



## PhD Horizons Conference 2018

### Panel 5A: Academic Careers

**Dr Ross Galloway, Physics Lecturer and Senior Teaching Development Officer, University of Edinburgh**

Ross gained his PhD in Solar Physics from the University of Glasgow in 2006. Following that he stayed at the University of Glasgow as a Postdoctoral Research Associate and then as a University teacher. In January 2009, Ross moved to the University of Edinburgh where he has progressed his academic career to his current role.

#### **What do you do in your current role?**

Ross's role of Teaching Development Officer is an academic role which is not as unusual as it used to be; most commonly referred to as Teaching Fellow or University Teacher. It's essentially an academic member of staff who has a very limited or no formal research remit. Technically Ross has no research time which means that he has more time to devote to teaching.

Ross delivers teaching and is involved in being the Course Organiser for large courses, Programme Coordinator and participates in internal committees and working groups.

Ross's typical day appears to be "firefighting" as the phrase goes, dealing with things that crop up unexpectedly. A big advantage of this kind of job is that it's very flexible; you can make your own schedule and decide how you want to apply your time. However, the role does require a lot of self-reliance and motivation. There can be a lot of administration work which is something to be prepared for.

#### **How did you decide to pursue your current career path?**

Ross thoroughly enjoyed his PhD and decided he wanted to stay in academia. He applied for various postdoctoral research positions and was offered one at the University of Glasgow which involved some teaching. Ross enjoyed the teaching aspect and found this really rewarding. After a year and a half, Ross realised that a postdoctoral position was not what he wanted to do as he wasn't finding the research aspect significantly rewarding to make a long-term career out of it. By good fortune for Ross, exactly the right job came along at the right time. The University of Glasgow advertised for what was termed a university teacher – a fixed term contract lasting 13 months. Ross was successful in securing the role and found that this was the niche for him. As Ross knew the role was finite, he looked around for something similar and again by good luck and fortune, Ross was successful in gaining his current role.

#### **What advice would you give to current students?**

Network! Ross knew almost all of the people who were on the recruitment committee through teaching meetings and educational conferences etc – he was a known face and knew what they were interested in: Ross thought this was a large influence in securing his current role.

When Ross started this career path ten years ago, teaching academics were a rarity but this kind of job has become more mainstream. If you're thinking about one of the non-mainstream academic roles that are becoming increasingly prominent these days i.e. outreach focused roles or knowledge transfer focused roles, – you might expect there





to be some resistance but Ross advised to power on through. There is an opportunity within academia to carve your own track and decide what you want to do.

### **Dr Sander van den Driesche, (Tenure Track) Lecturer in Biomedical Sciences, University of Edinburgh**

Sander gained his PhD in Molecular Biology from the Hubrecht Institute in the Netherlands in 2005. In May 2006, he moved to the University of Edinburgh, taking up a role as a Postdoctoral Research Assistant within the Centre for Reproductive Biology. He held various postdoctoral roles at the MRC Human Reproductive Sciences Unit, which later became the MRC/UoE Centre for Reproductive Health and became the Deputy Programme Director for the MSc Reproductive Sciences in September 2015. He became a Tenure Track Lecturer (Edinburgh/Zhejiang) at the Deanery of Biomedical Sciences in September 2016.

#### **What do you do in your current role?**

Sander has a lectureship role which includes research and teaching. According to his contract, 60% of his time should be teaching and 40% research but it's not set in stone. A lot of his day to day activities are around teaching and meetings with other teachers/lecturers that he designs programmes and undertakes research with. He also supervises students, applies for funding, writes research papers and reads a lot of literature. It's a busy job and can sometimes feel like having two jobs in one. Some months can be really difficult to focus on research as it can be really busy teaching wise with piles of marking of exam scripts, discussing marks with colleagues etc.

Sander finds the role very exciting and likes the teaching aspect with students. He is also part of a team of lecturers at Biomedical Sciences where he goes out to China to teach as well; it's part of the Edinburgh/Zhejiang institute. This can be a challenge as it can be hard to look after a masters' student when he's not in Edinburgh for three weeks at a time but it's manageable – he needs to make a lot of good contacts with colleagues who are able to help out when he's not there.

#### **How did you decide to pursue your current career path?**

Sander didn't enjoy his PhD - the project just didn't work out and felt he had bad supervision. After gaining his PhD, Sander didn't want to stay in research. He moved to Edinburgh for personal reasons and worked in a café for 6 months, where he was made a supervisor. He loved it. After six months, Sander got back into academia as a research technician. For two years, he was involved in running a lab, helping other PhD students with experiments and talking to the suppliers to make sure all the consumables were ordered. After his contract finished, he held various postdoctoral roles and then started to apply for lectureships. He was successful in the fourth lectureship he applied for which is his current role.

#### **What advice would you give to current students?**

When you do a PhD, especially if it's lab based, you might really have moments where you just want to give up. Even if you do complete your PhD, Sander advised not to make a career decision that you don't want to go into academia based on a bad experience in your PhD career. Try one postdoctoral position and if it's still something that you don't enjoy doing then start looking for something else.





## **Dr Wendy Ugolini, Senior Lecturer in British History, University of Edinburgh**

Wendy had an untraditional route into academia. After a history degree at the University of Cambridge, Wendy worked at the BBC and in the voluntary sector for a number of years. She gained her PhD at the University of Edinburgh and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for the Study of the Two World Wars (now the Centre for the Study of Modern and Contemporary History). Following research positions at Edinburgh Napier and Strathclyde universities, Wendy was appointed to a British History Lectureship at the University of Edinburgh at 2010. In August 2016, she was promoted to Senior Lecturer.

### **How did you decide to pursue your current career path?**

After Wendy did her undergraduate degree, she wasn't interested in academia at that point and got a job at the BBC Broadcasting House in London – this was pre-Google. She worked in a 24-hour research unit and did background research for BBC news and magazine programmes – she thought this was a fantastic job. Wendy met her husband and moved to Edinburgh. She got a part-time job as a parliamentary lobbyist with a charity and this gave her time to reflect on how she would love to work with history. A colleague of hers said, "Why don't you do a PhD?". Wendy's husband is of Italian heritage and she became interested in the impact of the Second World War on the Italian community. Wendy was accepted to do a PhD at the University of Edinburgh.

Interestingly, Wendy wasn't thinking about an academic career and as it was a part-time PhD, she continued to work full-time. Wendy began to realise through networking that other people were interested in her work and suggested publishing her work – that's when Wendy began to think of an academic career. She gave up the gave up her full-time job and took up a temporary lectureship at the University of Edinburgh which coincided with her research interests.

### **What do you do in your current role?**

Wendy loves the freedom and autonomy of having an academic job. Apart from the obligation of teaching time, you can control how the rest of the time is spent. Wendy has complete autonomy to pursue her own research interests. She has moved away from researching the Italians and is now looking at the Welsh during the Second World War.

Besides teaching and research, Wendy is involved in supporting students. She also does lots of reading, peer reviewing for colleagues and publishing houses. Wendy is also involved interview panels and reads a lot of job applications. The job usually involves having to take on a big administrative role.

### **What challenges did you encounter throughout your PhD?**

Challenges Wendy faced along the way were doing it all part-time but still working full-time. She got one day unpaid but had to do five days work in four days. Wendy had two children and took a year off her PhD for each child. Her PhD took eight years in total to complete.

### **What advice would you give to current students?**

- Make the most of your time attending conferences, give papers and network.
- Publication is key – try and publish your work: book reviews, journal articles whatever you can.
- Never lose sight of your scholarship – if you remain committed to that; fundamentally other things will come with that.





### **Further advice from Q&A session:**

#### **Is there any difference between PhD study and postdoctoral study?**

Sander: “In my experience, quite a big difference, especially when I did my first postdoc – you get told a lot more I felt. I wasn’t just seen as the PhD student - you get asked to contribute to grant publications in a group, to come up with ideas for papers a lot more. I got a lot more say about my work and my day to day activities – less supervision and had more freedom. In other postdoc groups this could be different.”

Ross: “Everyone’s experience will be different. I was largely following a research project that was laid out in the PhD proposal. When I first started my postdoc, there was more onus on the post doc to drive the research.”

#### **What extent does the academic member of staff get to direct the content of their teaching?**

Wendy: “When initially hired, there are set courses that you’re expected to teach on to 220 students on history and there will be a set curriculum that you follow and deliver. The beauty of being a lecturer is being able to do honours teaching and masters teaching - you get freedom to put together your own course, subjects for each week, compile reading lists and that is one of the most rewarding parts of the job.”

Sander: “The Zhejiang institute programme is developed by 11 lecturers. It’s different in Edinburgh. I’m a course organiser for a third year course of Biomedical Sciences and it’s been running successfully for many years so you kind of keep things similar – only small bits of teaching may change/update. Lecture content is closely monitored by a panel to make sure it meets learning objectives etc.”

Ross: “Within physics as a discipline, it’s intrinsically hierarchical e.g. advanced quantum mechanics builds on basic quantum mechanics - so within that kind of discipline there’s little manoeuvre to change content. In later years, if someone is teaching a specialism or a particular area you can branch out.”

#### **Applying for research funding - how do you approach that? Is it dependent on what percentage of your time you’re supposed to spend teaching?**

Sander: “Writing a grant is not an easy job. It can easily take three months full-time work. It’s a big challenge to fit within 9-5. It’s different for each lecturer – dependent on what sort of research you do, what sort of groups you work in and if you have lots of collaborations.”

Wendy: “It’s incredibly hard to do the research when you’re teaching - the academic year does have this kind of cycle where you have two intensive semesters.”

#### **Do you think you get as much recognition for your teaching as you do research?**

Ross: “I think I have an unusual take on this - speaking personally I feel much more recognised for my teaching than I do for my research. You see the impact immediately with teaching. I have developed a national profile and increasingly an international profile for my teaching - it’s just something that’s happened that I don’t think would have occurred to the same extent for my research. How much of that is personal – that’s less clear to me.

Can you get recognition for your teaching? – I would say absolutely. Teaching well is hard and people are interested to learn from other people’s experiences.”





Sander: “You can get official recognition – we all go for these higher education academy awards now – when I got that it felt good. I view positive course feedback from students as recognition.”

Wendy: “I think increasingly teaching is being taken seriously in that sense.”

### **When should I make that decision to stay or go in academia?**

Sander: “In my personal experience in Biomedical Sciences, a lot of it has to do with a huge amount of funding – I have colleagues who have no choice, their funding has run out so they need to do something else or they might come back to academia at a later stage. I think a lot of it has to do with luck, being there at the right time. Networking is important – go to conferences and meet people.”

Ross: “A lot of academia is what you make of it – something I hear which I’m sceptical about is academia is a lifestyle choice – ‘I’m getting paid to do my hobby’. Academia is a job and it can be tough – what makes it rewarding is you get those moments where you think I made a difference today or I helped. Academia tends to select for niche expertise and if you do find your niche that can be hugely rewarding.”

Wendy: “I’ve had three careers already and this is the one that I like the most.”

### **Can you take a break? Can you move out of academia for a year or two years maybe more after the PhD and how difficult or easy is it to get back in?**

Wendy: “I had a four-year gap between my PhD and lectureship but I retained an academic presence. It’s often about scholarship and publication – those skills don’t go away.”

Sander: “It comes down to a lot of luck. I had to change my research field when I came back to academia and I didn’t know anyone in that field – this was a bit of a challenge. I think it is becoming more competitive – not many people have a postdoc lined up either after PhD – some have to take a forced small break. Keep in touch with your old supervisor and colleagues – you could decide to apply for your own funding which is very competitive.”

Ross: “I can’t speak from direct personal experience but I do have plenty of colleagues who have left and come back with extreme success. I can think of colleagues who have aligned themselves with knowledge transfer so they’ve got the skills to translate between industry.”

