

# Benjamin Hennig

## Professor of Geography

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**Job title:** Professor of Geography

**Organisation:** University of Iceland

**Location:** Reykjavík, Iceland

### How did you get to where you are now?

I have always been in academia. Going the conventional path from one degree to the next is the perhaps most obvious route for becoming an academic. What helped me along the way were jobs that I took for earning a living while being a student. I cannot claim to have gained full inside into a professional life there, but I had student jobs at a consultant agency, at an insurance company, or also at a public transport operator, which all helped me to better put my studies into perspective. As it happened I found all these jobs through contacts in geography, and this helped me to fully appreciate the broad set of skills that one obtains in a geography degree and how these can be useful later. I would not want to have missed these insights as these have been very valuable experiences to see the world outside of academia.

### What do you do as part of your role?

My role as a professor involves teaching, research and administrative duties. My main specialisation lies in geospatial methods, which means that I work on designing and teaching modules in Geographic Information Systems, Remote Sensing, Cartography and Spatial Analysis and further advancing the curriculum in these areas. This specialisation is also part of my research work where together with colleagues I seek funding for projects and conduct research applying these methods. Administrative duties include involvement in research and teaching committees. I am also coordinator of international affairs in our department.

A typical week varies between termtime and the time without teaching duties. In a term where I have most of my classes, much of my time is occupied with teaching and administration. When I teach less or outside termtime, I work on research projects and some administrative duties. Much of this happens at my desk in the office. Fieldwork is mostly limited to shorter periods, mostly during the summer.

I am also a Honorary Research Associate at the University of Oxford which enables me to continue collaborations with former colleagues from the School of Geography and the Environment and maintain active links to UK academia.

### What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

The further one advances in academic, the broader the set of skills become that job ads list or which are needed for promotion. Teaching and general presentation skills also require a certain degree of creativity and technology skill. And one cannot really progress in academic without writing skills. Leadership and communication skills increase in importance with more responsibility when guiding graduate students and establishing a research group. And a skill not usually listed as essential in academic job ads but being very important is that of being able to self-motivate and being able to self-organising your work in a way that balances teaching, research and administration.

### What do you enjoy most about your job?

I love about my current job that is the certain degree of freedom that I have in defining my areas of research. As long as I can convince others to fund the project ideas that I have (or when I can realise them without additional money), I am very free to work on the things that excite me most. Obviously there need to be some results in the end as I still need to produce outputs, but I feel that a career in academia at public universities still gives you a lot of liberty over what you are working on. That said, academia is transforming, too, and the pressures of a more market oriented higher education is changing the duties and challenges of being at university. Coming back to the nice things though: The mix of teaching and research is very interesting, too. Seeing how former students are progressing into the most diverse career paths is intriguing, and among the very enjoyable moments are these when years later students get in touch again and tell a bit about where they are now and how you had an impact in achieving this. Last not least, academic brought me into my current position which felt too much like a once in a lifetime opportunity for a real adventure to not do it back in

**W:** [www.rgs.org/iamageographer](http://www.rgs.org/iamageographer)

2016. While I might not be based here forever, my time in Iceland so far has been the personal highlight of being a geographer. Iceland is one of the places where the relationship between humans and their environment can be observed in one of its most pure form. Geography determines and defines a lot of the ways of living in Iceland and some of the most fascinating natural phenomena are just in front of the doorstep, such as glaciers and active volcanoes. While these have shaped how people live on this island, we can now see and understand how the human impact is actively changing these environments, too. Iceland is like a microcosm of geography.

### **Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?**

My most important job that I took on during my student days was an internship at a research institute (Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research) towards the end of my graduate studies. This internship paved the way for my Master-level research project and also set the path for my progression in academia.

### **Do you get to travel for your role?**

Part of an academic's work includes quite a bit of travelling for collaborations, workshops, conferences and other science related meetings. This can bring one all around the world and often also provides the opportunity to explore new places beyond the original scope of a trip. My work in academic has brought me all around the world, from as far away as New Zealand to seeing many parts of Europe and rediscovering the nearby places around where we live through fieldtrips.

### **How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?**

Geography is my work: I teach and research as a geographer in a geography department. Therefore geography obviously features very prominently in my work.

What I aim to pursue here is that in my teaching and research I always aim to see the bigger picture of geography and include wider perspectives – from the human to the natural environment – even when focusing on very specialised themes (such as teaching GIS).

### **What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?**

Geography requires you to be able to orient yourself in this vast array of themes that geography has to offer. Geography is not one of the subjects that leads to a particular profession. Instead you need to seek your own niche in the world of geography and find your vocation which some do struggle with at times.

Geography has so much to offer – it's what you make of it that matters. You must also learn to say no and to not let yourself be drained by the pressure that academia generates (not only in geography). I recommend looking for geography degrees that give insights into both human and physical geography rather than the more specialised degree programmes

in either of the two lines. The full appreciation of the subject only every really emerges when struggling with understanding the chemistry of soils as much as with the nitty gritty for a good design of a questionnaire survey.

In the end, try to find a niche that you feel happy and comfortable in rather than what you think the world of academia requires you to be.

Be prepared for it to take a long time to have a stable and secure job and be ready to call it a day when you see that a career in academic does not work for you. A geographer's advantage is to be very broad and flexible so that there are many other career paths out there.

### **What are the opportunities for career progression?**

Career progression in academia requires not only hard (academic) work, but as much a good portion of luck. Senior positions in academia are limited and progressing requires flexibility. As for my career, I may have reached quite a milestone with having been promoted to full professor in 2019. Though where I will be in five years' time I would not dare to predict. Academia is a fast-changing environment, and some tempting opportunities come very sudden and out of the blue, as I have experienced at several stages of my career.

### **How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?**

I guess working at university often leads to the lines between work and private life becoming a bit blurry. Being in geography means that things one does for fun can be easily linked to geography so that leisure activities actually can feed back into work. Whether this is designing and setting up geocaches in class, or travels inspiring new research project ideas. You can never really escape geography, especially when one enjoys the subject so that you become a geographer through and through inside and outside of work.

I guess that comes with a little extra piece of advice to also 'enjoy' life outside of work and to sometimes be careful to maintain a degree of separation: There must be space for life beyond the job.

### **Why did you choose geography?**

Initially I choose geography to add some element of natural sciences to my humanities studies at university (which I started with German and Philosophy as majors).

Geography then captivated me so much that I (literally) changed course and switched to a Geography major and changed my minors to more classic geography subjects, Soil Science, Sociology, and Transport Studies. I think anyone who is keen on understanding both the human and the natural/ environmental side of our planet should go for geography. It provides the broadest and most comprehensive perspectives, and for me there is no more exciting subject that gives you so much choice.



**\* This interview was undertaken in 2021 and was correct at the time of publication. Please note that the featured individual may no longer be in role, but the profile has been kept for career pathway and informational purposes.**