Who is your current employer and what do they do?

Universities Scotland (originally the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals)

Universities Scotland is the representative body of Scotland’s 19 higher education institutions. It develops higher education policy and campaigns on higher education issues publicly.

What is your job title and what does the job entail?

Policy Assistant

The role is to primarily provide administrative and secretariat support for meetings and committees composed of senior figures in Scottish higher education across the areas of resources and governance, and research and knowledge exchange. I also undertake some desk-based research, policy and data analysis to provide briefings for more senior officers, draft papers and reports and liaise regularly with a range of key stakeholders including the Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government.

Having only been in post for a few months, I have been very lucky to have been given opportunities to get more involved with policy work in areas of interest to me from the outset. For example, I am working on becoming the organisation’s main contact on HE IT policy, something which draws on my academic background as well as interest. No two weeks are the same, in the last few days I’ve been at a sustainability conference, acting as the Universities Scotland contact at a committee of Scotland’s Researcher Developers, and supporting a residential meeting of University Secretaries and Registrars. I really do get a great ringside seat on what’s happening in higher education.

How did you achieve your current position?

Moving from astronomy to higher education policy often attracts questions! I took the pretty nerve-wracking decision to move away from a science career after I completed my PhD due to the prevalence of short-term contracts and the expectation of ongoing
national/international mobility. Both my partner and I chose to move out of academia post-PhDs in favour of living in the same country, and not prioritising one person’s career over the other. Perhaps most importantly, I had the confidence, thanks to the part-time roles I had undertaken during my PhD, that there were other career areas alongside research that I would find enjoyable and fulfilling too.

Looking to pursue a career in higher education administration/management/policy was a much easier decision. I had done some part-time roles in student support (as an Asst. Warden in halls, and as a teaching assistant) which I really enjoyed during my PhD, and these allowed me to go on and obtain a temporary HTBN project role with the Careers Service after finishing, looking at enhancing part-time work opportunities for PhD students.

Taken together with my research background I could demonstrate a keen enthusiasm for and commitment to a career working to support students and researchers within higher education, which I think was key in successfully obtaining my current role. It’s worth noting too that quite a few members of the policy team at Universities Scotland have academic research backgrounds, covering chemistry, linguistics, bioscience and astronomy between us.

**How do you feel you have used the skills and/or knowledge developed during your research degree in your career to date?**

My research degree allowed me to hone skills that have since proved invaluable, such as researching and writing persuasively for a wide range of audiences, strong analytical skills (a dataset of students is surprisingly similar to a dataset of galaxies!), solid project management, autonomy and confidence in taking on challenging and unfamiliar tasks. I also feel that my science PhD helps give me some credibility when working with senior figures in higher education, as I have direct experience working within the core functions of a university.

**Other qualifications**

MPhys Astrophysics, 2008