



**STS Careers Podcast – Dr Emma Tobin talks to former BSc History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Science student, and current Professor of Philosophy and History of Science at the University of Exeter, Sabina Leonelli.**

*Sabina graduated from the BSc in History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Science in 2000, before completing an MSc at LSE, going on to work as a research assistant to Hasok Chang at the Centre for the Philosophy of Natural and Social Science. She joined the University of Exeter in 2009, where she works to this day.*

ET Welcome to the STS Careers Podcast series. I'm Dr Emma Tobin, a philosopher of science here at STS, and I'm joined today by Dr Sabina Leonelli, who is a lecturer in the department of Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Exeter. Hi Sabina.

SL Hi Emma.

ET So thanks for joining us today in advance of your research seminar here at the department. What we wanted to do today is talk a little bit about careers in academia and ask you a little bit about your career path, how it went, some of the problems that you faced along the way and so on... and obviously some of the successes that you gained along the way. Can you tell us briefly what your career path has been. You started, obviously, with us as one of our undergraduate students here at STS.

SL Sure. Right after that I was already thinking – I had a very strong inclination to do a PhD. I applied for a couple of PhD programmes, but I was actually advised that the best thing to do was first to take a Masters course, to expand a little bit my knowledge of the area, and also to get some further tools to be able to teach later on. I managed to get a scholarship to do a Masters in History and Philosophy of Science at the London School of Economics, which is a very important masters for philosophy of science in a more analytic tradition. From there, I was looking for a PhD programme. I decided I didn't want to go to the states, where some of the big PhD programmes in philosophy of Biology – which is my main field – are based, so I started a PhD at LSE itself. After a while – I mean, that was only partly funded and I had a few problems there – so after a while I got a scholarship to do 4 year PhD at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. I did 4 years there, then I managed to get a post-doc position within a big project again at the London School of Economics, although this time it was in the Department of Economic History, which was quite an interesting thing for a Philosopher of Science. From there I got the opportunity to apply for a job, which was a permanent job, in the University of Exeter.

ET And what is your job, are you a lecturer in the department or are you a researcher? I'm sure students would be interested in knowing the distinction between those two things.

SL Now I'm a senior lecturer. The distinction varies a little bit between universities, so that's something that students should really keep in mind. Exeter, like UCL, is very research intensive. That means that people who have the qualification of a lecturer are both supposed to be teaching and supposed to be doing high level research. If your position actually started as a research fellow, which meant that my work at that point was supposed to be much more about producing research outputs and producing high level research, and then gradually shifted into teaching. Right now as a senior lecturer, I get a sort of 50/50 allocation, there's teaching, there's research, and there's of course a lot of administration, as with everything.

ET Would you say that your career path is standard?

SL I think I've been lucky, that's for sure, especially because in the current climate there are few jobs, I think it's important to keep that in mind. Certainly being at UCL as an undergraduate gave me a head start, because this is a department where people obviously value teaching

undergraduates, and they value really giving them the skills to do research already, so by the time I went on to my masters, I was ready able to work as a research assistant to what was then one of the staff members here, Prof. Hasok Chang. I was very lucky to work with him because I got a lot of research experience out of that, and I started to get some understanding of what it means to actually publish in international journals and gather research, do historical research as well as philosophical. I guess I've also been lucky in terms of getting scholarships that supported me both in my Masters degree and in my PhD. I did start my PhD without having secure funding, but the fact that I then got funding that covered me for four years was very important. So I think for students now, thinking about taking up an academic career, that would have to be something that, unfortunately, needs to be very much at the top of the priorities – to try and understand, given the current climate and where they actually want to work, what exactly they need to do, what are the requirements, what are the kind of formal components that will help you to get some financial help.

- ET So at what point in your undergraduate career here at STS did you decide – lightbulb moment, 'I'm going to be an academic'? At what point do you think somebody becomes convinced of that?
- SL To be honest I've never become convinced of that, so I guess I was very aware from the beginning of the difficulties lying ahead, and the difficulties in first getting a Masters degree, and then actually completing a PhD degree, and from there on to actually get jobs in my preferred research area. So I always thought that this was an amazing job to get because, of course, you have to do lots of things that maybe you're less happy about, but substantially you can devote a lot of your time to things you love to do. For me, that was really a big incentive. I've always been interested in it. Even before I started as an undergraduate I had this very strong academic inclination. I love to read, and I love to explore things, so I've always considered it. So what I basically decided, I think, during my undergraduate is that I was going to try, and I've always in the meantime kept a very strong focus on what could have been the alternatives. I've never been just fixed on the idea that I need to be an academic and that's that. I think that helped, probably, just to relieve a little bit of the pressure that can come if you set yourself to this.
- ET I think as well, one of the things that you've said is the idea that, y'know, I'm going to give this a try, rather than the idea that 'oh I'm definitely going to become an academic and I'm going to have that as my objective at the end'. Probably, at the beginning of your third year you would have been thinking about Masters programmes rather than thinking about the longer term goal of being an academic itself – I mean, that's there in the background, but you just want to take that first step.
- SL Absolutely, because at that time it's very hard to know exactly what are the topics and the areas that will end up being your core areas – and that also shifts during your academic life, so it's never really set, but I think it's important to use that time, also as a masters student, to explore what is it that your mind finds most exciting. [crosstalk] Sorry, just to say it's not even necessarily what's most exciting in terms of 'what you can do best'. Sometimes it's also things that you're really passionate about, even if you feel 'oh maybe I don't have the background'. You acquire that background. It's trying to find that thing that really makes you light up, that topic.
- ET Yeah, students often come to see me at third year level and say 'Well I would really like to do a Masters and possibly a PhD, but I don't know what to do it on, I don't know what the topic is gonna be. I think that doing a masters really gives you the possibility of exploring some of those options - but I always say as well that it's not just choosing a topic that makes you really light up, but also choosing a topic that plays some sort of a role in current research in the discipline, or in more than one discipline depending on what you're doing. I think STS is actually a good place to start that. How important do you think your undergraduate courses were in deciding or influencing the topic of your choice?
- SL I think certainly one thing that happened during my undergraduate is that I shifted my favourite science, the science of choice. So when I arrived I was fascinated by physics, and I

still am, but I became a philosopher of Biology, and I would put a lot of that onto the courses I got here, which opened up a lot of the other sciences to me. I think I came in thinking, you know, science in the end is physics, and physics is the most philosophical of the sciences, so if I'm interested in philosophy of science that's what I should study. When in fact what really happened here is that I started to become aware of all of the different sciences and all of the philosophical aspects to them. I also think it was nice to open up to different disciplines and the different ways in which they can be inter-related. One thing that still characterises my work now is the fact that I'm a philosopher of science, but I use a lot of empirical research as evidence for my arguments. Some of it is sociological and some of it is historical. So in many ways my research is very strongly mirroring some of the training I got here in the first place.

ET The other question I wanted to ask is, when you were trying to think about supervisor choice, what influenced that decision and how important do you think that decision is?

SL Well, I think actually, it was a difficult decision because the choice of supervisor comes together with lots of different things. I was trying to evaluate locations, I was trying to evaluate departments, and I was trying to evaluate supervisors at the same time. At the time I think I was putting much more emphasis on the location. So I had specific ideas about places where I didn't want to study, especially because it was a big commitment, it would have been several years of being in one place and committing to that. And of course I was trying to go to a place which would have been open to do philosophy of science, which was also including some historical study and some more empirical study. Those are now much easier to find, there are several centres around Europe who do that, but at the time when I was looking for a PhD programme, that wasn't the case. In the end I stayed at LSE, partly because I had funding, partially, to do that, but actually one of the big problems with staying at LSE for me was the fact that I didn't have a good supervisor. There were lots of amazing people around, but no one that could really closely supervise my topic and introduce me to the area. In fact there wasn't even anyone who was very sympathetic to the topic at that time. And that proved to be a huge obstacle, I think if I'd stayed there I probably would never have finished, because it was just too discouraging. It's very important to find someone that can really help you with your research and sympathise with it and push along, because doing a PhD can also be quite a solitary endeavour. So I was very glad when I then moved to Amsterdam I was actually interviewed before getting on the programme because of the scholarship, and that gave me the occasion to meet the prospective supervisors, and also I read their books before coming. I had a very different attitude at that point, I was very interested in seeing – would these be people that can help me?

ET You've mentioned a lot of the positive points and I don't want to dwell on the negative, but what would you say were some of the challenges to first of all doing a PhD, and then secondly towards that longer term objective of trying to work in academia?

SL: I think...well, several! One is of course as we mentioned finding the funding to do it, finding the support. That for many people is a primary obstacle, if they don't find that then it's problematic. Which actually means, sometimes, possibly sacrificing your immediate research interest, or not doing exactly doing precisely what you want to do, but as you were mentioning, maybe trying to target a little bit, aims and outcomes that will enable you to have the kind of CV that allows you to get some of the scholarships. The other part is to be very open minded, which might sound a bit strange when people are always told that you have to be focussed, you have to produce all these papers and show to the world that you're good at one thing. But in fact, once you actually get in the job market, even after you've done your PhD, what you find is - few jobs in lots of different disparate disciplinary arrangements, in different departments, and each department that is hiring is going to be hiring for quite a specific profile. This can be any number of things. Similarly I would say, during a PhD, especially in the UK when you only have three years to do it, many people try to focus on writing their thesis. I would say that actually getting some teaching experience is very important too. If you're not lucky enough to get a permanent position or a research position right after your PhD, at least you can actually go on for a few years being a teaching fellow in

universities, which means that most of your job is doing teaching, but in fact in the meantime you're part of a department, you learn new things and you can publish things.

ET I think that's about all we have time for today, so thanks for joining us Sabina. For more on careers, please visit the STS website – [www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/study/careers\\*](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/study/careers*).

- - Please note, the website has changed since this interview, and the correct address is <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/sts-careers>

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