Career paths of academic researchers: HEALTH STUDIES

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Community Child Health - Angela

Route into HE
Angela, already a State Registered Nurse, applied through an Access course as a mature student to University. She then worked for 4 years then moved into research. She completed a B.A. Hons. Education; M.Sc. Health Sciences; and a Diploma in Management Studies. She made no progress in her career as a contract researcher. All the personal development she achieved was self-motivated.

Route into Contract Research
Angela was told about the post by a friend and then responded to an advertisement. She spent 2.5 years in the Department of Community Child Health at northern red brick university working on randomised controlled trials of injury prevention in primary schools.

Nature and range of work
· Liaison with primary schools to implement effective health improvement programmes.
· Monitoring and process evaluation of interventions.

Likes about Contract Research
· Independence of work.
· Flexible working conditions
· Managing own workload, e.g. working from home.
· Project management.
· IT provision

Dislikes about Contract Research
· No clear career progression - too much emphasis on doing Ph.D. when other skills may be more relevant (depending upon area of research).
· Ad-hoc approach to appraisal, performance review etc.

Reasons for moving on
Angela spent some time with her Principal Investigator 8/9 months before her contract was due to end and it was suggested she seek some new funding somewhere. Angela did not know where to start and felt rejected by this suggestion. Later she did attend a session run by the Research Services Unit about getting own funding and they mentioned further help via Concordat support in the University (which Angela took up). She was offered some maternity cover work and was told she was unsuitable for a new project coming up because she did not have a Ph.D. - so not to apply. Angela felt insulted and hurt and decided it was time to move on - although she would have loved to carry on. She used her new personal development from Concordat support to help her look for something new.

Explorations of options and sources
Angela began with some mentoring to assess her self-awareness and identify all her strengths, both qualitative and quantitative. This helped her focus on:
· what she can do
· what she likes to do
· what she does not enjoy
Next she looked at job advertisements in local papers (as she did not want to leave the region), national papers, journals and on the internet. She looked at a wide variety of jobs, not to apply for them, but to see what employers were looking for and to see if anything looked attractive to her. She did this for about 6 weeks. She kept a schedule of which days' and evenings' newspapers had jobs. One of the posts Angela did apply for she was told about by a friend and knew to look out for it in the press. The same friend was also an applicant.

As a result of her search, Angela gained employment on a child health improvement programme for a local education authority, a post which draws upon all aspects of her previous experience.

**Messages for contract researchers**

- Be aware in advance that decisions about the future need to be made.
- Decide who to talk to - supervisor, Careers Service, friends/family, other suitable support.
- Follow up on any ideas which are raised when you discuss matters with them (your supervisor etc.).
- Be aware that the action has to be taken by YOU - no one else can/will do anything to help.
- Think through what you have to offer an employer, the options you think you have and your constraints.
- Ask yourself if you have any direction. If not, what can you do to help you get one and who can work with you to try to identify a direction.
- Send for some job descriptions and other information and application forms - just to look at them - to see what organisations are looking for in applications.
- See how you react to this information - does it look interesting? Why?
- Remember - it takes time. It could be many weeks before anything remotely interesting appears.
- Find out what electronic sources of help and information exist and use them as well.
- Identify your deadline for finding something and work back from that your time-scales (how much notice you have to give; how long to expect between application and interview and so on).
- Read job advertisements very carefully - look to see what is required - it may be that you could be very happy in a job using your transferable skills rather than any of your technical ones.
- Remember that interview practice is always a good source of learning and development.
- You may find yourself in a position of applying for something you have been told about by a friend, who is also a candidate - be prepared to be in competition with someone you like. Think about how you will feel and how you will handle your feelings.
- You may find yourself short listed for two jobs and want the job with the second interview more than the first interview job. How will you deal with that?
- Do thorough preparation for both application and interview. Think carefully and in detail about what you are offering which is relevant and what your evidence is of these qualities, skills, competences.
- Use these data, whether in a letter of application or on an application form.
- Refer constantly to what the organisation is saying it is looking for - show your evidence in a rational and coherent form - do not challenge the reader to find what is
relevant.

- Be aware and alert in interviews about your feelings towards the people and questions. If you feel any concern - ask yourself why - concentrate to find an answer - it may be telling you something about your suitability for the job/organisation or their suitability for you.
- Be sure to ask every question you need to, to clarify anything which you are not crystal clear about. During the interview, work hard to envisage what they are saying will be expected of you. If it is not clear, or if anything in the job description is not clear then ASK and ASK until you are satisfied. It can make all the difference between being happy in the job and knowing within 3 days that you have to leave.
Health Sciences - Ellenor

Background
With my B.A. in Theology, M.Sc. in Applied Social Studies and Diploma in Social Work, I moved to South Wales from Oxford intending to look for a position in social work or in a probation-related post. I saw an advertisement for a research assistant in Health Science and felt that it might be something I would enjoy and so I applied for the job. At that stage I had not decided whether this change of direction would be temporary or permanent.

I got the job and towards the end of my contract, having been told it would be renewed, I was told it would not be. I felt pressurised to find another job in a short space of time and was directed by a friend to a vacancy with the Welsh Drug and Alcohol Unit. I applied and it took about 6 weeks for me to get the position.

Now as the Strategic Development Officer I offer support to those charged with implementing the Welsh substance misuse strategy. I deliver workshops, monitor substance misuse services, adapting the UK template designed to assess planning, spending and service delivery in relation to substance misuse. I deal with enquiries from professionals, the general public and the media and am currently managing a project to identify the nature and extent of alcohol service provision in Wales.

Transferable skills development
The main skills that I have developed in contract research include:
- Research and analysis - Considering all aspects to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the subject. Generating and test methods and writing technical reports.
- Communication - Using simple words and phrases to converse at the level of others. Engaging others through asking questions and using active listening skills. Involving people to agree outcomes
- Presentation - Planning and preparing material with clear aims and objectives and presenting information clearly and confidently without using jargon or complicated words.
- Decision making - Considering all available options before making realistic and achievable decision.

Before I worked as a contract researcher I was a qualified social worker where I developed many of my skills. I’d say that the main added value of working as a contract researcher was the development of my understanding of research methodologies and the nature and importance of collecting evidence.

Messages
Analyse your skills and your knowledge and identify how to apply them in other settings. Don't stay in a contract research job for too long as it can be bad for morale and de-skilling, particularly if you are seen as a disposable commodity. Stay if you are learning and developing new skills within the job and maximise these opportunities, but when that learning and development stops, make every effort to move on.
Public Health - Yasmin

After completing an MSc in Public Health and Health Promotion, Yasmin held one research contract for three years before moving into her current job as a health promotion adviser for an NHS trust.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO CONSIDER OPTIONS OUTSIDE ACADEMIA?
I wanted more varied experience and the thought of working in a less isolated environment appealed. I did consider both academic and non-academic jobs but the security of my next job was important.

HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE TRANSFERABILITY OF YOUR SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE?
I felt very lacking in confidence about my knowledge as I was moving into a completely different area. Conversely, I was confident about my skills - communication, IT and interviewing skills were all things I had developed in my university post. The change in work environment was both a hope and a concern as I knew the change from operating as an individual to being part of a team would place different demands on me. In the event, the main skills I am now using are communication and planning.

COPING WITH THE TRANSITION
I probably spent around four hours per week looking for vacancies, mainly in the Guardian, local papers and on the internet. Having been offered my current job I spent five months doing both my university research and my health promotion job part time. In some ways my transition was easier than others because it was gradual. On the other hand it was difficult juggling two part time roles, both of which required different modes of working so I tried to keep strict boundaries in terms of time given to both posts.

I was able to integrate into my new work environment very quickly and am now working with people from a range of backgrounds - industrial, public sector and academic. The whole transition process for me has been, in a word, exciting.

THE APPLICATION & INTERVIEW PROCESS
I needed to complete CVs and application forms for the jobs for which I applied. The main thing is to be focused. The interviews I attended were very skills based and I was asked to give a short (10 minute) presentation for one of them. I wasn't asked specifically why I wanted to move out of academia. The whole process generated mixed feelings. I was nervous about the interviews but excited by the opportunities. Overall it really increased my self confidence.

YOUR CURRENT JOB AND FUTURE PLANS
My current job mainly focuses on strategic policy development. I anticipated that it would be more hands on and have had to get used to not actually having tangible results - though it will be good to see the results eventually when longer term strategic initiatives come to fruition. I have the freedom to make day to day and longer term decisions and a significant part of my job involves researching national initiatives, plus investigating and applying for funding. I am very much a team member, working
with a group of people who are extremely enthusiastic and dedicated to what they do. Although there is still some isolation in that everyone has their own area of expertise, we all share ideas.

Working in an open plan office (I miss having my own room!) brings its challenges. There are five of us in a "talking profession", the phone is always ringing so there is constant noise. On the other hand it was a very good learning environment - I could listen to what people were saying and pick things up quickly. A really positive aspect of my work is the health promotion mentality; the team is really supportive of the physical and mental health of individual members.

Regarding skills, my research skills are invaluable, and so are communication skills for the many meetings I have with often very senior people from voluntary agencies, education and social services. Organisation (time management and planning) is vital. Although my job is called health promotion I do not have to sell or negotiate - the people I deal with are there because they want to be.

My career development is likely to be further into policy development rather than research. I do still maintain my academic contacts and would happily consider moving back into academia as I enjoy research and think that the longer time-scales are less stressful. - though maybe this is balanced out by the stress of the insecurity of contract research.

**HINTS AND TIPS**
- Speak to a Careers Adviser as an impartial sounding board.
- Be open to suggestions and new ideas.
- Get the whole process underway earlier than you would anticipate.
- Have a really good look around, read up about a variety of jobs and apply to "test the water".
- Trawl websites widely - www.jobs.ac.uk had health authority as well as academic jobs.
- Specifying a geographical area can help in targeting specific websites which can then be checked regularly.
- Be honest and open. Let people know you are looking for jobs, network and use people's advice and expertise.
The Competences displayed by Contract Research Staff who make a successful transition from one career to another

1. COMMUNICATION

1.1 Making an impact
• writes to provide evidence of suitability
• writes concisely and unambiguously, with a variety of layouts to help the reader
• presents self effectively in interviews and presentations with the intention of demonstrating strengths for the post
• asks questions to ensure the post and organisation are appropriate for the candidate
• articulates constraints (such as geographical limitations) effectively

1.2 Networking effectively
• networks with people who can influence
• uses a wide range of sources of information, both print and electronic
• builds relationships with named people in careers services or recruitment agencies
• asks questions of careers/recruitment staff to ensure that they understand what is sought and what will be suitable
• scans the environment by asking questions, visiting appropriate web sites and listening to people who might have an idea about the future

1.3. Persuading
• uses well reasoned arguments in applications, interviews and presentations
• is thoroughly prepared for application and interview - having researched the organisation and its environment and being fully self aware
• provides a range of examples of achievements which used relevant key skills

2. COGNITIVE

2.1 Positive/analytical thinking and use of judgement
• positive thinker, when things go wrong, looking forward and putting effort into next attempt
• sees potential in things which are not immediately obviously suitable
• uses judgement to assess the suitability of a post in relation to key skills, preferences and potential
• analytical thinker in identifying own strengths, key skills from experience in the present and previous positions and relating them to requirements of new posts
• makes timely decisions to take action (or not)

2.2 Lateral/creative/conceptual thinking
• lateral thinker, in looking far outside the expected posts in seeking a change - systematically assembles and presents relevant data about self and links it to qualities required for posts
• makes connections between unrelated fields of work and the application of key skills
• innovative in seeking posts and presenting oneself as a candidate
• uses initiative to make self known to people who can help

2.3 Political/Collaborative thinking
• strategic thinker, planning the 'campaign' for finding a new career
understands the political implications of situations and events by being sensitive to the environment in which an organisation is operating and to interview questions or answers to candidate’s questions
• collaborates with colleagues, friends and advisers who can give advice or feedback to help the process of changing career

3. SELF DEVELOPMENT
• undertakes voluntary work/work shadowing to get experience to help in decision making
• uses mentors to support transition
• gets additional qualifications to help transition
• has an ongoing personal development plan which is regularly updated

4. SELF MANAGEMENT

4.1 Positive/enthusiastic
• realistic about how long things will take and expectations
• has energy
• is enthusiastic - talks with passion/sees a positive side to everything/does things does with good spirit even when they are not preferred tasks
• responsible - works to standards expected/meets deadlines/has pride in work and self

4.2 Persistence/stamina
• persistent in making applications despite disappointments
• stamina to keep making consistently high quality applications and attend and make an impression at interviews whilst still maintaining standards in current duties and responsibilities

4.3 Flexible/open-minded
• flexible, in listening to feedback which requires action not previously thought of and in applying for posts which had not appeared appropriate formerly
• open minded in applying for a range of posts which require key skills but will need a lot of new learning as well
• inquisitive about what the world outside academia has to offer
• does not dismiss anything

4.4 Self confident and self controlled
• talks objectively about strengths, needs for development and achievements - with evidence
• self aware - has a list of everything to offer an employer, backed by evidence for previous performance (at work or elsewhere)
• objective - looking at things as they are - without bias from past experience
• adaptable, being willing to try new things which are necessary to progress in the direction required to fit a career plan
• assertive
• self controlled when facing anger, disappointment, frustration and able to vent these emotions quickly and then move forward positively
• has a clear vision for self
• insightful - knows how to build a positive reputation
5. DRIVE TO ACHIEVE

· immerses self in finding knowledge about new career field
· proactive in seeking new opportunities
· uses external resources to help achieve goals
· pays attention to detail