

For The Independent
March 2007

Looking Up

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For the first time in twenty years, I advise you to pursue a career in universities. It has been a long slog, through decades of red tape and low-wage mediocrity, but British academic jobs are finally attractive.

Money is a small part of it. If you enter academia now, and do well, you have a reasonable expectation of making it to £80,000 a year by the time you retire. You have a tiny chance of earning a six-figure pay packet, and a very good hope of reaching a salary of £50,000.

Better still, as a university lecturer you will get far more autonomy than in normal jobs. The Darth Vader aspects of the Quality Assurance Agency years have, thank goodness, been somewhat beaten back by the good guys. You will have a chance to think and speak your version of truth. You will not have to present a pat company line that requires an inner belief in selling yet more products to debt-ridden British consumers.

Labour deserves to be congratulated. On the key issues, a Scottish good sense has prevailed (at least in England). Blair and Brown have been brave-hearts. The politically risky introduction of the 3000 pounds fee will slowly siphon vital resources into our institutions of higher education. Although the squealing of the brakes of the trade union movement can occasionally still be heard, salaries are less dictated by 1960s notions of equal pay for unequal talent and effort.

Nevertheless, being a faculty member in the UK is an exhausting career. If you are a potential PhD student, or perhaps a young researcher starting out, here are things I wish I had been told when I set off.

First, the division between work and leisure barely exists in universities. You will be an obsessive self-employed thinker. Picking an academic career means spending all your hours working or thinking about work – 8am on Sunday mornings, midnight on Wednesday evenings, virtually all day and every day. You will, though, have flexibility. I go shopping for Paul Smith ties, without telling anyone, if I get fed up with looking at regression equations. As long as I get my work done, nobody notices.

Second, it is probably not sensible to become an academic unless your grades are close to top of your university classes. Intellectual competition is now global. If you are getting Upper Seconds in your final year of university, it might be best to do something different.

Third, eschew the latest research fad, and go for iconoclasm. This is harder than it sounds. You have been pumped full of Chinese post-modernist game-theory or whatever, and, without being aware of it, have been powerfully brainwashed that this narrow approach is the only way to think. If you go against that trampling herd, nearly everyone will ignore your early writings or tell you that you are mistaken (“I’m afraid your research will not go anywhere Mr Oswald” – a high-IQ Oxford economist told me gently in the late 1970s).

I try to explain to my doctoral students that if most people like your work you can be certain that you have not done anything important. Academics are mostly keen on clever acolytes who are mirrors of themselves -- but a painful iconoclasm cannot be avoided if you hope to be more than a short footnote within a long footnote.

Fourth, and unsurprisingly, it helps to like students. You will see a lot of them, and a lot of them.

Fifth, if you are not a gifted teacher, there is something to be said for getting some training. This is unfashionable. But to survive in a university, all you need is to be a mildly competent communicator, and that can be taught.

Sixth, although working with the media is interesting, it is generally a career mistake to do much of this before the age of 40. I do not recall

a single instance of a hiring or promotion group being approving of a young person's media contributions.

Seventh, advertise. In a self-obsessed world, ideas rarely sell themselves. Submit papers to the top journals in your field while you are still a PhD student. Accept that you will get lots of rejection letters (I used to say that mine could wallpaper a house – now it is two houses). Listen to critics, but not too hard. Create your own website. Send your work relentlessly to the major scholars in your subject. I still remember, as an unknown stripling, the useful delight at getting comments from a Nobel Prize winner, typed on an old typewriter, who had read through a paper sent him to him by a young British nobody. In the world of scholarship, one encounters an extraordinary dedication to ideas and a generosity of intellectual spirit. I still find that marvellous.