CASE STUDY

Nina's story

Hear from a young researcher: Nina's story

Meet Nina!

A recent graduate of Psychology, Nina is a passionate advocate for student welfare and youth mental health issues. Nina has a large amount of experience in understanding complex issues faced by individuals and communities through her university studies as well as through her role as a youth researcher in a community-based youth research program.

Why did Nina want to be a co-researcher?

Nina had some experience with research through her undergraduate study but had just started her post-graduate degree when she signed up to be a co-researcher, stating that

> I thought this would be relevant for my future career path and will also build upon skills that I had developed in my prior university studies. I wanted to gain experience, and build networks. I hadn't done any hands-on type of research before, it had all been quite theoretical. This was an opportunity to move beyond that.

What has Nina's experience been like?

Nina has been able to work on several different projects, from evaluation work to facilitating living lab workshops and gaining employment as a research assistant.

For the evaluation project, Nina got to offer suggestions on whether the document was appropriate for a young audience based on her perspective as a youth researcher and as a youth consumer. This was followed by a similar evaluation project where Nina designed some evaluation tools to assess the work of an organisation and also review the effectiveness of their existing evaluation tools as well.

For the living labs project, Nina worked in a group with other young co-researchers and senior researchers. Together, they co-designed and facilitated workshops to collect data. Thinking about the experience, Nina states

> Living labs were a new concept to me but I was glad that I was eased into the projects. It was a staged process and there was a whole aspect of strength in numbers, where if I didn't have the answer - the insights of the rest of the group could help move the project along. But also, I could add to the insights of someone, even if I didn't have the confidence to answer straight off the bat. At every point, we had the support of not just the research team but also the peers in the youth research program, which was really great.

Were there any challenges?

The biggest challenge that Nina had to face was a lack of clear expectations. There were a few times when Nina's expectations of her role did not align with the senior researchers.

> I felt like I got dropped into the deep end with the fact that I was required to make a lot of decisions that I didn't expect were going to be my decisions to make. Their expectations of me were really high, but I hadn't expected it to be that high.

Nina emphasises that she liked having that responsibility but it would have been good to know about it beforehand and have clearer expectations before starting.

> The thing that helped was having the other young researchers in the youth program to talk to and also reaching out to people on the research team and clarifying the expectations.

There was another instance of miscommunication, and unclear expectations:

> I ended up dropping out of that project because the way that it was pitched to us, the time commitment and responsibilities weren't made clear. We had to do tasks like recruit participants, which was something that has always been done for us. We had to also sort out the physical space where we would need to hold the workshop and organise the timing and logistics. All of these tasks meant

that the role required a lot more work than I expected, and I didn't have that time. Having made those expectations clear at the start would have been helpful.

What about any benefits and opportunities?

Nina appreciated the social connections she made, saying

" It was great to be able to meet people like our peer researchers, but also professional researchers, like academics. So, being able to make those professional networks has been really great. Plus, it was a collegial kind of environment to be exposed to research in. I felt very supported, where if I felt something was too much or even in the extreme cases where I just did not have the time to do something, I was supported to take a step back and work through it.

Nina also gained employment as a research assistant through her experience as a youth co-researcher.

" This experience led me to develop new skills which helped me to get employment. I had not designed evaluation tools to the extent that I got to as a co-researcher. I also had not run facilitation workshops related to research before. I knew about co-research theoretically, but it wasn't something I had experienced myself as a young person. So, that was a unique thing.

Another benefit that Nina emphasises is being able to build on her public speaking experience.

" I had mostly been okay with public speaking before, but I hadn't had any experience in the structured type of facilitation, where you establish a space and do the introductory things like welcoming people to the session and setting up an icebreaker and closing the session. Gaining experience and learning about planning and delivering a session, where you are creating a two-way communication process with the participants has been really useful.

What is Nina's advice for other young people?

" My main advice would be to just go for it. Even if you end up biting more than what you can chew, a youth co-research program is an ideal environment to do that because you will have a safety net that you're not necessarily going to have in certain things like employment. So, this is the perfect environment to try new things and to put your hand up for things that you're not even convinced that you're suited for. As long as you have the time to commit, you might surprise yourself and find that you are really good at it. Or, if you do need the extra help, it's not a judgmental environment and there are people that you can reach out to. If things don't work out and you come across some unexpected challenges, people around you will advocate on your behalf if needed or they will teach you the skills to advocate for yourself. So, the first thing is to put your hand

up for everything, because you don't really know what skills you can gain, and this kind of environment comes with a safety net.

What is Nina's advice for senior researchers wanting to engage young co-researchers?

Nina shares two pieces of advice for senior researchers,

" Firstly, be clear. Have as many of the expectations set out beforehand as possible and communicate that in a clear way to young people. This includes logistical and practical things like time commitment or tasks they will be doing. That information should be made available to anyone you want to recruit. Secondly, try to make researchers available for questions, especially when busy periods come up. This is based on what I liked about the people who worked with us - the fact that they made themselves available when things were tricky. There is a lot of value in being supported and not having to work alone, especially when things don't make sense.