

A day in the life of a Strategic Planner in Physics

9.15am – Phone rings as I come through the office door – a call from an environmental journalist. This is on foot of a press release which I sent out yesterday in relation to climate change and global warming. He is firing questions at me about the rate of increase in greenhouse gas emissions in Ireland and whether this is meeting European targets. Luckily, I had recently been in contact with the Environmental Protection Agency and had the up-to-date figures to hand or at least buried under only a moderate layer of paperwork on my desk. Although my background is in Astrophysics, in my job as policy officer for the Institute of Physics in Ireland I find myself tapping into many broad areas of the subject and enjoy keeping myself aware, at least at a surface level of what is happening in physics.

By 10.00am I have dealt with most of the multitude of emails which have come in overnight and I'm starting to put together a newsletter article about a recent meeting of the heads of physics departments in Ireland with the government chief Science adviser. Policy work is about formulating ideas on physics issues and then attempting to influence education/academia/government/industry in these areas. So this meeting allowed the Institute to find out at first hand the issues affecting third level teaching and research and to ensure that this is heard at a senior government level.

11.30am – while having a quick cup of coffee, I scan through a recent report on UK salaries which shows that graduates in physics and chemistry have significantly higher lifetime earnings than graduates in most other areas including psychology, biological sciences, business and arts. Make some phone calls to the authors of the report to see if the findings can be extended to Ireland – the good news is Yes!

1.00pm – Intend to go to gym, but have a sandwich instead with colleagues in the physics department at DCU and catch up on lots of gossip. Afterwards get to work on arrangements for an upcoming medical physics conference, calling potential speakers and checking the venue's lunch facilities. No matter how good the talks are people always want a decent meal – or is that just me? Part of my work is to think strategically about how the Institute can work with other organisations to promote Physics. So have decided to work closely with the Irish Medical Devices Association in promoting this meeting. This should help enhance links between academics and industry.

4.00pm – start to put together some figures on numbers of physics teachers in N. Ireland for tomorrow's meeting with the Institute of Electrical Engineers in Belfast. We share a similar concern about resources for teaching science in schools and together we might be able to push through some initiatives on this.

By 5.30pm I'm ready to leave – tomorrow will be a totally different day, combining travel, meetings and some work at home to ensure all is ready for the following day. For now – it's home to dinner and the family.

Shiela Gilheany

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Shiela Gilheany at work. Shiela has a BSc in Pure and Applied Physics and a PhD in Astrophysics from Queen's University Belfast.