

What's Next After Your PhD? - Careers in University Research Support

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Tuesday, 21st May 2019

My Background

Education:

- **Executive Diploma in Strategic Leadership** – Warwick Business School, University of Warwick (2019-2020)
- **PhD** – Trinity College Dublin (2005-2009)
- **MA** – University College Dublin (2004-2005)
- **BA** – University College Dublin (2000-2004)

Lecturing:

- **Philosophy** - National University of Ireland, Galway (Ireland, 2008-09)
- **Philosophy/English Language** - University of Paris XIII (France, 2009-10)

Research Management:

- **Research Strategy and Development Manager for Social Sciences** – University of Warwick (2017-present)
- **Research Strategy Manager for Arts and Humanities** - University of Sheffield (2015-2017)
- **Research Facilitator in Humanities & Social Sciences** - University of Cambridge (2012-2015)
- **Science Officer in Humanities** - European Science Foundation (France, 2010-2012)
- In 2015 I passed the European Commission's concourse for employment at **European Research Council** (10 applicants listed from 605 applications)

Key professional moments...

- **Stacking shelves** from ages 15 – 18
- **Unemployment** after PhD submission: 1 year wait until my viva because of external advisor's illness meant I needed a job. Months of menial labour before role as Project Assistant at **Irish Research Council for the Humanities & Social Sciences**. Being offered this was pure luck but was the basis for later being offered the job at the European Science Foundation
- **Rejection at interview**: Although I made the final 2, I was ultimately rejected for a Research Facilitator role at Oxford. The feedback was so positive, though, it encouraged me to apply for a similar role at Cambridge (which I got)

Reasons for leaving academia

- Initially it was not my choice. Recession in Ireland in 2008/09 meant **no new jobs in academia**
- Having spent 8 years at University my main goal was **stable employment**
- Knew I wanted to remain in academic domain so initially targeted **research funders**. Loved working there as I got to read about and discuss a wide range of fascinating research projects
- But then wanted to use my knowledge to **help future applicants secure funding** whilst not worrying about job security

What do we do in Research Support Services?

Research support offices cover a wide range of activities and are generally divided into 4 sections: **Research Development; Research Impact & Communications; Research Governance & Ethics; Research Systems and the REF**

Within **Research Development**, where I work, there are three general levels and types of position:

- (i) Research Funding Officer: mostly administrative tasks, dealing with budgets, on-line application systems, and contracts. Some have PhDs
- (ii) Research Development Officer: mix of administrative and development, so works on budgets for larger bids but also advises on structure of proposal, including project managing large submissions. Many will have PhDs
- (iii) Research Strategy & Development Manager: purely developmental and strategic. Develops high-value bids, creates interdisciplinary groups, supports Heads of Department and senior managers of the University (Pro Vice Chancellors for Research) on matters of research strategy. Most, if not all, will have PhDs

Benefits of role

- Meet with a wide range of academics and discuss often fascinating research projects
- Become a key part in success of large, ambitious research projects and Faculty strategies
- Monday to Friday 9-5
- Good pay (junior role: £30k to £38k; mid-level role: £40k to £48k; senior role: £48k to £58k)
- Good holidays (30 days a year excluding closures and bank holidays)
- Job security
- Burgeoning job market

Drawbacks of role

- Perception from some ‘traditional’ academics as being, at best, ‘just’ an administrator or, at worst, the embodiment of the evil money-hungry ‘University’! (Note: these views are actually very few and far between and disappearing exceptionally fast. Vast majority of people see you as being of invaluable help)
- Sometimes miss the freedom and self-management of academic work - although, the job is largely self-managed - particularly senior roles – and creativity is often key to success. Also, academic life is not as independent as some think...

Getting these roles

- Having a **PhD**, particularly for senior roles, is fast becoming a necessity
- However, be prepared to **take on more junior roles first**, then move up quickly
- Experience in **administration or project management** can help, so any part-time/summer/occasional work done before, during, and after PhD which have these duties – such as in museums, funding bodies, NGOs, Universities, publishing houses, etc – will help
- Understand, and be able to articulate, the importance of **core PhD skills** to these sorts of roles:
 - reading and understanding complex texts, synthesising the most important information and explaining it in plain terms
 - the ability to write in a clear, concise, and grammatically correct manner
 - being able to ask intelligent questions of projects outside one's field
 - presentation skills (devising, drafting and delivering)
 - communication skills (making oneself understood, diplomacy, persuasion)
- **Talk to people about the roles.** You can often gain key insights from those already working there about important expectations



Questions?