KEA programme leads to a sea-change in career plan for one PhD student

With her expertise in applied econometrics, Tina Liu seemed destined for a career in academia upon completing her PhD. Instead, after nine months working as a Knowledge Exchange Associate (KEA) with Drewry Shipping Consultants Ltd, ostensibly to make her knowledge of the sector “less abstract and more practical”, she says, she’s found an alternative career. Now a full-time consultant at the company, she and Drewry both agree that the UCL Advances-run programme gave them time and space to see if each other’s different perspectives were compatible. In this case, the answer was yes.

Challenge
Tina Liu has just returned from a trip to Albania, where she prepared a comprehensive business forecast for a Turkish investor interested in acquiring a stake in container facilities in the port of Durres. Tina works for Drewry Shipping Consultants Ltd, which provides information and advice for organisations involved in maritime activities. It’s a far cry from the lecturing post she expected to have after graduation, and she credits her new career path with a 9-month stint as a Knowledge Exchange Associate (KEA) with Drewry. Tina applied to UCL Advances’ KEA programme as she was finishing her PhD in the Economics of Logistics in UCL’s Centre for Transport. She was familiar with Drewry, having used some of its data in a benchmarking study as part of her degree. The consultancy’s modest size – 40 consultants in London, Singapore and Delhi – belies its world-class reputation, and she wanted commercial experience before deciding what to do next. UCL Advances approached the company on her behalf, assuming a catalysing role by drawing up a formal agreement which set out specific objectives for the assignment and a plan to review Tina’s progress every three months.

Solution
Working in publications, where she prepared an in-depth analysis on the performance of container terminals, and consultancy, where she provided bespoke advice for clients as far afield as Russia and China, Tina describes the arrangement as “very openended”. She says: “It’s like an extended job interview, with no obligations on either side. For me, it was a chance to explore an alternative to academia. I also benefited from training opportunities funded by UCL Advances in areas like finance, where I felt I was lacking.”

Outcome
For Drewry, Tina brought intellectual rigour to the practical knowledge and experience that already existed in the company. Tim Power, Head of Consulting, says: “On meeting Tina, we felt instinctively that she would do well in a consultancy – which not all academics do – and we were able to test our hypothesis, and were proved correct, over a decent length of time. We would not have been able to do this without UCL Advances, and we were delighted when Tina elected to stay with us.”
About UCL

University College London was established in 1826 and is ranked seventh in the world’s top universities. The university is a modern, outward-looking institution, with more than 4,000 academic and research staff committed to engaging with the major issues of our times. It has a global reach, with 34% of its students coming from outside the UK, from almost 140 countries.

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About UCL Advances

The centre for entrepreneurship at UCL, UCL Advances, offers training, networking and business support for staff, students and external entrepreneurs to encourage and enable new enterprises to get going. Unique in the UK Higher Education sector, its primary role is to promote a culture of entrepreneurship on campus and engagement with entrepreneurs and small businesses beyond UCL’s boundaries, and currently delivers over 30 activity programmes.

UCL Advances is affiliated with UCL Enterprise, which provides UCL’s structures for engaging with business for commercial and societal benefit.

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About Knowledge Exchange Associates

The Knowledge Exchange Associate (KEA) programme enables PhD students, either near completion or recently graduated, to act as a conduit for the transfer of knowledge from UCL to a small or medium-sized company that will really benefit from exposure to their specialist knowledge.

Although an employee of UCL, the KEA will work within the company for much of the 9-months-long collaboration. The project will be challenging and central to the needs of the company and its development. Support and training at UCL, London Business School and elsewhere, will be given as required.

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