PhD Horizons Conference 2018

Panel 1A: Policy and Research

Dr Lyndsey Dodds – Head of Marine Policy, WWF-UK
Dr Catriona Rooke – Senior Researcher, Scottish Government
Dr Justine Geyer – Principal Researcher, Scottish Government
Dr Anne Jepson, Senior Researcher, Scottish Parliament

Q&A

Lyndsey Dodds: Head of Marine Policy, WWF-UK

Lyndsey has a PhD in Marine Science – specialist in research in deep sea corals. She then spent time deciding what to do and went to work in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (Westminster) in a Fellowship working. This involved preparing briefing notes for MPs and Peers, and conducting desk-based research and interviews to assist policy makers. Preparing short briefings is important for people that don't have much time. This experience allowed her to test out policy path rather than academic path. She could see research making a difference to policy making. After her fellowship she joined the WWF as a Policy Officer in 2007 and has worked in different roles during that time and now Head of Marine Policy e.g. fisheries management (big focus now with Brexit), polar regions, Blue Economy, marine governance. There is a big focus on communications and working in partnership with academic organisations, governments etc and ensuring decisions are evidence based. Role is largely office based and in meetings (eg Parliament). There is some travel given the global WWF network. This role is not at all field based – but largely desk-based.

Top tips:

- Important to get experience if interested in policy. Fellowship (open to PhD students) was a good route. Internships at the Scottish Government or Westminster are also useful to gain understanding of the parliamentary system.
- Demonstrate that you have an interest in policy e.g. you have supported a campaign
- Communication skills are important – being able to communicate in a simple and clear way and to make evidence interesting and compelling. Writing for social media and blogging is useful experience.
- Influencing and negotiating – need to be able to work with a range of stakeholders, know and understand different perspectives, networking – get to know people outside of the academic environment
- Apply your PhD brain – be pragmatic, balanced and make evidence based decisions. There is a balance between being compelling and ensuring an evidence base – you need to find the middle ground.

Dr Catriona Rooke, Senior Researcher, Scottish Government

Senior social researcher, been with Scottish Government just over 3 years. Has a PhD in Sociology of science, technology and medicine as she was interested in academic
research at that point. After PhD she moved into research fellowship at the University of Edinburgh and had a few short term contracts at the university for about 3 and a half years but issues with job security and then moved to Scottish Government.

Now works in team of around 12 including social researchers, statisticians and economists. Based in Edinburgh but also working in Glasgow and meeting with stakeholders in Equality and Social Justice Analysis. Works on projects to improve the evidence base, addressing gaps in knowledge, to identify policy interventions. No typical day and the role is very varied. Projects have included developing the evidence base on food security, consultation on the Child Poverty Bill, commissioning questions on attitudes towards poverty. A lot of the work is about reviewing the evidence base and presenting information in a clear way – there is also some field research.

**Academic versus government research** – main differences include pace and timescales

- In government timescales are shorter - often weeks not months – and you can be asked to produce a report for the next day.
- More breadth in government rather than a deep understanding on a small area.
- Government roles involve more collaboration and team work in government.
- There are different processes and hierarchies. You are close to policy making and have the opportunity to make decision making evidence based.
- Flexible working is easier - you can put boundaries between work and home life.
- Government roles offer variety with security. You can move around and take up new topics.
- However – there is less time to think and really get to know a subject.

**If you’re considering government research:**

- Learn how to talk competencies – very important for the recruitment process which is very different from academic recruitment process.
- Get the broadest experience you can during your PhD e.g. teaching, conferences and workshops – anything involving communicating about your research.
- Take the long view – your first post might not be the ideal role but can lead on to other opportunities as there are a wide range of opportunities in Scottish Government.
- Weigh up the aspects of research that you do and don’t enjoy.

**Dr Justine Geyer, Principal Researcher, Scottish Government**

Working in local government division working on public service reform, democracy research. Been in this post 18 months and has done a range of roles since joining Scottish Government - including sport and physical activity, climate change and food and drink.

There is lots of turnaround and variety in terms of projects/roles – and it is worth taking the longer term view to get into an area which really interests you.

PhD was part of her career path change and previously worked as a medical herbalist and then went back to university to do a Masters, enjoyed research and then moved on to PhD on a CASE studentship which involved placements in Scottish Government which she enjoyed and then went to internship after PhD. Then on to temporary contracts before going through Fast Stream recruitment process – very intense process involving several stages and many different types of assessment. Took about 5 months in total. Recruitment process is now more open. Roles come up more regularly and it’s possible to apply.
directly to the Scottish Government.

Entry only needed a 2.1 but PhD made a difference in terms of adding to research experience and building confidence – gives you ability to show you have designed, implemented and reported on your research plus given you the autonomy – all good evidence for recruitment process. Examples of projects include Commonwealth Games evaluation; managing national surveys; working closely with analysts, researchers, ministers and external stakeholders e.g. steering groups; literature reviews; analysis of consultation responses – some work is done in house, other work contracted out.

No typical day but over a week – weekly briefings of events you need to be aware of; lots of meetings with team and policy colleagues about research design, progress and research evidence; calls with external stakeholders (e.g. NHS Scotland); attending events and workshops e.g. future challenges for local government and gaining evidence from 3rd sector; doing emails (lots!) – need to keep alerts on all the time as some need to be dealt with immediately – some roles give 30 minutes to provide evidence for press releases & Parliamentary Questions (PQs). In house literature reviews are done but commission out depending on the scale of the work or if specialist expertise needed – quality assurance role involved when reports come in. Teambuilding coffee mornings are held fortnightly to keep colleagues updated on projects. Also working one day per week in University of Glasgow as collaborating on some research. Mix of in-house research and some externally contracted so contract management is a focus of the role too.

Lots of variety in the role and a key appeal of working in government – lots of opportunity to rotate. Encouraged to continue to develop skills and knowledge in a supportive environment. Feels like you’re tangibly making a difference – you can see where you’re making a difference which is very satisfying – for example managing a national survey which fed into the mental health strategy which impacted on funding for food banks. Very supportive and intelligent colleagues – there is always support and you are never working on your own.

Flexible working options are available. On the downside it can be very stressful – e.g. lost of media attention or very tight deadlines – there is not always enough time to inform in detail.

Key messages:

Finish your PhD before applying or it can be stressful

Do a three month internship through the Scottish Government social science scheme – will give you a really good understanding of the environment and how to get through the recruitment process

Anne Jepson, Senior Researcher, Scottish Parliament

Working in Scottish Parliament Information Centre – involves providing information for politicians, government and constituents. There are 25 researchers in total across all devolved areas (Anne working in health and social care)

Involves working at intense speed, meeting deadlines and a huge amount of variety. Need to respond to queries very quickly – for example you can be in the middle of working on why a particular care home is closing, and suddenly be given a 30min deadline to respond to a question about why a particular drug is not provided by the NHS in Scotland. Provides support to committees eg Public Audit Committee, provide briefings for chamber debates on issues relating to health and social care.
Role includes supporting Members in constituency work, preparing briefings and questions for Government committees; preparing briefings (in simple language) for chamber debates; academic engagement e.g. supporting PhD interns. Advice needs to be impartial. PhD helped to develop intellectual rigour which is important for this role.

Your career will involve many untaken roads and some low points too – e.g. not getting postdoc funding and feeling like a failure (you’re not!).

Q&A

Do you have choice over the roles you move to?
JG: – some posts offer choice but not always
CR:– It varies – you usually get to express a preference but can’t guarantee this.

Do you get to publish and continue a profile to allow a move back to academia?
LD: - publish a bit so could maybe still move back
JG:- do publish but reports are not named – just government social reports.

How important is it to have a background in the policy area you want to work for?
JG:- not important - you need research skills but you will develop expertise over time in the areas you work in. Own first degree was microbiology but has come a long way since then.
AJ:- in SPICE you do need a subject specialism
LD:- do want subject specialism in WWF

Is experience in a different context / culture an issue?
LD:- doesn’t matter
JG:- language skills are important – apart from that it doesn’t matter

Are there different researcher roles in the Scottish Government?
JG:- research officer – senior research officer – principal research officer – so different levels. Roles do vary according to the project and where it is when you join. You are given appraisals etc.