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My role(s)

I am currently a Senior Lecturer and Director of a Research Institute at the School of Informatics. I lead my own research group, supervise PhD students, teach undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and supervise taught and research students. I am also responsible for the selection of PhD students that apply to my Institute. I am a member of the Academic Senate of the University, and of the Strategy, Research, and Equality & Diversity Committees of my School. I am a Principal Investigator (PI) for two major research grants, one of which I coordinate. My previous administrative tasks have included the management of taught degree programmes, and acting as a Director of Teaching for the School.

A typical week

About three to five hours of teaching, around fifteen to twenty hours of meetings, twenty hours of answering emails, and ten to twenty hours of research, which mostly involves reading, writing, and reviewing documents. A typical working day starts at 9am and ends at 9pm. I work at least one full day on most weekends. On average, I am away on work-related trips to meetings and conferences around 60-90 days a year. Only a small percentage of my work involves doing my own research, most of the time I manage, instruct, and advise other staff and students, or coordinate collaborative activities with various colleagues at the University and other institutions.

My career journey

I completed my first degree in 1999, and worked for a small software startup until 2000. After that, I went back to university to do a PhD, which I completed in 2004. I was appointed to a permanent Lecturer position at Edinburgh in September 2004, just before defending my PhD. I was promoted to Senior Lecturer in August 2013.

What has helped me progress

My first appointment to a permanent academic position was mainly down to luck. I happened to be at the right place at the right time, and to be hired by people who valued enthusiasm, vision, and human qualities more than outstanding research achievements. In today's much more competitive climate I don't think I would be able to obtain such a position with the profile I had back then.



Supportive people

I was very lucky to have a PhD supervisor who gave me a lot of freedom to pursue my own research interests, and who gave me specific project responsibilities from the start of my PhD. This allowed me to build a portfolio of early achievements and to develop a vision for my research early on in my career, and I think this played a major role in being offered a permanent position right after completing my PhD – showing potential for future success was probably more important than concrete research contributions I had already made.

I was appointed to a lectureship without any postdoctoral experience, so I have never worked under a PI, and built my research group from scratch. This was an uphill struggle for a long time, and it would have been more useful to join larger teams of established researchers when I first started as a lecturer.

Everything I have achieved since has been the product of very hard work and endurance, especially in terms of taking on tasks and responsibilities that provided opportunities for learning and career development.

Personal qualities needed for success

The two most important qualities are discipline and diligence. Academia is very competitive nowadays, and given that you are competing with very clever people who work very hard across the world, it is unlikely that you can succeed unless you are very organised, hard-working, and rigorous in your scientific work. This also involves being prepared to switch context between different tasks every day without losing focus or motivation, and a strong ability to deal with criticism and negative feedback (most feedback you receive is based on the scrutiny of your work by your peers, and is, by its nature, critical).

Outstanding communication skills and a positive attitude to working with other people are also essential. Contrary to a widely held belief, research is a social process and success is entirely based on one's ability to understand the broader research landscape, to communicate own results, and to create the right professional networks and working relationships.

The rewards

I am very pleased when undergrads come up to me and tell me that my teaching has sparked their interest in the subject. Many people forget that the impact teaching has on the people you educate is in many ways much more profound than that of research, which is often incremental and only relevant to a specialist community.

I am also very grateful to be in a profession that allows you to choose the scientific question you want to pursue. Unless you are the type of person who has a genuine passion for coming up with new problems to solve every day, the disadvantages that come with academia are not worth accepting in return for this freedom.

The challenges

Increasing organisational demands that lead to more and more bureaucracy. Every academic activity (research, teaching, knowledge transfer) is planned, measured, audited, and validated nowadays, and this creates a heavy administrative burden at all levels of academic life. A large part of this is due to the political and socio-economic landscape within which universities have to operate. The additional workload created by these processes does not contribute in any way to the core purposes of my role, and detracts from the quality of my teaching and research.

The other challenge is the increasing difficulty to obtain research funding, and the risks this creates with regard to career progression. At the moment, my group is very well-funded, but it is very hard to predict future income on the basis of past success. This basically means that you have to try to attract external funding continually to maximise chances, and that simply doing "good work" is not enough to guarantee future progression.



Taking the next steps will require...

Producing research outputs that have a substantial and visible impact within and/or outside the academic world, and achieving a transition from success at obtaining external funding to leading major strategic initiatives that will provide sustained support for research in my School.

Supporting others

The most important thing is to treat them as colleagues, not “apprentices”. This implies treating them with respect but also expecting them to act as professional academic workers. I try to always make time for talking to them, and encourage them to pursue opportunities with a view to their future careers. In this respect, it is important to consider that the vast majority of them will not end up in a lifelong academic career, so it is important for them to develop skills that will be valuable in other sectors and professions.

Beyond that, it is very difficult to support most of them over a longer term, as we are rarely able to offer anything beyond fixed-term positions.

