Alumnus
Philip Leifeld

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Artwork by Patrick Tresset
"Wouldn’t it be great if we could predict the outcome of political debates like we forecast the weather?" Philip Leifeld, now a Senior Lecturer at the University of Glasgow in the School of Social and Political Sciences, has been pursuing this question since his PhD.

He completed his dissertation at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, Germany. The PhD programme was new and designed to bring together graduates from different disciplines. Because they did not have an expert in his field present who could co-supervise him, he collaborated with the University of Konstanz, where he received his PhD in 2011.

Philip Leifeld studied Politics and Public Administration at the University of Konstanz and took courses in policy networks and network analysis, at a time when network analysis was "quite an esoteric subject within political science, a peripheral area." It was done descriptively then and clearly defined results were rare. But within the last ten years, it all changed, and now statistical methods and modelling are commonly used, which made analysis more reliable. For his PhD, Leifeld taught himself how to write specific software which made analysis more reliable. For his PhD, he studied Politics and Public Administration at the University of Konstanz, where he received his PhD in 2011.

When he saw an advertisement by the Zukunftskolleg for a Postdoctoral Fellowship, he was intrigued. "At first, I didn't like the idea of returning to my old university, but the offer was very attractive. I would be part of the Zukunftskolleg and have the autonomy from the faculty to pursue my projects." And then it happened: "Shortly after I got the Fellowship at the Zukunftskolleg, I also received a grant for the projects in Switzerland," he laughs. Not surprisingly, he wanted to do both projects. Though the administrative part was tricky, it was possible to combine both positions, something for which he was extremely grateful.

He remembers one prominent feature of the Zukunftskolleg, the Jour Fixe, "with mixed emotions. Sometimes Philip Leifeld wanted to collaborate with scientists from other disciplines right away, because their subjects were so fascinating. Other times, he felt the urge to explain to other scientists how it's done, and in the most diplomatic way it helped to understand the differences, but also the similarities between scientific fields. After his experiences there, he is sure: "Communication between disciplines is far more challenging than explaining your own research to others from the same field."

From the many resources the Zukunftskolleg offered, he especially went for the Membership Programme. It was not something he planned. "I was convinced I didn't need a mentor because I was used to finding my way around." But he had collaborated with Skyler Cranmer from Ohio State University before, and wanted to finish some joint papers, ideally on site in America. So he applied to the Zukunftskolleg for funds to travel to Ohio. During his stay there, he spent a lot of time with his host and indeed a membership began! Philip Leifeld thinks: "If your mentor isn't way ahead of you, just a little bit is perfect, so you learn the most." Skyler Cranmer also told him a lot about navigating the academic job market, a skill which came in handy when coming to terms with the University of Glasgow, where Philip Leifeld has been a senior lecturer and Director of Postgraduate Research Training since July 2016.

"In academia, it is important to have no illusions; you need priorities and plans for your career."