



STS Careers Podcast – Dr Karen Bultitude talks to Civil Servant, and former BSc History and Philosophy of Science student, Jake Soper

Jake graduated from the BSc History and Philosophy of Science course in 2003, and joined the Civil Service in 2005. Since then, he has held a number of posts in the Treasury, Cabinet Office and Department for Work and Pensions, and completed an LLM in International Economic Law, Justice and Development at Birkbeck in 2012.

KB Welcome listeners, we've got an extra-special careers podcast for you today. We'll be talking to a former alumnus, Jake Soper, about his experiences in the job market, and in particular, how you can make best use of your STS degree. I'm Karen Bultitude, the science and technology careers officer at UCL, and it's a pleasure to have you here, Jake.

JS Thank you very much Karen.

KB Now, what was it that you studied when you were here Jake?

JS I studied the History and Philosophy of Science degree.

KB And so, what sorts of subjects do you remember that you covered then?

JS I studied... I remember doing 'Magic to Science'. I can remember doing a project on the uses of chlorine with Hasok [Chang]way back when, quite a lot of philosophy of science, quite a lot of Kuhn and Lakatos and Popper, and things like that...

KB OK, just testing you to make sure you really were a student here...

JS Oh absolutely – we remember absolutely everything 100%

KB [laughs] I'll test you later. What we're obviously more interested today is, y'know, what's your role now?

JS So, I work for central government, I'm a civil servant, I'm a mandarin. And I work in the unit called the Child Poverty unit, which is sort of a tripartite unit that works between the Treasury, the Department of Work and Pensions, and the Department for Education. And what I do is carry out analysis of policy ideas, and then brief ministers on various recommendations on how they can achieve the goals they want to achieve, which for our unit is about eradicating child poverty, at the moment, by 2020.

KB So how did you get to that job?

JS I applied for the Civil Service Fast Stream when I left UCL. The Civil Service Fast Scheme is a graduate recruitment programme. Usually they take on graduates, but older people apply as well. You go into the Fast Stream, you find yourself posted into a department, and then you go through a quite intensive training programme where they invest a lot in your training and they shift you to lots of different jobs – could be within one department, could be within several departments – to try and give you lots of experience to different types of civil service work. As you go through that you pick up skills, you pick up experience, you learn how to brief ministers in person, you learn how to support ministers in parliament. You learn how to critically analyse information, and hopefully you learn something about the delivery of public policy as well. Then you go on to be promoted to what they call a Grade 7 job, and there'll be someone in the profession you want to stay in, so for me, to stay in policy analysis.

KB Right, ok. So going back to the beginning of that then, you went in through the fast stream. So what sort of processes are involved in that?

JS The fast stream is quite selective, it's quite a competitive entrance, but it's really designed to pick up graduates, and to pick up smart graduates. The first thing you do is relatively simple, you do a maths and English exercise, just to make sure you come up to a certain standard. After you've done that you go through this 'in-tray' day, where they test your ability to handle lots of different bits of

information. They sit you down and you start answering emails, and they send you more emails and just try to make you really deal with the pressure. Once you've passed those two stages, you go through to what they call the fast room assessment day where you do an interview, you do some role-playing, they get you to do a group exercise, which is like a negotiation exercise, and then they get you to actually do some policy analysis. So they give you some evidence, they give you some ideas, and you have to go through those, evaluate them, and give a recommendation.

KB So how do you think your degree contributed to all those sorts of skills that you've just gone through there?

JS One of the...the critical thinking element of the history and philosophy of science degree shouldn't be underplayed. I spend so much time challenging economists, statisticians, social researchers on the work they do, and trying to think about... I mean, I spend a lot of time arguing about the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative research...

KB Good going!

JS ...yeah, absolutely! Which speaks straight back to the stuff I did when I was here. The ability to draft articulate arguments, and to think critically about your own work, is really important. I actually think the degree relates really well to what I've been doing. There's a lot of argument in central government...

KB ...debate, surely debate?

JS No no, argument, definitely argument - in the central government, and in the policy community more widely, about the role of economics, and classical economics, in policy work. If you look at those arguments they start to sound very similar to discussions we had about levels of confidence in 18th Century chemistry, or in the development of physics, and things like that.

KB Excellent, it sounds very relevant then. Did you know when you were doing your degree here that that's the kind of career you wanted to go into?

JS No, I didn't have the faintest idea. After I left UCL I was basically working in the bars here, and basically having an absolute blast. I went travelling for a year. I came back and decided that I'd run out of excuses not to get a career of some description. So I went to a graduate careers fair, I found this stall there that was advertising a local authority equivalent of the fast stream. I was talking to them about going to work for Haringay council, and they described this graduate programme where you come in and get all of this experience, and I said 'That sounds very cool, they should do that for central government', and the person said '...well, they do, and it's called the fast stream'. At first, even at that stage, I didn't take seriously the idea of me being a civil servant. I applied because it sounded sort of interesting, and it was a direction, but the further I got through the application process the more I enjoyed what I was doing, and by the time I got to the actual selection day and went in there... I mean, it's very rare that people sit you down and ask you to talk about yourself and show off for a whole day, and I kind of love that. Having spent the day talking to real civil servants trying to persuade them that I knew what I was talking about, I came out of that feeling quite rewarded by the potential that the work had, and then when I got through I was very, very surprised, and I accepted the job.

KB Well congratulations, it sounds like you've done well out of it. Now, you've also been previously involved in recruiting staff, is that right?

JS I have, yes. I've recruited staff from within the civil service. I also, at one point, was a financial recruitment consultant, while I was trying to work out what to do with my life. So yes, I've done some recruitment work.

KB Is there any specific advice that you would give to our students about how they can make the most of their skills during the application process?

JS There's a couple of things I'd say specifically. This is not so much about making the most of your skills, although I suppose it is relevant. When you go to job interviews you're no longer selling what you've learned in your degree, you're selling the things that you can do. It becomes very important to start talking about how you did various things, and what you yourself are capable of, in terms of producing work. I think that's often quite hard for graduate students, because you've done a

degree, and maybe done some work experience, but people don't give you the opportunities before then to necessarily demonstrate what they'll later start calling your competencies. Really, in terms of preparing for those kinds of interviews, thinking about how you've done what you've done, and what you personally did – to be able to talk about that articulately is helpful, when it comes to job interviews.

KB So is it about having evidence of the sorts of skills, or is it a deeper thing about 'what's your personal role and involvement'?

JS It's about being able to describe the evidence in a way that persuades the interviewer that you can do what they want you to do. Usually a job application or a job advert will contain some key words in it about things they're looking for, like someone who can organise information, or someone who can explain things clearly. When you go and interview for them and they say 'can you tell me about a time when you organised information' they don't really want to hear 'well, I did a degree and I organised information lots, because that's how you do a degree'. They want to hear 'I found organising information very interesting, I did it like *this*. I set myself a specific framework for making it function' and things like that. So I would say that about preparing for jobs.

KB Do you have any specific advice about what our students *shouldn't* do when they're going ahead with their careers planning?

JS I think there's one...one mistake I made was, as I came out of university, to take the first office job I could think of, which was to go and work in sales. I took that simply because it seemed like a straightforward thing to do. I spent a year working in sales thinking I would build up, you know, an understanding of how office life worked, a bit of an understanding of different finance sectors, and I did – but I could have got that reward out of a much more interesting job, and I think if I did, I would have had a more rewarding year. If I'd gone to work in a think tank, if I'd gone to work in almost anything other than a sales job, I think I'd have had a much more rewarding year. Some people are motivated by money – I'm not. If you're not, then sales jobs can be really quite depressing, actually.

KB So one of the things when you introduced yourself, you said 'I'm a mandarin'. I guess when people think of civil servants they think of, I don't know, grey suits and not very interesting people. So what is it about working for the civil service that makes you get up in the morning?

JS I am routinely called a geek by a lot of my friends, for being one of those people who, genuinely, on a Sunday is looking forward to going back to work. I suspect that is, if not unique, quite rare. It's the fact that I'm always doing different things. One of the interesting things about working in central government, if you've come through the fast stream and you're working in an exciting role, is you are nearly always doing something for the first time. So if you think about our constitution, it's constantly evolving. We're forever changing how select committees work, or the way you pass certain kinds of rules and bits of legislation. So you're forever trying to figure out exactly how to pass the piece of policy that you have in hand. There will be different groups of people you need to approve what you're doing, those different groups of people will all have different benchmarks for what they think constitutes approval. So you're forever really working on the edge of trying to figure out the best way to pass a new piece of policy or a new idea, and that's a lot of fun. It's quite chaotic but it's fun. There's also the element that you get to go into the houses of parliament and sit in the box, and you write down notes for what ministers are going to say, and you pass them down, and the minister reads out what you've written, or they read out something a little bit like what you've written. There's no denying that's just fun.

KB So your work is in Hansard then is it?

JS Yeah, yeah, my work's in Hansard. People on my team have had their names dropped in Hansard, although that's meant to be a nono. You regularly find yourself...so if you work in a policy team on a bill in very surprisingly prestigious places – after I'd been there, I think a fortnight, I was in the treasury arguing with treasury officials over pensions policy, and I was being taken surprisingly seriously! I was thinking – I've only been here two weeks, I really don't think you should listen to me! But everyone took it very seriously. That's not just about being prestigious, that's just a lot of fun. The calibre of the people you work with is good too. You get to have...and actually, that's a little bit like doing a degree in STS, you get to have some really good discussions with people who know what they're talking about, and if you enjoy that, then you'll enjoy doing a lot of the policy work we do.

KB Great, okay. So the challenge and the intellectual stimulation, and the teamwork, it sounds like, are really important to you.

JS The teamwork is excellent, the intellectual stimulation is excellent. And also, there's the... I almost hesitate to say the kind of realism to what we're doing, the impact of what we're doing. One sometimes feels quite sceptical about how much impact what I'm doing actually will have. If you stand back and look at the data, and you're any good at what you're doing, then you can work out what will make a difference and what won't. That's what the best policy should be made up from.

KB So I'm afraid that's all we have time for, but a big thank you to Jake for coming in today.

JS You're welcome

KB That was Jake Soper from the Central Government Child Poverty unit. If you want more advice on careers guidance, then remember, go and take a look at our website, which is www.ucl.ac.uk/sts. You've been listening to Karen Bultitude, the careers office in Science and Technology Studies at UCL, and our illustrious former alumnus Jake Soper. Many thanks, as always, to Jo Pearson for the sound and editing, and best of luck with your ongoing careers planning.

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