

Interview with Professor Christian Kay on life as an academic, by Dore van Haasterecht and Robert Lennon

Dore: Since this is the time of year where we all get really stressed about erm finishing our undergraduate degree and looking for jobs, erm what what is the career of an academic, erm, what is it?

Christian: Would I recommend it? [laugh]

Robert: [laugh]

Dore: [laugh] Well, wh-what does it involve?

Christian: Well the first thing nowadays you'd have to do is get a PhD. Um, it's much more regimented than it used to be. You know, I don't have a PhD but it's impossible now to get in by any other route, usually. So you're looking at another three or four years, before you can even start looking for an academic job. And such is the competition now that you would probably find you spent two or three years maybe doing six months temporary job while somebody was on leave, or, that kind of thing, or a research assistant kind of job. And at that, the same time you'd be trying to build up your teaching experience, because, well in this department you'd probably get some Level one and two tutorials to do, and you'd be trying to publish. So that you would go in to your first interview, for a real job, with probably more qualifications than people had, thirty, forty years ago. So I think it's tough for, I mean there's obviously more universities but then there's always more graduates.

Dore: Yeah. Erm, how has, academic life changed since you started with your full-time, erm?

Christian: Well I came in I think in, just when it was beginning to change. I became a lecturer in 1979. And as we moved into the Eighties you began to get a lot more government attempts to control what people were doing. I mean when I first came here, university departments were very leisurely places. [laugh] Erm, I'm sure people were working hard but there was no sense of activity, really. There were enough staff for the students, which probably isn't true nowadays, far fewer students. Erm, and then people began to question what universities were doing with the money that was being put into them. So you got the beginning of, I think, all the research assessment exercise, which has really governed people's lives because everybody's research is assessed and you get a grade, and a lot of other things depend on what your grade is, you know, how much money you get and so on. And there were...

Robert: That must put a lot of pressure onto the research?

Christian: It does, yeah, and it's, I mean I think that's one of the biggest changes, it's short-term pressure.

Robert: Yeah.

Christian: You know, before you could have a life work,

Robert: Yeah.

Christian: erm, and nobody would question that you would maybe produce the one great book, when you were fifty. But now if you don't have four things to put into the research assessment, in the next five years then you're in trouble. And if you're not selected you're in even worse trouble, because that is regarded as the baseline. And of course if you've got a competition like that, academics are quite clever so they learn how to manipulate it. So, every year, you know, every time it gets worse, or they have to think of new ways of distinguishing, ehm, between people because it's grade inflation. It's like, you know, highs and A-levels, that you've got far more people getting the top grade so, instead of the top grade being 5 it's 5*, and that sort of thing. And at the same time they began to look much more closely at teaching and how people taught, and especially how they recorded stuff. I think that's the single biggest difference, is the amount of paper, and I think a lot of people would say that about their jobs. Some of that's been good because I think students have benefited, because

they have more idea of what's going on, and I think they have more idea of their entitlements. Erm, but it has meant an awful lot of form-filling, and doing things just because you're told to do them. I mean there was no such thing when I started as a course handbook, say. The idea that you would want to know what you were going to do every week would never have occurred to anyone. You just came and you did what you were told. And an essay handout, you know, there used to be one handwritten list of essay titles that was pinned on a noticeboard, and you stood and copied it down. And of course the the electronic revolution has made a big difference. That's probably saved us from drowning in paper because we can now email a lot of this stuff, erm or put it on moodle or whatever. So the whole thing is much more tightly controlled, I think. And of course the classes are bigger, erm I mean you don't have an Honours tutorial with four people in it now, so...

Dore: For some subjects you do!

Christian: Well maybe you do! [laugh]

Robert: [laugh]

Dore: [laugh]

Christian: Yeah. So, well the first year's probably the one that's grown the the most. Cause that's maybe quadrupled in the time I've been here. Erm, so there are quite a lot of changes. Not all bad. [laugh]

Robert: [laugh]

Dore: [laugh] Did you enjoy your career?

Christian: Yes, yeah. I mean mine was quite mixed because I, I didn't really intend to become an academic. Erm, I mean I'd spent a few years before that in America, teaching English as a foreign language, which is a great fall-back position for people with degrees like you will have. Erm, and really I took the Thesaurus job because I was interested in dictionaries, but not really thinking of it as a route to an academic job, so, I really became an academic because that was the only way of getting a permanent job that would enable me to carry on with this Thesaurus.

Dore: But you do not regret this decision?

Christian: No, no, it's been interesting.

Dore: Mmhm. Yeah.

Christian: And I've learnt a lot.

Dore: Erm, over the years, how has English Language grown as a subject?

Christian: I think in this department, and probably many others, although there aren't many others, by taking in a lot from modern linguistics. I mean when I started the core of the whole operation was historical. You know, everybody did a lot more Old English than, I don't know what you've chosen to do?

Dore: No, I think those are the smallest classes now.

Christian: Yeah, I mean that was the syllabus. Believe it or not everybody in English Literature had to do an Honours paper in Old English, [laugh]

Robert: [laugh]

Dore: [laugh]

Christian: which caused quite a lot of unpopularity. And you had to learn it a lot more thoroughly, you know, you were expected to parse things, and comment on them. So I think the big change is having subjects like Phonetics and Grammar and Semantics and so on. Partly that's cause linguistics has grown. I mean there was hardly a discipline called Sociolinguistics, say, in the 1970s, it's a very new... and the ones that have grown out of Grammar like Discourse Analysis. Nobody would have thought of teaching Pragmatics, you know, forty years ago, so there's more subject content and it probably appeals to a wider range of people. Erm, so that's probably the main thing, but Glasgow's slightly unusual

because we don't have a linguistics department, so we're covering stuff that elsewhere would be part of linguistics, which gives us, well it gives our students quite an unusual range, in fact.

Dore: How, how has this range of choices influenced employability?

Christian: Well it makes you very versatile. Erm, I mean I still think there's truth in the adage that if you've got a good degree and you've got a critical mind and you know how to deal with information, then you're fit to do quite a lot of general jobs.

Robert: Transferable skills?

Christian: Yeah, transferable skills are very important,

Robert: [laugh]

Dore: [laugh]

Christian: and nowadays of course they include computing, the ability to write is quite an important transferable skill. If you see some of the really bad writing - I've had to look recently at reports from estate agents and, you know, I just want to sit and correct the grammar! [laugh]

Robert: [laugh]

Dore: [laugh]

Christian: So, there are skills like that, like communication skills I think, and that's something, I think, that's improved, that you do more speaking nowadays. We wouldn't have thought of speaking as being a, a useful skill, you know, in past days. Erm, there's no particular career path, I mean I've mentioned EFL teaching, but any kind of writing job, I mean there aren't the opportunities in print journalism that there used to be, but there are all sorts of other opportunities that involve writing, or some kind of research, where you have to go to libraries and dig stuff out. I mean, you can't get everything off the internet, even now. So, I think you're quite employable! [laugh]

Robert: [laugh]

Dore: [laugh]

Robert: Good! [laugh]

Dore: That's good to know! [laugh]

Christian: I mean I don't know if, you know, there are a few jobs in dictionaries, there are a few jobs in publishing. There aren't a lot of jobs in anything, but,

Robert: Mmhm.

Dore: Too many students?

Christian: Yeah, but, I mean partly it's, it just depends in, in being able to present a range of skills, I think, not just, "I can do one thing and that's what I want to do", you know?

Dore: So, what would you suggest to undergrads starting, say, next year, how to make themselves more employable?

Christian: Well I think employers still attach a lot of importance to being involved in things outside your actual degree. I mean obviously one of the main things is getting decent marks so, especially in the first year the temptation is just to mess about for a bit. The Scottish system is fairly well adapted to that, [laugh] in that you can make up, but even so it's, it's better not to, to have to do that. But, all of the traditional things, I think, like student journalism still count for something, or doing some kind of voluntary work or just generally showing that you've got a bit of initiative. You know, running something's always a good thing, even a small thing like a, well maybe not for undergrads but postgrads quite often run little conferences, for instance, or put together newsletters, that kind of thing. But I think nowadays, probably the majority of students will have to do some kind of paid work, I mean that's another huge change. It would have been unheard of, I think, for my generation or the one after to feel that you had to work in order to make your way through university and that's just got worse and worse.

Robert: Now it's the norm.

Christian: Yeah. And we've got to adapt to that, and the plus side of that, I suppose, is that you do get some work experience, even if it's, it's not strictly relevant but even the fact that you've turned up at the café and done this dreadful job for so many hours a week for four years, it shows a certain stamina, and reliability, and you've got someone that'll write you a reference. And you've also got every incentive [laugh] not to get stuck there, as well! Yeah.

Dore: How do you think the funding cuts, ehm, well especially in England will influence English Language as a subject?

Christian: Well, there's always a risk with minority subjects. What's happened in England is what's happening here at the moment in that English Language was absorbed into schools of English, or into even bigger schools like we now have here. And there's always a risk of a small unit being absorbed by a big one, because then your priorities change. So if you're in a School of English, and you've got a hundred students doing American Literature, and you've got ten doing Medieval Literature, and you've got one job, what do you go for? You know there may be good academic reasons for continuing to teach Medieval Literature and, not just saying "okay we'll start with Shakespeare", but you've got the pressure of numbers always. So I think it could have a bad effect, in that it might squeeze out things at the edges, or squeeze out detail, for instance. Cause I think, quite a lot of places now, they will only have, maybe, one module on, the structure of English, say, one semester, and they'll have one semester on the history of the English language. And then they'll have a few options that people that are interested in can go on to, but probably not the range that you've got here, or not in the the depth. So I think there are risks that, the bigger the units get, the smaller the number of subjects, in some ways, and the less coherent. I mean that's another change, that, in the early days you didn't really have any choice, or not much choice. You know if you did English, you did two first years, language and literature, two second years, eight honours papers, of which Shakespeare and Old English were compulsory for everybody. Beyond that you had a certain amount of choice on authors in English Lit or periods in English Language. Now you've got a much broader choice.

Robert: I think that's, that, that's pretty good, yeah.

Dore: Okay.

Christian: Is that okay?

Dore: Thank you very much!

Robert: Thanks very much, thank you!