



Interview with Dr Briony Labram, Private Secretary in the UK Government's Department of Science Research and Innovation

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Abstract

One of the most exciting things about a degree in Biomedical Sciences and closely related degrees is that it can lead to a wide range of career options. Previous issues of Bioscientist magazine have explored well-known and popular biomedicine aligned careers. In this issue a career working for the government will be explored. Dr Briony Labram delves into an unusual graduate destination. Poppy Gethin-Jones secured an interview with Dr Labram, who after successfully completing a degree in Biology, went on a career journey that took her to the UK Government's Department of Science Research and Innovation.

What is your current role? Is this what you set out to do?

I am currently the Private Secretary to the National Technology Adviser Dr Dave Smith. My role is focused on integrating academic and industry expertise with government to boost UK's superpower ambitions. The National Technology Adviser also advises the Technology Secretary on the best approach to building and enhancing the UK's technology strengths, working across government to champion the science and tech industries, and build networks across industry and academia to draw the best minds into policymaking. The Private Secretary role acts as the primary link and channel of communication between the Minister and the rest of the department, working closely with the rest of the Private Office team. As a Private Secretary I must ensure that the National Technology Adviser's views are represented on areas of policy across the department. There will also be many people who would like to meet with Dave, both internally and externally, and it is the Private Secretary's job to scope out these meetings to understand the purpose behind them and to ensure that they align with the National Technology Adviser's priorities.

What has been your journey from undergraduate student to private secretary?

I completed an undergraduate degree in Biology and Biomedical Sciences and did a placement at public health England working in a lab for a year. I knew I wanted to do a PhD and finished my PhD (Defining the Cellular and Molecular Mechanisms Regulating *Aspergillus fumigatus* Induced Airway Wall Remodelling in Asthma) in 2017 and then left academia and research. I joined the civil service after finding out about it from a careers fair as I knew there were many roles there where the different skills that I learnt during my PhD would be of use and I would be doing a job to benefit society. I started around 5 years ago at the medicines and health care regulatory agency. But since then, I have worked in lots of different departments in the civil service. I have also worked in the government office of science for Sir Patrice Vallance in his private office which is when I decided that I wanted to do a role in private office. Following this I moved into the national technology advisor's office which is where I am now, and I really like this job.

What are the positive aspects to working within the civil service?

There are many different science-based jobs within the civil service with plenty of scope to move around different departments. People within the civil service generally do not stay in roles for very long, a year to eighteen months maximum. It is very different from other workplaces in this respect, in the civil service people move around a lot more. The work is always varying and interesting. You also have a great work life balance as well as job security which is not common with certain science-based jobs such as a research career. Which is what first attracted me to working within the civil service.

Where are you based?

I work for the Department of Science Research and Innovation and my office is based in London, but our second headquarters is in Salford at Trinity Bridge House. We are currently trying to get more people working in Salford at our second headquarters. The offices are moving to the north. The department of Culture, media and sport and the department of work and pensions have offices in Manchester now. The department of health and social care has an office in Leeds. There are lots of jobs outside London now.

What is your advice to students interested in a career in the civil service?

I would recommend doing an internship for the government within science and engineering. You would go into the government office of science and work as an intern for up to a year. There are around 20 places per year. You will have a six-month probation period and then after this you will be working in a permanent position within the civil service. You can apply for jobs across the civil service. There are many fast streams as well. There are some graduate fast stream schemes such as science and engineering fast stream at department of health and social care which is more policy related. It is a permanent position. There are summer internships you can do which are really good. Keep an eye on LinkedIn because they advertise these internships.

What is progression like within the civil service?

I would say it is really good. There are lots of different opportunities that you can take. You start off as an EO after a year you progress to an HEO after a few years you will then become an SEO. You can move up the ranks quite quickly and that's why I had a PhD. I did not come in as an intern although some interns do have PhDs as it is a great way to get in and they know that once they are in they should progress quite quickly. It is quite common for a person to go into the civil service after finishing their PhD. Sometimes when you get higher up it can take longer to progress but nonetheless, I would say that progression is really good.

What kind of science-based jobs are there within the civil service?

I have worked for research funder at UKRI which was interesting. This involved reviewing what people had submitted what they want to research. At the MHRA working with the data from clinical trials. Following that I worked at the government office of science on the covid enquiry with Sir Patrick Vallance. You can also help with coordinating groups that provide science advice. These groups are called SAGE groups during disasters such as the COVID outbreak or a natural disaster such as if a dam bursts. You could also help with different policy areas such as policy for health like obesity or with the NHS.

How do you manage your time now as a private secretary compared with your time as an undergraduate student?

My schedule now is typically 9-5 during the weekdays and very few weekends. The hours are very regular which is something that is nice about working in the civil service. There are a few trips which is similar to when I was completing my PhD. Although your days are busier during your 9-5 it is easier to manage your time.