Careers in Global Health Conversation with Dr. Christopher Tait:
Insights for graduate students on finding their own path as Global Health Practitioners
Interviewed by Ayesha Shakeel

Dr. Christopher Tait is a project leader at the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), a global management consulting firm. His work focuses predominantly on social impact healthcare and global health practice areas within BCG. Before that, he completed his Ph.D. in Epidemiology at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health (DLSPH) at the University of Toronto (UofT), where he was also a fellow in the Collaborative Specialization in Global Health graduate program. He has a wealth of experience with global health research, but currently, his work has largely been focused on global health practice. In addition to his current role at the BCG, he is also appointed as an Assistant Professor in Epidemiology at the DLSPH.

We interviewed Dr. Tait on what he refers to as his “zigzaggy trajectory” from being a student to a global health researcher, project leader at BCG, and assistant professor at the DLSPH. Dr. Tait’s reflections on his journey, including the challenges and lessons learned along the way, provide current students with insights on navigating academia, and strategies to gather essential skills and experiences for carving their own, unique path in global health.

Let’s begin from the start: why did you choose to study epidemiology during your graduate studies?

For my undergraduate degree, I studied biology, and I was always interested in the health sciences, broadly speaking. But when I was finishing up my undergraduate studies, I didn't know specifically where I wanted to go in terms of future studies, or even career prospects, and what I didn't know is that I wanted to take some time off after undergrad. So I went to France and spent a year there teaching English. And I was working in both an elementary school and in high school. One of the things that struck me early days when I was in France was just how many of my students were smoking after school. And I was really perturbed by this, mostly because it wasn't the smoking itself. That was an element, but it was more that I was just with these students in class, teaching
them and trying to build them up in that way. And then to see them smoking after school, right after class got under my skin a little bit. So, I was compelled to do something about this and in a small way, my way of doing something about this was starting an anti-smoking, smoking cessation club, where we combined physical activity with after-school seminars around healthy lifestyles. And I really took to it, I enjoyed it, and realized that I was unintentionally foraying into the world of public health before I even really thought critically about that being the path I wanted to pursue.

The more I started to think about what I was interested in within this broader realm of Health Sciences, and where I naturally was motivated, public health as a discipline started to fit that mould for me, and Epidemiology specifically, that felt like a good way to leverage my more science and statistical background from my undergrad with my passion for Health Sciences more broadly.

From that point onwards, I did my Master’s degree in epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health; very much enjoyed my time and research there. So much so that I continued on to a Ph.D., which eventually brought me back to Toronto. Similarly, I had a fantastic experience in my Ph.D. studies and epidemiology, a combination of local Canadian focused research as well as exploring the abroad global health agenda. Towards the end of my Ph.D. studies, I decided to not continue explicitly in academia, but move more to the practice side of things. For me, this felt like an extension of my training to be more hands on and a little bit further away from the research. But more recently, I’ve come back a little bit closer to my roots through my faculty appointment at the DLSPH.

What are some of the challenges you face with balancing a dynamic career of teaching, research and consulting? How do you balance the competing aspects of your work?

The challenges I faced were more on the original transition from academia to private sector. There are a lot of differences in how we work, the pace of the work, given the nature of the work itself, and what the deliverables look like. So whereas in academia, it’s often in the form of research and peer-reviewed journal publications, my day job includes working with the actors in the global health arena, whether these be public sector actors, NGOs, social ventures, private sector actors, to make tangible impacts on healthcare delivery, and other aspects of global health. And so, the nature of the work looks very different. It’s client facing, as opposed to, serving the broader scientific evidence base. And I found that to be a challenge, the transition from academia into the world of the private sector.

At its core, I am still focused on population health, whether that be on epidemiology foundations and the course I’m teaching right now, or low global health research, which is a part of my academic, or global health practice, which is more a part of my day job. There’s a common thread
between them in the form of population health, and I think that helps to keep things in balance, and that they're not completely disparate. There's a lot of overlap and synergies between them and I get a lot of passion from each of them in different ways.

**For students who are thinking about working in the evolving field of global health, what are some general skills, information or connections that students should be thinking of starting to build up?**

As for advice for students who are currently going through this process or looking ahead to this process, I think it's about the variety of experiences. Oftentimes, in an academic program, you can end up being very narrowly focused, and that works for a lot of people. But I think there's a lot to be gained by having much more variety to your experience and an academic institution offers a lot of opportunities to explore that variety. So even within the academic side of things through coursework and research, there's a wealth of opportunities there. On that dimension, exploring the different topics that you, on the surface, might not feel that you're interested in but after digging a bit further, you find that you actually resonate with that field or there are some interesting components to it that you could see yourself gravitating towards in the future. That's one side of things.

But even outside of the core academic and research offering, there are a lot of other opportunities to explore within the confines of an academic institution. For me, what that looked like was participating in case competitions: I thought that this is a really neat way to get exposure to a slightly different skill set than we traditionally think about in public health or global health research, but that very much leverage my global health skill set and my epidemiology training. For me, that was a nice way to add variety to my overall graduate training, and through experiences like that, I started to gain exposure to working with people from outside of my field, and what interdisciplinary collaboration looks like. Even by participating in case competitions, I learned a little bit more about the world of consulting itself, and what it means to do client service, and how you think about approaching problems and communicating evidence to stakeholders outside of the traditional academic sphere.

So, one very key piece of advice that I would give students is to take advantage of the breadth of opportunities, and this time in your careers, to explore the breadth of opportunities because institutions like UofT and DLSPH provide a wealth of experiences. And it's very rare that you'll have this kind of time in your career to explore new areas of interest, because once you get past your academic years, you're caught up in the day to day working world, and it's not as easy to carve out time, or even to access these types of opportunities. So I think that's a big part of it.
A second piece [of advice] is talking to people who have been through the path that you’re either considering, or you’re already going down yourself and figuring out where they’ve ended up versus where they started, or what prompted some of those decisions. The ability to talk to people who have been in your shoes before is so powerful, and that’s something that I didn’t take advantage of until much later in my graduate training. Talking to graduates of the program, or folks who are in a field that you have even an inkling of interest about, it’s so much easier to learn directly from people's lived experiences, as opposed to, you know, trying to read up things online and figuring it out. And making that personal connection can also help guide you into that path if that's something that you're genuinely interested in.

**What is a good way for students to get started on finding mentors?**

Firstly, there is the idea of networking or finding a mentor. In my mind, it should be rather organic: ask yourself who do you find this intrinsic connection with on both a personal level and also in terms of the work that they do. Where I've found the most value out of those relationships has always been an organic connection or something that's drawn me to those people.

The person that you have access to right now might not be the eventual person who can provide you with the guidance that you need but you have to start somewhere, and that person will know someone who knows someone who knows someone; and eventually, it might be that third or fourth degree of separation that you eventually get connected to, that proves to be the more meaningful guidance or mentorship relationship.

So, don’t be afraid to reach out, because the worst thing they can do is say no. But if you don’t ask them in the first place, for even just a quick chat, then you’ll never actually get there. I think that sometimes we can get in our own way, and almost talk ourselves out of certain things before we've even given ourselves a chance for them to manifest.

**What was one of the defining moments while you were completing your Ph.D. at DLSPH and what did you learn?**

For me, why taking advantage of the time to explore my options happened later in my graduate career is because I was so hyper focused on the near-term things, whether it be, early on in my program, the coursework, and then getting to my proposal defence, and then there are these incremental milestones that I was so hyper-focused on, and I wasn't ever really looking super far ahead, perhaps for good reason, because I was really just kind of chipping away and staying focused on each little milestone. But when I got to my penultimate year in my Ph.D., when I was on track to graduate within 12 months at this point, that was when I started to rear my head a bit
and look a little bit longer-term. It was at that juncture where I did some critical thinking around what is it that I want to be doing in 12 months? And what are all the steps that need to be taken in the near term to get me there? At that moment is when I started to think that I'm on this academic path, and I can see myself having success there, but I haven't thought critically about other options necessarily. And so I started to explore other options, you know, again, with the breadth of options that were made available to me at UofT, and with the time that I had by being in a graduate program. The more I started to explore some of those things, I started to learn more about what's out there and what resonated with me through participating in activities like case competitions. I had the benefit of time and new opportunities that shifted my mindset about how I can best prepare myself for where I want to be as opposed to staying on this rather linear path that I had been on for the majority of my graduate training.

This was the point where I realized that, on my own, I didn't have all the answers or the information, that I needed to make the most important decision. And so although it wasn't a natural tendency of mine, up to that point, it became very clear to me that I needed to really expand my horizons and really think back to my earlier point around people who have gone down that path ahead of me, and leverage their experiences and their perspectives to help me make my own ultimate decision.

**Based on what you’ve learned from key moments in your career as a Ph.D. student, what would you advise current students in Global Health?**

I would say it's about building a well-rounded skill set. Back to this earlier point around variety, I think, to the extent that you can equip yourself with, for example, good statistical skills, good writing skills, good communication skills, and seek the different types of opportunities that will enable you to build a broad skill set and continue to hone that through a variety of experiences. This opens you up to more options when you're at a juncture where you need to decide on what's next. Whereas if you end up being, you know, too narrowly focused on a subset of skills, you know, early on, and then get to a point where you're interested in opportunities that require, perhaps, other skills that you're less versed in, it's not insurmountable, but more challenging at that point.

**What is your mission statement now and how is it different from what it may have been when you were graduating?**

It’s not completely formulated but at its core, I don’t think my mission statement has changed in a material way. Coming into my Master’s program, where I was very new to public health and epidemiology, my mission at the time was to learn as much as I can, take advantage of as many opportunities to learn in different ways within and outside the classroom and the academy. This
continued in my Ph.D.: I taught a lot, did a lot of research. Even within my research, I explored a lot of different topics and methods. My philosophy was always to collect this breadth of experiences and exposure, because only via that process can you determine what you like and don’t like. If you don’t expose yourself to something, you can’t know if it can be a viable path for you or not. For me, taking things on in broad strokes helped me narrow down and inform my next steps from there.

I think that’s actually still part of my mission nowadays. When I was coming into consulting, it was driven by some of these exposures in my graduate training that influenced where I wanted to go immediately post-Ph.D. And now I’m thinking that within the context of my time at BCG, what are the different experiences that I can get here, that will ultimately inform where I go next. And it’s always about this continual journey, not really knowing where the endpoint is, but putting these short-term goalposts ahead of me that I am working towards, and then that informs the zigzaggy trajectory, from that point forward.

On the whole, my mission has always been: don’t sell myself short and don’t rule things out before I’ve had the opportunity to make an informed decision to rule them out. It’s really about this breadth and collection of experiences that I think can really shape your perspective on what is the best fit for you. That hasn’t changed.