

Episode 4 - Plan your journey: Navigating the ECR landscape

with April-Louise Pennant and Martin Scheuregger

Key timings:

00:46 – Introductions

02:29 – The journey so far

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Transcript:

Welcome to Confessions of an Early Career Researcher, the show where we deep dive into the journeys, challenges and successes of ECRs. Whether you've just begun navigating the early stages of your research career or you're a seasoned ECR looking to upskill, this is the podcast for you. Join us as we speak with ECRs at varying stages of their careers to discuss their experiences and unpack their academia survival tips. I'm your host, Leonie Smith, a philosopher and lecturer at Lancaster University. Today's episode concerns navigating the higher education landscape as an ECR.

So welcome to my guests, Martin and April-Louise. I thought I would start by just asking you to maybe introduce yourselves who you are and where you're based, and what stage of your career you're at.

So I'm Martin Scheuregger. I'm an associate professor at the University of Lincoln, and my research is in the area of music. I'm a musicologist and music analyst and composer. I finished my PhD in 2015 so I'm at the far end of what you might call an Early Career Researcher, and was promoted this year to associate professor, so I feel like a bit of a fraud on this podcast, but nevertheless, I still just about fit in that ECR bracket.

Well, welcome Martin, and I should say, we've had some other more senior ECRs on the podcast series as well. So you're very welcome to be here. April-Louise?

I'm April-Louise Pennant, and I'm a scholar-activist. I am a creative educator, and I'm a consultant, and I'm currently a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow at the School of Social Science at Cardiff University. And right now I am in Ghana, where I'm completing the last year of my field work, and I'm in the library of Africa and African Diaspora. And I completed my PhD in 2019 and in my viva in 2020 so I've had my PhD for about five years, which is wild to say, it's gone so fast.

Where's it gone? That's the question. How has this happened to us? So thank you both so much for being here, really looking forward to hearing a bit more about your experiences and hopefully shedding some light on the journeys that different people go through. So it's already obviously clear that both of you are at different points in this journey and have done different things. I think it'd be really useful to say a bit about maybe, what roles have you had, maybe leading up to this, and how have you ended up there? So I might start with Martin: you've just been promoted to associate professor. That's something that many listeners might be aspiring to at some point in their journey, as it is. But how has that gone for you? Was it a smooth journey, how'd it begin?

Yeah, that's a great question. So smooth in retrospect, smooth, but everything's smooth in retrospect, because there's only one version of whatever happened. But along the way, a lot of moments where you're very unsure and where you're wondering if you're doing the right thing to get to the place you want to be. So I have a lot of that. But the journey, I suppose, obviously, started with a PhD, which, as I said, I finished in 2015 that was, luckily, an HRC-funded PhD, so I was able to do it full time and in a fairly relaxed manner, well relaxed is the wrong word, intense, but without extra pressures. Yeah, I finished that, and then went straight into a quite an odd three-month post doc. And it was at the University I did my PhD at, and it was again, HRC-funded. It was public engagement focused. I did that beginning of 2016, finishing up in the end of the spring, and I was then deep in job applications and so on. My now wife and I were engaged, we were kind of like at that point in our life where we thought, okay, lots of stuff is about to happen. I was kind of ready for, like, 2-3-4-5 years of wondering where I was going to go with my career and not getting a job and having to do all the little bits and pieces that we do as early career researchers. But anyway, I think it was the 13th job I applied for in that kind of window of time was for a lecturer at the University of Lincoln, where I am now. There was a new music degree that had been running for a year. I went for the job. Couldn't really work out what the job was. I couldn't really work out what the university was going to be like. I didn't know the city anyway, I got that job, and I've been here since, and I've worked my way, obviously, from a lecturer to senior lecturer, and then senior lecturer to associate professor this year. Went for a promotion last year and

didn't get it. So, you know, that was a hurdle. Yeah, that's been my journey. And the bit within the institution has been the smoothest bit, because I've had that security of a permanent job. But at the same time, there's all the bits of your career which things like applying for funding and publications and getting book contracts and so on, which have been, you know, different hurdles that I've worked my way through. But yeah, that's kind of the journey I've been on, and that's why I'm sitting here in Lincoln today.

Brilliant, thank you. And in some ways, I think your journey has mirrored what people think of as a classic ECR journey to success. Finish the PhD, find some kind of postdoc, apply for a bit of a numbers game, a number of jobs, get one and then progress your way up. But of course, as you say, whilst going through it, it certainly wouldn't have felt like, oh yes I am clearly pursuing a straightforward, clear pathway with hurdles at each level. And I think it might be worth saying for people who are listening, we've got separate episodes of the podcast just on applying publications and applying for funding. So please do look out for that, because, as Martin says, once you get the job, there's a whole bunch of other stuff that comes along with it. I wanted to just touch briefly, just on the three-month post op, before talking to April-Louise about her journey. How did that come around? See, it's quite unusual: three-month post op, public engagement. At that time, you mentioned you were engaged. You thought, I'll spend the next few years doing stuff. Were you open to everything, or was this something you were really going after?

That's a great question. Yeah, it was open to everything, is the answer. It's open to everything that I think an email came around, probably the whole university or the arts and humanities subject, saying there's some HRC funding for I can't remember what the specifications were, but I think it was universities that had already had kind of block grant funding for PhDs or something like that, and they wanted proposals from staff and from recent PhD graduates. I think, I think it could either be a member of staff or member of staff with a recent PhD or something like that. And I saw it and thought, well, I don't know. I could probably do something. So I met one of my supervisors and said, I'd love to do this. Here are some vague ideas, what do you think? And then we worked it up together into a proposal. That was my first proper taste of applying for funding and working with colleagues to work on that kind of day in, day out. So we worked up a proposal, a budget, all of those things, put it in in, I guess, probably the September or something, and then got it so it was kind of an easy process, because I was within the institution, I had all the support and so on, and it was speculative, but there weren't other people going for the same position, if you like. So it was an unusual one, but the three-month nature of it meant it was a little taste of what my future could be. And it's three months full time, you know. And I kind of went and sat at a desk every day and did stuff and then and did lots of events and had a budget. So it was a tantalizing little glimpse at what my career could be. I think I finished it and then applied for the job,

which I now have. So there was still a period after it where I thought, well, crikey, what am I going to do? But, you know, I could pay my rent for a few more months,

Fantastic, and I might come back to that as well. Not you paying your rent, which I'm sure you did, without fail, but more having these contracts, but knowing you've got to get something else at the end of it. So maybe we'll come back to that afterwards, Because I know April-Louise, you've had a different journey through the landscape. So tell us a bit about that.

Okay, so I have been studying from, I guess, for primary school all the way to PhD. I did a year abroad in my undergrad. So I guess that kind of counts as a break, but not really, because you're obviously still studying abroad in another university. But I took the ESRC 1+3 route, which enabled me to do my masters in one year, and then in passing that, I was then able to do my PhD. So in total, that was four years straight after undergrad, and along the way, I've always been involved in like working either in retail or in extracurricular activities on campus or in the summers, doing internships. So I've always balanced being involved in the student life through students like unions, as well as, like a job, as well as my studies. And after I finished my PhD, I then wasn't sure if I wanted to stay in academia. I did try to stay, but then I realized, looking back now that there's an art of doing all these applications, and I think looking back when I had tried to get some postdocs, I don't think I had mastered that art just yet. So in the end, I then moved to work as a civil servant in the Welsh Government, which I did for just under two years. And within that time, I was able to really see how academia and policy can come together, and I was involved in a lot of their really groundbreaking policies, such as the anti-racist world action plan. They were also doing things about their new curriculum and trying to explore and put in black, Asian and minority ethnic contributions across their new curriculum. I was also actively involved in the staff diversity network, for the women's network, the minority ethnic staff network, which meant that I was then able to do a report called 'Running Against the Wind', which I co-authored with another colleague, in light of Black Lives Matter. So what that actually did for me, that two years away from the Academy made me be able to apply my expertise. So for those that don't know, my PhD was in education, I am a sociologist, and I focus on the experiences and journeys of black girls and women within the English education system, so from primary school all the way to university undergraduate. So within those two years, I was able to really apply intersectionality in practice, policy, how can we develop that real-world, how do you develop social justice and do it in a way which is meaningful and that can actually make a difference? So it was actually a diversion, but also became, like, a really pivotal part of my career. So after those two years, I then realised, oh, I'm missing academia. I miss the autonomy. I miss the creativity. A lot of people don't think academia is creative, but it is because, depending on your subject, obviously, there's a lot of ideas that you are constantly having to articulate. You're problem solving. You are applying things to the real world. You're engaging with other people from different

sectors, different stakeholders, and I just loved all of that. And I think that feeds into my consultancy work now, right? So even if you are expert in a niche area, which you've honed and your academic skills around it, you can then apply it and bring to life someone else's vision, goal, the idea. And I just love that.

Yeah, so there's quite a lot going on, there's some really interesting parts of what you said. I mean, your entire research area is absolutely fascinating, but let's try and stick to the topic for what we're doing, because you finished the PhD, and what you said was, I think might resonate with quite a lot of people. You had a bit of a go at applying positive and looked at the postdocs, but felt you weren't quite in the right space for that, or weren't quite sure what you wanted to do, maybe in the postdoc, or how to go about it. And what I absolutely love about what you've just described is it's very clear that from an early point onwards, you were developing all of these things that might have looked like side skills or extras or other things, but you were effectively doing a lot of networking, working, developing all these other things. So how important do you think it is for early career researchers to do things, maybe other than the research early on?

Well, I think it's very important. And I think it's about being strategic as well, in terms of like, what are your interests? How does your research connect with other things and other areas. And then how can you hone those skills and try doing it alongside, even if it's for three months, in the case of Martin with the postdoc, or if it's like a project, or even as a student, you know, in your undergrad, there's so many things happening, or a PhD, there's so many things happening. So how can you basically filter it in and connect it with other things, so that it can then help you to hone in your skills, see what you like, see what you don't like, and then also help you to carve out your career journey in academia. .

And so you talked about these things you got involved in: when you got involved in, for example, when you were working like networks and things like, were you thinking, 'oh this might help me in my future academic career?' or were you just 'Oh that's interesting.' How did that happen?

I think it's in hindsight, isn't it, that you are able to see how things come together. Because obviously, as I was doing it, I just wanted to essentially retain my skills. Because, you know, as we know, when we're doing PhDs, it's a long journey, it's intense. You do a lot of training. So I wanted to ensure that even though I was in another space that wasn't academia, I was still able to co-author a report, do some research, talk to different stakeholders, articulate and solve a problem that was a real-life problem that was happening. So yes, to get back to the journey. Then, after I was in the Welsh Government for about two years, I then was like, I miss academia, and the Welsh Government is literally opposite the road from Cardiff University. And I saw that they were advertising a role, and the role fit perfectly in terms of what I'd been doing in the Welsh Government, in terms of intersectionality in the workplace and so forth. And me

being a naive, recent PhD graduate, I messaged them, and I was like, hi, I know this advert is saying for a PhD studentship, but I have a PhD. Can you make it a postdoc and I can just do this? And obviously it doesn't work like that, right? They messaged me back, 'oh, it doesn't work like that. But have you considered?...' And then they showed me the ESRC one year postdoc, and luckily, one of those colleagues became one of my mentors, Professor Sin yi Cheung, who was amazing, and herself and the School of Social Science, they worked with me properly to develop the application. So as I said to you before, The art of doing an application, I then was able to learn that amazing skill and just the depth which is needed. And I made connections as well, which was good. And then I had a one-year postdoc, which was great, and it ended up in my book: 'Baby Girl You've Got This'. And that was a mixture of my masters and my PhD, I put all the findings together to create my book. And then as I was doing that as well, and having my foot back in academia, I was then able to be engaged in what was happening in worlds, in terms of the Heritage sector, particularly the National Trust, they were looking at things related to their properties and collections and the colonial connections. My surname is Pennant, which is Welsh, and it means head of the stream, and I'd already been exploring that connection. And then it just so happened that I was then able to work with the National Trust on the community of practice and colonial collections and develop another strand of my research. And that led to me then creating a proposal with the help of my mentors and the school, and it led to the successful gaining of the Leverhulme Early Career Researcher role. And it's like an overlap, right. I'm still in social sciences and I'm still a sociologist, but I've now moved into history, heritage and memory thanks for the Leverhulme Trust fellowship.

Do you know one thing that's coming out so strongly listening to you, April-Louise, is just this whole being really open to how connections might just occur between the things you're interested in, between the things you're doing, between what's out there. So I think that's really useful for people who are listening to hear because I think possibly when you're starting out, there is this sense that, okay, so this is how you do it. As I said with you, Martin, you get your PhD, then you apply for a postdoc, and then you apply for these things. But actually what you've kind of done is pursue things you find interesting, keep talking to people, keep doing things, and then you might end up in a place that you don't expect to end up. Is that fair to say?

Well, the thing is, I always wanted to be a lecturer. I always said that, but I think now it's shifted towards, I love the research aspect, and I think this is still clouded in the bit of mystery, because people always do think that you're still a PhD student, which is nothing wrong with that, because you're always constantly learning, but in terms of the understanding of you could do PhD and then do research as your career, right? But it's often we assume that PhD, you must get a lectureship, which I guess it makes sense,

because it offers the more well, it's changing now, but it did offer like a more permanent stability, and then you're still able to do research from there. I think now I am where I would like to be, but as Martin said, sometimes it's not as stable, particularly when you are choosing to do the research academic career path.

There's a few things I think, that are coming out as well that might be worth highlighting for people who are listening. One of the things that's come up on other episodes of the podcast is just how, quite often, when you go into an academic career, you feel like I don't know how all this works. I'm not an expert on it. But one thing I liked about what you said, and it reminds me of things that I look at in my research, which is all about the strengths and skills that people from under-resourced backgrounds actually have and bring, of course, you didn't know that you weren't supposed to just ask, can this PhD be a postdoc? You asked, and that led to the ESRC thing. And I think some of us might have had those experiences. There's something really useful there about maybe just ask, and so it might just come to you, Martin, just for a little bit here that again, on the outside yours has looked like this more traditional journey, but for the start of that, you got this little post op thing, and you just thought, well, I guess I could do that and maybe have a go at that. It wasn't part of your plan necessarily. Is that fair to say?

Absolutely? And actually, I think plans are things that we make up in retrospect. So you know, when we're writing a job application or when we're applying for promotion, you make a narrative of the things you've done. This publication led to this. By going to this conference, I was able to make this connection and do this, and it led to this and so on. And that's a lovely narrative that persuades somebody to give you a job or to at least invite you to an interview or whatever it is. But on the ground in the reality of it is that you go, yep, I'll do that because it looks interesting, or yes, I'll do that because it's nearby, or it'll allow me to have a job for three months, or do this for six weeks, or whatever it is. Or I'll be able to do this thing down in Bristol, and I've got a friend there, so I'll go and do it. So you have all these things that are actually you decide to do them because you think, oh, that's a nice thing to do. And then only afterwards do you piece them together. And of course, there are things that you do along the way that, in retrospect, you kind of forget about, and it's because they didn't necessarily lead anywhere, and that's fine. And as an ECR, I think the thing I was probably quite good at during my PhD, and I try and recommend people to do, is just to say yes to as much as you can in terms of things like going to conferences, contributing to editing collections, or early publications where you're kind of part of something bigger, or things like this, me being a guest on a podcast. What's that going to do for my career? Well, I don't know. I don't know until I've done it. And I think going in with that attitude and trying to get rid of the voice in your head that says there are other people that are better or there are other people that have got more interesting things to say, or people that are good enough. And I'm not, you know, we all, I think, have that voice, and you kind of got to silence it. Go for the thing, whatever it happens to be, and then see where it leads. And as an ECR, you really have

more of a there's more opportunity to do those more speculative things, I think, and you kind of have permission. As a PhD student, especially, to just try things out. And what I've certainly found is, further on my career, I've gone, the more I've had to justify the narrative in advance. You know, you need money to go to this conference, or what's it going to lead to? Well, frankly, I have no idea what it's going to lead to, but I want to do it. But I'll pretend there's a reason.

That is interesting, I can empathise with that as well. So I'm a lecturer in my current role, and before that, I was a Leverhulme fellow like April-Louise. So I've had these two different experiences. And there is something about maybe being in the earlier stages, whether you're a postdoc or even trying to work alongside precarious working or being independent scholar, where you have, weirdly, a kind of freedom to go after the ideas that were the further along you get that that kind of does, as you say, not just get curtailed by the job, but you start having to do this kind of process of explaining what this is going to achieve in terms of impact so on. So that's maybe worth just stressing, because I think we can all get quite caught up in how stressful it can be in the early stages. As April-Louise said, you don't have that security, I guess, but you do have this other side of it, which is the creativity and part of why we got into this. So coming back to this idea, there was something he was just saying there, Martin about saying yes to things and being open to things. And I kind of asked you this April-Louise in a slightly different way. But it seems to me like it's about having some kind of balance between being open and saying yes, but maybe knowing the kinds of things that might just be enjoyable to you or might still be part of who you are on your vision. Because one thing a lot of ECRs do talk about is feeling kind of overwhelmed. Sometimes maybe they've said yes too much. So how do you strike that balance? And I might ask both of you this, so maybe Martin then April-Louise, how do you deal with that?

Yeah, that's a really good question. I think when you're earlier in the ECR bit, if you like, you know, in your PhD, early early, when you're in that stage, I think you do have to say yes to more things, and I think that kind of openness is really important at the same time remembering that it's a job, or it's a career that you're trying to go on, and it's not necessarily your whole life. I don't think it should be your whole life. You know, academia is a thing, and so say yes to things, but ask yourself if you're saying yes to things and they're taking up all your weekends, all your spare time, and you're not doing things that you want to do outside of your career, then that's where you maybe say no, or, of course, you say, is this a bit exploitative early in my career? And so I'm being asked to, you know, teach a whole module for not very much money at short notice. You know what I'm going to say no to that. Is this good for me? I had a big musician friend, lots of musician friends, and a good friend who used to have criteria for taking gigs or not, which were badly paid or which weren't paid. And I can't remember what they were, but they were essentially like, will I make connections that I want to make? Will I enjoy it? And will I something else? So you having, like a checklist, and if it's no to

one or more of those, you don't do the things. Having a sense of what you want to do. What I will say, though, is the further on in my career I've gone, and especially over the last two or three years, I've realised that I need to say no to more things in order to create the focus I need for this kind of mid-career bit that I'm starting, and not going to so many conferences, because I just don't necessarily need to at the minute, and my time is better spent on other things and potentially more impactful things, or, dare I say it, higher rated ref outputs and that sort of thing. So, you know, the pressures change.

This is why somebody who's been there and gone through some of these stages can be really helpful, helping you to know how to define your boundaries. I really like what you said about your friend in the music business. It's one way to really think about, what are my boundaries here, and why does it get into this? And what am I trying to pursue and what fits? Because it maybe it's the right choice for you to say, okay, I am going to pursue whatever precarious contracts I can get for the next two years, because I'm committing to that I can travel. I'm doing that, but knowing when you're ready to stop as well and keep your eyes up for the things. So April-Louise, same for you: How do you get this balance between being open, because you're clearly open to so many things and you've clearly got involved in so many things, but keeping it true to where you want to be?

I think strategy and what Martin said as well, trying to just understand what it is that you enjoy. And for me, I feel like it's almost about killing two birds with one stone. So for instance, if you're going to a conference, could you get a paper out of it? Or if you're going to organise a conference, and you've done that in your first year, do you need to organise in your second year again? You've got that experience. And also, there's a few things that you can look at and see that, okay, this is what you kind of need if you're trying to get a career as academic or someone that is teaching, some of that is already constant, presentation, admin and organisation, you know, pastoral staff. So how can you do those kind of things along the way so that at the end, you have a good CV, which can then open up opportunities to get jobs or more research opportunities which encompasses that.

I'm so glad you brought that up. Actually, that is so important, because I was thinking, well, a lot of people listening to this might think, okay, it's all well and good. You're talking about boundaries. I don't have that luxury. I need to earn money. And I've only ever been an academic. I've only ever done the PhD. I've only ever done these kinds of things. I know both of you have got experience outside of academia and doing other things. But what you said there, April-Louise, about keeping an eye on the CV, building up CV as you go, I often think that many ECRs don't quite recognise the wide range of skills that they've developed just from being an ECR in the contemporary landscape. So

you've obviously applied for things inside and outside. What kinds of skills have you developed that have been useful to you?

So I guess in terms of project management. So for me, like I said at the beginning, I love autonomy. So I tend to even my PhD, I created the project myself. The postdoc, created the project myself. The Leverhulme, created a project myself. So I love that, the idea of articulating and bringing something together and making it into something so a lot of my friends are not in academia, or people outside of academia. I always describe what I do as essentially like *The Apprentice*, which many people like have watched. And the current format is that Lord Sugar, he has 250,000 pounds, and the candidates have to go through different stages and different activities and tasks to prove themselves. And then there's a final five, and they have their idea, and they're trying to get that £250k so essentially, what I say to people is, what I do is I create an idea, I create a proposal, and I give it to the funders, and I let them see how beneficial it is to themselves as well as society, and why they need to provide my salary and my research costs. So it's tailoring, yeah, so it's tailoring. So even that in itself, right? Business. I read a really good article, I can't remember the name, but it's about how academics are like entrepreneurs, of like ideas, even when you're doing consultancy as well, you're trying to share your ideas and your expertise in a way which is palatable, in a way which makes sense to somebody, most likely, who's outside of academia. So you're translating in a way, and you're making things accessible, and you're breaking things down. And I think for me, those are the kind of skills which able to harness in based on going through this journey as an academic. And I think few people understand that skill set, right? You're not even thinking outside of the box. As my dad says, there's no box. It's quite interesting, because it's very few jobs or, like careers or professions that I feel like, well, obviously people are different, but I feel that I can do based on the fact that I've got to another level in terms of my intellect and my thinking in the most humble way. I'm not trying to like, we're all geniuses, yeah, right, but once you've done that, like, because there's a lot, even when you're doing a PhD, there's no path. You are literally creating a path and then walking it. And that's why, as Martin said, you have to do what you enjoy, because it's isolating. It's not easy. A lot of the times, people don't understand what you're doing. And even if someone's in the same year as you, they're doing a completely different topic. So enjoyment is one of the things that will help you to get out of bed and to stay up working on that proposal or working on transcribing that interview.

Getting through the admin so you can get to the research. Yeah, absolutely. That's fantastic. I love some of the things you said, then I think it's worth bringing them out. But in particular, at the end where you said you talked about boxes, and so maybe it's not a box, maybe it's a boat, maybe it's something else, but you're so shaping it, you are creating the path by walking it. So it's really important to be creating a path that you like,

you know, so you are creating it by walking it. That's incredible freedom, but make sure you're creating a path you like. And then to come to some of the skills stuff. Yeah, I think you've touched on all the things that we all are. You've talked about this. Entrepreneurs of ideas. We've got project management skills. We've got these amazing communication skills, actually. So Martin, you probably do a lot of teaching, lecturing, presenting skills, shaping ideas, putting proposals together. Early Career Researchers actually have this vast range of skills. So it is worth thinking about that. And then how do you shape the narrative of all those skills to the thing that you want to apply for, whether it's doing consultancy alongside what you're doing, or moving on or staying in academia. Martin, if you wanted to add anything to that with the skills discussion.

Well, I think what you say there about communication is really key. As April-Louise was talking there and I was thinking, well, everything I do is basically one form or another of communication, whether you're, as you say, whether you're in a lecture room speaking to students, whether you're having a one to one with a colleague or a student and you're trying to convince them of something or encourage them to do something, or you're writing a bid and you're trying to persuasion. There's another one, it's influencing. It seems like that's really what we do. Yeah, and actually, ECRs are amazing at communication. We've probably all been at the conference where you have a panel and you've got your professor, your mid-career person, and your PhD student. The best presentation is the PhD student. The pretty good one is the mid-career and the badly prepared, 'I'm reading a chapter of my book' is the well-paid professor. And that's not a generational thing. I think it's about the stage of your career and the need to be really good when you're early on. And I think a lot of ECRs are really good at communication. I think some of us let it slip a little bit as we get further down, but knowing that that's the thing we're good at, I think, is important, or the thing that we have to be good at is about being able to communicate verbally, or speaking, writing, and all those other things.

It's true, isn't it? And you don't entirely lose that. So apologies to any professors listening who were obviously wonderful researchers and presenters, but you don't entirely lose that, and that's part of why. The further on you go, you can just, yeah, I can just do a presentation, just whatever. What is it you need, and sort of drop into things, can't you?

Okay, so we're coming towards the end discussion, so you've both actually given loads of really good advice and insight just from your own experiences, about the skills we have about navigating these things. You're obviously at a point where you're doing what you're doing, what do you think is coming next for you in your career? So I might ask April-Louise this, so you've said, you know, you've managed to craft this career in research so far, but you're very aware that every contract has an end date. What's next?

So for me, I would love to continue to explore both internationally and nationally, black girls and women in education, particularly from primary schools to undergrad and also

the transitions into the workplace, because I think it's an area which is quite underdeveloped, particularly in the UK, particularly when you think about adultification, when you're thinking about intersectionality, and when you're thinking about the real life pay grades and the disparities for race, for gender and class, obviously comes into it. So I'd love to explore that a bit more and see how that because it can then be applied or compared to other groups. Also, I'm really interested in my current research, and there's just so much so I feel like I've only touched the surface in these three years about how well Jamaica and Ghana are so connected and centering enslaved African people and their contributions. So for me, I would love to have a team, because I describe it as being a one-woman band. I think it would be great to be able to delegate and have a team who were all working together so that it's not just me, even though it's been useful, because I've gained all the skills, and I know how every part works. The next phase would be to have a team that can help me to fulfil those research missions.

It's very clear from your journey that a lot what helps you deal with the fact that you don't know quite what the next thing is going to be is just having this consistent narrative and the background of where you're heading and where you're going. Martin, you said you got lucky getting the lecturer job, but you applied for 13 jobs. I think you said before that, do you have any advice for people about this, how to deal with doing a full-time piece of work like the three-month contract, while thinking about the next step? How can we manage that challenge?

I think it's really difficult. I think the truth of it is it's really difficult. A few things I would say. One is that I think other careers and other jobs, other parts of industry have the same type of precarity or versions of it. So I think we're not alone. So it's worth remembering that, you know, if you're a steel worker at the minute, you've only just kind of realised that you're going to still have a job up in Scunthorpe, for example, because the government have stepped in. That's exactly the sort of precarity we're dealing with, it's a very similar type of precarity that we're dealing with. And so when you run a three-month research contract, yes, it's kind of comfortable and it's nice, and it's, to be honest well, paid in the grand scheme of things, but you've got to be thinking, what's going to come next. The way I think about it is, what am I doing now? What are the things that are peaking my interest as I'm going along? Oh, there's this little thing that I've been working on, and there's this little part of it which I want to do more about. What could I do? So, when you're at that kind of slump in the week, I don't know, 4:30 on a Friday, and you've got an hour and what can I do? Right? I'm going to look up some funding schemes. That's an easy task. I'm going to see what might support this next thing. Or I'm going to do a little bit of reading. I'm going to read out of my normal area, and I'm going to see what I can find that I could follow up with something else, or I'm going to email a few people. I'm going to do something, so using the work you're already doing, as a catalyst for future things, and then using your time carefully when you are exhausted and you can't do the stuff that takes proper brain power, do the easier

things, do the emailing a colleague do the bit of googling that you need to do to figure things out. I think, yeah, using your time in that way, knowing that there are opportunities out there, you've got to find them, but also knowing that we're not unique in having this kind of, we don't know what's coming next, and we're not alone in that.

So there's something so we've got the kind of like knowing what your narrative is, knowing where you're going with it. You've got the you're not alone. There's precarity in a whole bunch of industries right now, and that's true. So what do you do to live with that, for the period that you're willing to live with that? It is this recognising your skills, developing your skills, and keeping your eyes open for the things that are coming, and maybe knowing what your boundaries are and how long you're prepared to give to this, this precarious kind of situation, maybe you make the move out of academia. Maybe it's not forever, but do those things. And yeah, and for me, there's something really coming out about this, just having this almost like a portfolio of skills and interests that you've kind of got in the background.

So to wrap up, then, if I was to ask you, what's your one bit of advice that you'd like to leave people with, out of all the advice you've given or something new, what's the one bit of advice you'd like to leave people with on how to navigate the early career landscape? What would you say to them? So Martin, I'll ask you first and then. April-Louise.

Sure, I don't have a prepared answer, but I would say something like this. I'd say you kind of need to be ready for anything. You need to be prepared to do anything, but knowing your boundaries. We've talked about boundaries, I think, a fair bit. So knowing that anything is possible, and being prepared to do any of those things, and being happy to take a gamble on different things, I think, is important. So doing something where you don't know what the outcome is going to be, because that's going to be the thing that will potentially lead you somewhere else. And the other piece of advice I would probably give in terms of kind of this navigation thing, is deciding for yourself where if you might want to find a different map and kind of do something different, as we've kind of said along the way, I've kind of had, in retrospect, what looks like a fairly traditional career, but I would have quite happily gone into a very different area, post PhD, and done something different out of academia, and knowing that that's a possibility as well, and that it's a legitimate path.

So two bits of advice are cheating by giving two bits. The second one is particularly useful, like knowing that your skills might map elsewhere, and actually there might, or the other things that you might enjoy. And April-Louise, what about you?

So for me, I would say it's about having an understanding of the area that you're in. So academia, right? What are the different roles in terms of the teaching and research if you're going to be a lecturer, teaching and scholarship, as it is in Cardiff, and it's also

the research pathway, so looking at people that are where you want to be, or look who have an interesting pathway or position, and then people are so friendly, because I would just drop a line or meet people in conferences and ask them and pick their brain. So an example is one of my colleagues, he was able to get funding to do a project about hurricanes in Dominica. So he created this proposal, was able to get funding and to create a team, and once I realised that you could do that with research, it blew my mind. It transformed me, and that since then, that's what I've always wanted to do, right in terms of creating my own projects which solve a problem, and through talking to him and seeing that he could do it, that obviously inspired me. So I think it's about understanding the different roles in academia, how things are changing as well. So make sure you're signed up for things like Wonkhe and Times Higher Education, so you can stay in the loop different mailing lists as well as you can see different opportunities, different conferences that are tailored towards you and your area. And also just know that the possibilities are endless. Yes, right now, it can seem quite daunting, and higher education is on fire, but you just have to sometimes get your protective gear on, get your hose and create a little place in that burning house, or create like something. If that's your passion, if that's what you want to do, then you can find a way, even if it may be difficult to do.

So, I think there's something you said there that I think is particularly also worth saying, but something particularly worth putting out: look at the people whose careers you think that looks good to me, and maybe even ask them, you know, maybe even talk to them, but certainly look at what they've done. I am unfortunately going to have to wrap this up now, although it's been wonderful talking to you both. So thank you so much to Martin, to April-Louise for the conversation.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Confessions of an Early Career Researcher. I've been your host. Leonie Smith, this podcast was brought to you by the British Academy in collaboration with the Leverhulme Trust, produced by Content is Queen, music sourced by Epidemic Sound.