaries can get quite good with seniority, we're talking around \$200,000 per year. So it's not uniformly low.

In France, the situation is different. Public sector salaries are lower, and even at the PI level, I remember my professors talking about earning not much more than €2,000 a month, which, for the level of responsibility they have (running a lab, teaching, writing grants) is not a lot. France doesn't have the GDP the US has, so the comparison isn't really fair, but the gap is real. And industry will always pay more than academia, in both countries.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *What does a typical day in the lab look like for you?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** I usually start between 9 and 10, depending on what I was doing the day before. My days fall into two types: experiment days, where I'm doing recordings or histology, and analysis days, where I'm sitting at the computer, writing code, plotting data, trying to see things in different ways.

I usually finish around 5 or 6. Experiment days can go later if something goes wrong and takes more time. Work-life balance is genuinely important to me: when I leave the lab, I try not to work at home unless there's a real deadline coming up.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Do you go to a lot of conferences?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** At least one per year. Our PI actively encourages it. I've been to SFN (Society for Neuroscience) multiple times, to the Barrels conference (which is specifically about somatosensory cortex), and to others. There's also COSYNE for computational neuroscience, which is a great one but hard to get into.

Beyond conferences, there are courses worth looking into: Cold Spring Harbor has good ones, and Neuromatch is a great option because it's online, so it's accessible from anywhere. I did the Neuropixels course too. These are good ways to learn techniques, meet people, and see what other labs are doing.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *Looking back, what skills do you wish you had developed earlier, or what would you tell students to focus on?*

**PROFESSIONAL:** Coding used to be the obvious answer, and it's still important, but AI tools have changed things a bit. You can now get Claude or ChatGPT to write code for you, but I still think it matters to actually understand what the code is doing, so you can modify it, catch errors, and trust your results. You need to be the one in control of your analysis.

Beyond that: scientific communication. Being able to explain your work clearly, in a way that people actually understand, is something that matters a lot whatever career path you go into, and it's often underestimated. Organization also, especially writing things down. I see it with

students I mentor: they don't write things down, they forget, and then they don't know what they did or why. Just write things down.

And then interpretation: understanding what your data is actually saying, not just how to produce a graph. I think the French educational system does this quite well, actually. The way we're taught to think analytically and really dig into questions, that's a strength that students coming out of the French system tend to have.



# Clinical & Healthcare Research

## From a pharmacology background through biotech to academia - an international profile

*Dragana Stojic has a degree in pharmacology and medical biochemistry from the University of Belgrade and a Master's degree in neurogenetics from Saint Petersburg University and is currently pursuing a PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience at the Human Neuroscience Group of the Institute for Medical Research in Serbia. We discussed discovering neuroscience through an unconventional path, the differences between academia and industry, studying abroad, and the skills students should develop before entering the field.*

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**INTERVIEWER:** What first triggered your interest in neuroscience, and how did your initial expectations compare to the reality of your first job after your master's degree?

**PROFESSIONAL:** To be honest, I did not enter neuroscience through a very standard path. My master's degree was actually in biology, specifically neurogenetics, and my original background was in pharmacology and medical biochemistry. During my master's studies, we had the opportunity to choose courses from different departments, and that is how I discovered cognitive neuroscience. I became very interested in it and progressively chose more and more courses related to that field.

At first, I was not planning to pursue a career in neuroscience because I did not even really know that this kind of work existed. I originally imagined myself following a much more traditional biomedical path. In that sense, discovering cognitive neuroscience happened almost by accident, but once I discovered it, I became genuinely passionate about it.

Regarding my first job after my studies, it was not the same neuroscience I am doing now at all. I worked as a clinical data analyst in a biotech startup where we analyzed flow cytometry and immunological clinical trial data. Even though it was outside cognitive neuroscience, it was still an interesting experience, and I also enjoy immunology. Today, however, I am very happy to finally be working in cognitive neuroscience research.

**INTERVIEWER:** You mentioned that the biotech position was not directly related to neuroscience. Was it more connected to your pharmacy background?

**PROFESSIONAL:** Yes, definitely. The biotech position was much more closely related to my pharmaceutical and clinical background because we were analyzing patient data from clinical trials.

**INTERVIEWER:** What motivated you to pursue neurogenetics after your pharmaceutical studies?

**PROFESSIONAL:** At the time, I felt that many answers to diseases and biological problems could be found at the genetic level. I thought that if you understood the DNA and genes, you

could understand everything else. However, during my studies I realized that biology is much more complex than that. Genetics is fascinating, but I eventually found myself more interested in physiology and understanding processes at the systems level rather than only at the molecular or genetic level.

**INTERVIEWER:** What made you return to academia and pursue cognitive neuroscience instead of remaining in industry?

**PROFESSIONAL:** The answer is actually very simple: I wanted to do cognitive neuroscience. Pursuing a PhD was not necessarily an easy decision, but I knew that I wanted to work in this field. I searched for institutes and laboratories in my country that were conducting neuroscience research, and I eventually found the Human Neuroscience Group at the Institute for Medical Research.

Neuroscience research is not extremely widespread in Serbia, so finding a dedicated place for cognitive neuroscience research was very important to me.

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**INTERVIEWER:** Beyond theoretical knowledge, what technical tools and practical skills do you use daily in neuroscience research?

**PROFESSIONAL:** MATLAB is definitely one of the main tools I use, although I still feel that I need to improve my skills with it. In my previous biotech job, I mainly used R for data analysis. Statistical and data analysis skills are essential in neuroscience.

There are also many practical skills that are important depending on the field you work in. For example, in cognitive neuroscience, you need to know how to set up EEG recordings, use brain stimulation devices, and understand cognitive testing procedures. Since my background does not include neuropsychology, learning how cognitive tests work and how they are used to assess different functions was initially challenging for me.

Scientific writing is also extremely important. Writing papers, project proposals, and scientific reports is a major part of research work. Beyond technical competencies, you also need strong analytical and organizational skills.

**INTERVIEWER:** Would you say that soft skills are also important in your daily work?

**PROFESSIONAL:** Absolutely. Soft skills are important in every professional environment, and research is no exception. Communication is especially important because our laboratory collaborates with both national and international teams. We also work closely with other research groups inside the Institute for Medical Research.

Being able to communicate clearly, collaborate effectively, and establish professional relationships is essential, particularly when working on international projects.

**INTERVIEWER:** What is one difficulty in research that students are usually not warned about?

**PROFESSIONAL:** One important challenge is how demanding experimental design can be. There are many small details that can strongly affect data quality, and setting up experiments properly often requires a great deal of precision and patience.

Good-quality data are the foundation of research, so even small mistakes in the experimental setup can create major issues later during analysis. I think many students underestimate how technically demanding and meticulous experimental work can become.

**INTERVIEWER:** Having experienced both industry and academia, how would you compare them in terms of stress, freedom, and job satisfaction?

**PROFESSIONAL:** They are very different environments, and both have advantages. In the biotech startup where I worked, teamwork was extremely important, and we had a very supportive team environment. However, there was much less intellectual and research freedom. The objective was mainly to provide reliable analyses rather than develop and discover original scientific ideas.

In academia, creativity and problem-solving are central for the work. Your role is not only to analyze data but also to ask questions, design projects, and propose solutions. That intellectual freedom is probably the greatest advantage of academia for me and why I left the industry.

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**INTERVIEWER:** You completed your studies abroad. What motivated you to leave your country and study in another country?

**PROFESSIONAL:** Honestly, my primary motivation was more personal than academic. I wanted to experience living in another country, studying in a different educational system, and using and learning another language.

Of course, there were also academic motivations, like discovering different research environments and approaches to science and research, but my desire to broaden my horizons personally was very important.

**INTERVIEWER:** Would you recommend studying abroad to current students?

**PROFESSIONAL:** Absolutely. I think studying abroad expands your horizons a lot. It allows you to discover different scientific cultures, different educational systems, and different ways of thinking.

I would definitely recommend it, but also I think students should carefully research the institutions they apply to, the kind of research conducted there, and the areas of specialization offered by the program. To check if it truly aligns with what they want to do.

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**INTERVIEWER:** What advice would you give students who are hesitating between pursuing a PhD and going directly into industry after their master's degree?

**PROFESSIONAL:** I think that if someone is wondering whether they want to do a PhD, they should start by working in industry first. After many years of studying, gaining professional experience outside academia can help people better understand what they really want and what really interests them.

That does not mean abandoning academia forever. It is entirely possible to return later and pursue a PhD after spending time in industry. The same way I did it.

Of course, for students who already know with certainty that they want a research career, going directly into a PhD also makes complete sense. But for those who are uncertain, taking time to explore industry first can be valuable. Even if it's after one year or five years it's always possible to return to academia.

**INTERVIEWER:** If you were hiring a recent neuroscience graduate, what would make a candidate stand out beyond grades?

**PROFESSIONAL:** Practical experience would probably be the most important factor. If a student already has practical skills relevant to the position, that would immediately make their application more interesting.

That is why I strongly encourage students to pursue internships whenever possible. Internships provide practical competencies, and experience that can really help when applying for jobs later on.