

Zoology Postdoc Teaching and Research Statements Workshop

1 June 2015

Panel: Profs Howard Bayliss, William Foster, Tim Weil and Anne Forde

Compiled by Alecia Carter & Dom Cram June 2015
Organised by the Zoology Postdoc Committee/Alecia Carter

The Zoology postdocs gathered to ask a panel of academics in the Department what they look for in teaching and research statements for lectureship applications. Below is a summary of the **questions** that were asked by the postdocs, and some notes of the responses (bulleted) and some *general comments* from the panel as the discussions continued. Important, reiterated points are in **green**.

Please note these documents are a product of an informal discussion and represent personal opinions that do not reflect the position of the University and the Department of Zoology on these matters. They are rough transcripts of the conversations that have not been edited for content.

What is a teaching philosophy?

- Broad, pointless question
- Avoid metaphysical
 - Inspire the audience
- If a teaching-focussed: more specific examples of the types of teaching you've done.
- Observing teaching that has worked well—saw a difference
- How do you do your teaching, subvert the question to how you want to answer it
- They want to hear some buzz words, search online—go to an example that was successful
- Interactive teaching: some mechanisms in place—think about how
- Oxbridge: lecture and leave: old-fashioned at the lecture level, but at the supervision level is interactive

Would it be a bad idea to say that you could do supervisions?

- Take what works in a supervision and scale up
- Most universities expect a lot more teaching: adapt your background

You're also seeing how you fit into their Department

- Accessibility outside the classroom: drop-in time, be accessible within reason.

Important that you are accessible!

Be present! And approachable.

If someone came in and suggested they would be quite revolutionary in terms of teaching, what would you think?

- Don't put too many ideas down, know what is being taught.
- Model of dependency: banking theory of learning; move away from this.
- Challenging and inspiring during the lecture

How do you find out what a Department teaches, student feedback?

- Internet will let you know courses
- Appear to be enthusiastic: don't be too critical
- Talk to someone there to get an idea of what the department does
- Show some imagination, but don't imply that they're doing it badly, don't be difficult

Routine question: If you had an opportunity to teach a 3rd year course, what would you do?

- Don't say that you'll just teach your research interest.
- Bring other people in! Construct the course in a collaborative way.
- Gives a key to how you do your research: be broad, not narrow in the intellectual area that you're familiar in.
- If you are bringing others in, say "It would be great if X could contribute"

Link with research: how important is training research students?

- Also includes research students. Have sections dedicated to lecturing / research students / give examples of what you have learnt
- Relationship between teaching and research: important! Make links between them. Teaching should not be a chore, but feeds into your research. Give the impression that this will happen in your teaching at the position

Give a story of something that works: How do you know if it works?

- Students will give feedback: if they are confused about something, they will ask questions which will let you know. You can usually tell during a lecture what is working and what isn't.
- If with a project student: "they've grown as a person, driving their own daily decisions, are more confident, reading literature, etc."
- If doing practicals, you might have an idea about how they're learning: weave in the critical aspect: develop the way the students develop questions.

You probably have more teaching experience than you think you have

Few of us have lectured undergraduate lectures: how do we bridge that gap?

- The decision will be based on how you do research talks! They will know from your research talk
- *Your research talk is an advertisement of how you will teach*
- Start broader and then come in to what you do: explain WHY! you do what you do. It will show straight away whether you will be any good. It is the main bit of evidence.
- PDN will ask candidates to do a mock lecture.

- Graduate teaching, field courses will be relevant. If doesn't have to be formal lectures!
- Dredge out your experience.

Research statements?

- Start broad *with your research question*. Put what you've done into context, what are your major achievements, how have you had an impact on the field?
- Write confidently, but don't "run an advertising campaign for yourself".
- Don't spend so much time talking about what you've done: you should show you've developed your research plan. Talk about short, then medium- to longer-term goals, too.
- Start broad: why is the area you're in interesting? The reader may not know! Spend a little time explaining why the area is important.

Difficult to balance broad and specific research aims: emphasise broad?

- No: start broad, but don't stay there. A sentence or two, but not a whole paragraph. Definitely don't go straight into your problem.
- They want to see a vision, beyond the next experiment and where it will go. It has to be interesting. *The start matters!*
- **The first paragraph really matters!**
- They've read a hundred of these: yours has to stand out.

How does the selection committee view a not-straight trajectory in terms of the research statement?

- Try to weave it together, somehow. Get a sense that selection committees prefer straight-and-narrow.
- Unwise to leave holes. Give it a sentence or two, the committee will think poorly if there are holes. Focus on what you learnt, and what you gained. Pull it out in 3 sentences and then move on.

Is a diverse portfolio what committees are looking for? Or the straight track?

- Focus on the positives. Spin it positively. Don't try to be what you think they want.

You're also judging whether you want to be there!

- Play to your strengths! Broad is good.
- If you're a little broader, show that you can be specific in your 'future work' statement. Know yourself, and prove that you can do broad and narrow.
- The committee needs to know that you will get grants and get papers in Nature.
- The committee is making a huge investment in you: make it clear in your research statement that you are not a risky bet.
- You have to really want the job! A committee can tell when someone doesn't want a job: it becomes obvious. It will come over if you want a job; you won't get it if you don't look like you want it.

- Be confident in yourself!
- Important! It's easy to get it wrong in both directions:
 - Don't be so self-effacing and modest that you don't think you're any good
 - Make sure other people see your talk, read what you've written. You won't realise that you're too testosterone-y or too lacking in confidence.

Should the research letter be tailored?

- YES!
- Don't just look for people that do similar things. Suggest why they may be good collaborators
- **Get someone to listen to you and read what you've written!**

How do you sell that you want to inspire people who 'have' to be there? (hostile audience)

- Be enthusiastic! They will know: have two or three take-home messages, make it exciting!
- You have to show that your subject matters!

What would you do if you have to teach something you're not familiar with? Bread and butter lectures

- Say that it "will help your research"
- "It will be fun to learn the new field"
- Find it a challenge for yourself!
- Why should a student need it?
- In an interview: are they collegiate members of the Department? Will they help out if that's what the Department needs?

Assessment of collegiality is key in the interview

- Outreach activities, stuff you didn't have to do that wasn't focussed on a publication. Have it on your CV, and bring it up when they ask. Outreach things will give you skills.

In a job talk, do you put some stuff in about who it will work with?

- Do you have to contact people? No. It's ok not to, it would be odd to. You should know enough about their research to include them in the talk.
- Put it into context. And your work into a Department.
- Talking to people in the department: they will report on you! Be aware of that.

Don't drink too much in dinner! =)

- Ask people LOTS of questions. Pay attention, and they'll be onside. Have some ideas about how you'll get through the interview day—it's a marathon.
- You'll have a program—prepare!

Can you ask who to meet?

- Tell them who you would like to speak with! Write to the administrator and tell them
- It is ok to have those questions with you. Preparation looks good: feed into their vanity.

Know what would be expected of you in the job:

- Research
- Teach
- Admin
- Other

But often all are listed in the job advert. Which is most important, and how should we weight our application?

- look at the university probation and promotion criteria online. In the case of Cambridge, research = 30pts, teaching = 10pts. Your application, statements and job talk should reflect this.

You must be above a threshold for "teaching and collegiality."

- Below that threshold, you are very unlikely to get an interview, and you will never get the job.
- But if you are MILES ABOVE that threshold, that WILL NOT make up for shortcomings in your research

What is collegiality?

- You aren't just locked in your office, you put yourself forward and are nice to be around and work with
- You do things you don't NEED to do, for the benefit of the dept or institution
- Concrete examples are CRUCIAL for demonstrating this
- =Admin, committees, recruiting, mentoring, outreach etc
- Ask your advisor to read your application and make sure you have given collegiality adequate attention
- Ask your referee to specifically mention certain examples in their letter of reference for your application

At interview, relevant questions might be

- Give an example of a time you disagreed with a co-worker, how was it resolved?
- What would you do if there was an authorship dispute within your group?
 - GOOD ANSWER: I would talk to everyone, gather facts, be unbiased. I would then be a leader, make my decision and take responsibility for that.