



PhD Horizons Conference 2017

Panel 2B: Professional Roles in Higher Education

Dr Caroline Proctor, Postgraduate and Research Staff Officer, University of Edinburgh

1 year into her postdoc in History, Proctor realised that she did not enjoy research and preferred teaching and organisation, which led her to the decision to leave academia. As Postgraduate and Research Staff Officer, her role is varied and includes administrative tasks, people and budget management, advising, external and internal relations, and working on improving processes. A busy and unpredictable workload can be stressful at times, and there is less autonomy than in academic roles since you sometimes have to deliver other people's vision, even when you disagree with them.

Career paths may look linear, but it is normal to have doubts throughout your working life. Start thinking about your future with a self-assessment (what can I do? what do I enjoy?), research the opportunities available, build connections, tailor your CV (skills-focused rather than narrative), and be enthusiastic in applications and job interviews. Don't hesitate to make use of the informal contact listed on job adverts to ask about the broad vision of the role or the day-to-day activities.

Words of wisdom: *think about what you already do in your studies or at work, and be confident when changing careers.*

Dr Ellen Spaeth, Learning Design and Technology Specialist, University of Glasgow

She found her first post-PhD job on MyCareerHub as Digital Education Researcher, a part-time fixed-term position interviewing academics and creating video material for the PgCAP course. Knowing the hiring manager helped her chances, so try to make contacts in the industry you want to join. Spaeth worked as a Learning Technologist, again on a fixed-term contract, advising academics on using technology for teaching so pedagogical elements. She recently moved into her current position as Learning Design and Technology Specialist, designing and creating online learning spaces and managing the Digital Identity project at Glasgow.

Abandoning her life plan of becoming a lecturer meant negotiating a big identity shift, but she was more interested in the ideas behind research projects than the thorough perseverance and toil required to be a successful academic and therefore decided to leave. It can also be argued that a number of attitudes that are detrimental to mental health (i.e. anxiety) are exacerbated and even institutionally rewarded in academia. Her advice is to seek additional experiences and diplomas to make yourself more employable. Talk to people about their job and do not hesitate to ask about recent job openings and how you could fill their requirements. In professional roles you may feel happier, more confident, and appreciated at work.





Words of wisdom: *identify your skills early and revise them regularly to keep track of your development.*

Dr Liz Fletcher, Research and Development Manager, University of Edinburgh

After a number of postdocs in Australia, the USA, Canada, and the UK, she “burnt out” and wondered what to do next. Realising that she enjoys writing, Fletcher did a diploma in science communication then quit her job and applied for a Science Writer role with the Wellcome Trust to gain experience, develop a portfolio, and test the industry. Through various editing roles with publications in the UK and the USA, Fletcher not only broadened her skillset but she also developed an interest in science business and entrepreneurship. This led her to take a job in technology transfer to learn more about business and IP protection. Without a clear plan, many careers look like a game of snakes and ladders!

As Research and Development Manager of a biological sciences research centre comprising various labs, Fletcher is responsible for developing marketing and communication, and ensuring that the centre delivers on the outcomes promised to funders and investors, as well as public engagement projects and relationships with industry. In this diverse, complex, and challenging role, she also support academics writing grant proposals.

The universities sector is a massive contributor to the UK economy, and professional services who keep the institution running are critical in research-intensive institutions. The recruitment process for those positions is competency-based, so it is essential to prepare examples to demonstrate that you possess the required skills (and know how to implement them). A career change means starting at the bottom in your new field.

PhD skills:

- communication
- ability to assimilate complex information
- independent rigour of thought
- discipline
- stamina and resilience

Words of wisdom: *you will likely have more than one career in your working life, so try out different things and take risks to discover your skills.*

Dr Nicola Stock, Public Engagement Officer, Roslin Institute

Unsure what to do after her PhD, she was offered a postdoc in Chicago through networking at a conference. She also volunteered at the Field Museum of Natural History, using her research background to show the public what is happening behind the scenes in the museum. After 3 years of postdoc, one night at the lab Stock listed the qualities of the top researchers alongside her own, and found that they did not match: public speaking and presentations were her favourite parts of being an academic, instead of research publications and funding applications.

Stock moved back to the UK and applied for museum jobs but was rejected for not holding a Masters in Museum Studies. She took did shifts in a supermarket and gained further volunteering experience in various science museums, leading to a job as a science explaine





on minimum wage. Starting again at the bottom of the ladder is part and parcel of negotiating a career change.

As Public Engagement Officer with the Roslin Institute, her current role includes press relation, media, events and festivals, school visits, and teacher training. As well as education and outreach, it entails supporting researchers to engage with the public and help them prepare funding applications. Universities are a growth sector for science communication, so if you are interested look for and target new roles.

PhD skills:

- presentation
- training people
- communication
- networking/building relationships
- multitasking
- creativity

Words of wisdom: *reach out to people doing the job you want and ask them for a chat over coffee, you may even get the opportunity to shadow them.*

