



PhD Horizons Conference 2017

Panel 1B: Policy and Non-Academic Research

Dr Samuel Lussac, Russia Senior Research Manager, Wood Mackenzie

Lussac is Research Manager at Wood Mackenzie, a Scottish energy research company recently bought by the US corporation Verisk. With a PhD in political science from France, he originally planning to do a postdoc in the UK but when funding dried up at the start of the global financial crisis he decided to move to the private sector.

Analytical skills, persistence, and self-awareness set PhD graduates apart on the workplace from those with an UG degree. However, you may have to accept that the PhD does not matter to some people, and that teamwork when you are used to working on your own can be challenging. Holding a PhD helps to be promoted faster and progress quickly in the first years of joining a company. Co-publishing with people who work in policy or the private sector will help you learn how to make different arguments. There is a different focus in the private sector because it is commercial/profit and revenue-driven.

PhD skills:

- fieldwork experience
- a network of contacts
- broad sector knowledge rather than topic knowledge

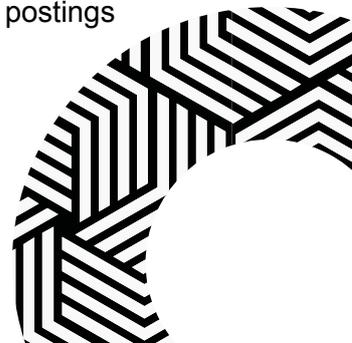
Words of wisdom: *be confident about your skills and ready to adapt to challenges.*

Dr Jenny Bann, Digital Solutions Project Manager, Department for Work and Pensions

After a PhD in English Literature, Bann spent a year doing part-time tutoring before landing a postdoc in Digital Humanities, which she held for 6 years. Her long-term plan was always academia, as is often the case in the arts where the dominant narrative is that of the ideal career path, with anything else seen as “failure.”

Frustrated by the lack of permanent academic jobs, the expectation of geographical mobility and of working large numbers of hours, and wanting to settle down in a position compatible with her family life, Bann decided to leave academia. A strong desire to do something rewarding and have a positive impact on the world, yet be able to go home in the evening and leave work behind, was also a driver for change.

The civil service Fast Stream is one of the few ways to enter the public sector, as there are few recruitment campaigns. There are specific research streams within the graduate programme, but the generalist stream is the most versatile. Getting in is difficult, with a long process of online testing, assessment centres, and interviews. Bann had several postings and secondments during the first years.





The government doesn't care about applicants' specific disciplinary background, but appreciate the fact that researchers in the humanities understand the way cultural expectations affect how large groups of people behave and how to change it. Working in policy means searching how best to do something and then trying to convince people to do it. In academia, there is little scope to help make the world a better place and have a positive impact.

To prepare for a career change, speak to people who do the job you think you want (what's the day to day job?) and other people to broaden your ideas, rather than looking at the description only. Competency-based interviews identify what the employer needs and candidates need to use specific examples from their personal experience to evidence those skills.

Words of wisdom: *don't box yourself in – consider moving between the private and public sectors, taking your experience and new perspectives with you.*

Dr Grace Vickers, Head of Education and Chief Education Officer, Midlothian Council

After an UG degree in Music, Vickers started her PhD but dropped out to train as teacher after one year. She progressed quickly through the ranks of a fairly traditional profession and took Masters training courses to become Head Teacher. With staff management responsibilities, she re-started her PhD and applied to become Head of Education, which required going through psychometric testing. Now she works on improving outcomes for learners and keeps doing research in partnership with UoE.

Facing opposition from those who don't see the value of a PhD requires learning to articulate and sell your skills and abilities, so don't be too modest. Look at the criteria for the job carefully and address them all in the application. At the interview stage, try to mention something that makes you special and stand out from other applicants. Practicing interviews and seeking feedback can really help prepare for the recruitment process.

PhD skills:

- the ability to manage the operational processes of the job
- being critically reflective.
- The ability to see the different sides of an argument
- presenting arguments in a strong way without personal elements

Words of wisdom: *having a PhD makes you unique, don't undersell it, yourself, or your skills.*

Dr Mariela Fordyce, Senior Research Officer, Corporate Analytical Services, Scottish Government

Fordyce was a Research Fellow at Moray House School of Education before taking the post of Senior Research Officer at the Scottish Government 2 years ago. After UG and PG degrees in disability in education, she did not feel suited to academia because she had a





family and was not geographically mobile. For her, it was a chat with a Careers Consultant that opened up new horizons by suggesting to look into research in the public sector.

Entrance into government research can be gained via the policy or social research tracks, but recruitment is rare. Changing career paths requires doing thorough research about the process and what to expect, so do seek opportunities for additional training, and contact potential mentors who are already in the jobs you are targeting. In the application, demonstrate that you can apply the skills the employer wants and what you can do with them, rather than relying on your qualifications.

Skills matter more than topic knowledge in the public service. Fordyce's experience using mixed methods research was an asset, and she received training on the job to learn evaluation research, which is uncommon in academia. Working in Corporate Analytical Services and Organisational Development is far from her former plan to stay in education, but it gives her the opportunity to engage her problem-solving skills in real-life research that has a clear social impact. Although most social researchers commission other people to do research for them, there is scope for methodological freedom.

PhD skills:

- the ability to collaborate and negotiate conflicts of interest
- the ability to lead and influence
- basic research proficiency (quantitative and qualitative)
- a capacity for learning new technology quickly (i.e. NVivo)

Words of wisdom: *don't limit yourself to what you thought you would do and your careers plans.*

