PhD Horizons Conference 2018
Panel 3A: Professional Roles in Higher Education

Dr Boleslaw Czarnecki, Research Support Adviser, University of Edinburgh

Boleslaw gained his PhD in Philosophy in 2015 at Jagiellonian University in Poland. He was a Visiting Fellow for a year at the Eidyn Research Centre at the University in 2014/15 and then worked as an Academic Network Facilitator, again within Edinburgh. He started his current role as a Research Support Adviser for the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in March 2017.

Boleslaw supports academics to get external funding for research. It is a busy, deadline-driven job, he focuses on working with the Business School and Moray House. He meets with academics and talks to them about different funding available.

He wanted to work in an HE environment but didn't want to join race for academic posts. He had learned to write research bids and apply for external funding during his PhD so felt this experience transferred well to this role. The main challenge of the role was initially, understanding the complex financial landscape, and now is dealing with the heavy volume of applications. He feels his academic background is very helpful in terms of him being able to relate to academics and write robust comms that will engage them. There is an element of peer reviewing of proposals that he feels his PhD also prepared him well for. There are similar roles to his across HE in the UK. His advice was not to feel like giving up academic work is a compromise, you can move out of academia for a while and come back - it's not impossible.

Dr Emily Woollen, Academic Developer, Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh

Emily gained her PhD in Geosciences at the University of Edinburgh in 2013. After two months working as a GIS Scientist with an organisation in Madagascar she returned to the University as a Post-doctoral Research Associate. Following four years working as an academic researcher, Emily moved into her current role as an Academic Developer in the Institute of Academic Development.

Emily stressed that people don’t always have a plan, or the plan changes. She did a BSc in Ecology because she wanted to be a park ranger. She spent some time in Madagascar on a trip she planned and funded herself. She then did her Phd in Geosciences, worked in African woodlands, it was a fieldwork heaving PhD so still all tying in with the plan of wanting to work outdoors, in a environmental role, like the original park ranger idea. After her viva, she wasn’t sure what to do next and said she floated around for a year. She then got a job with Operation Wallacea in Madagascar. It was living in a tent for 8 weeks, unpaid but covered expenses. That led into her getting a post-doc contract and had a baby. She did a few post-doc contracts but realised that she had become an interdisciplinary scientist, and had generalised to much and felt like going for a fellowship wasn't feasible anymore. So she had to rethink. She audited what had she enjoyed: teaching communicating, supporting people. She realised she wanted to stay in HE, met someone from IAD at an event like this and that led into her pursuing this kind of role, where she is in an HE environment, delivers workshops on topics like ethics, research integrity, how to make most of your postdoc, researches content related to this, supports students. She enjoys the immediate results and impact that her work offers, and being part of a team.
She spoke about realising she had a choice dilemma – she had her specialist knowledge, her technical skills and her communication skills, and she had to decide which one she was willing to let go off. She talked about the hard thing for her was letting go of the specialist knowledge she had spent years building up, but to find a career option that worked for her current situation – with a family, wanting to stay in Edinburgh, she had to focus on the other aspects. She compensates for this by volunteering – she realised ecology can still be a part of her life, but just not through her job at the moment.

Dr Elizabeth Vander Meer, Climate Policy Manager, University of Edinburgh

Elizabeth gained her PhD in Environmental Policy and Ethics at Lancaster University in 2008. She worked at the e-Science Institute at the University of Edinburgh for four years as an Education and Training Policy Officer then a Project Officer. She was Network Manager for UK Carbon Capture and Storage Research Centre for one year until April 2012, before moving into a Centre Coordinator/Research Manager role there. This led to a 2 year role from April 2013 as a Project and Policy Officer, supporting one of the Vice Principals at the University, before Elizabeth moved to her current role.

Elizabeth started this role in 2016 and spend the first 18 months focusing on strategy development. She was then able to develop the role to start working on project more aligned with her background.

She wanted to stay in Edinburgh and had a part-time role in the Disability Service during her last year of her PhD and realised she liked bring around students and academics. After her PhD she took short term policy and strategy roles, the last one being with one of the University VPs – it was the least interesting role for her, but got her exposure to uni contacts and understanding of how uni works. That led to her current role. She took the view that she would take roles that would use her skills, and add to her professional experience, even if the subject area she would be working on wasn’t so closely aligned to her specialism. She realised that if she did this, she would have a better chance of being able to transfer over to a role more closely aligned to her specialism if one came up.

She gets to do lots of stakeholder engagement, still gets to do research. She feels there a number of roles in the Uni, or HE generally, where you can fulfil your desire to undertake research. She advises getting involved in mixed student and staff groups to expand your network and exposure to other parts of the University.