

From Philippe de Mézières to Unisanté

About

Claire-Marie Schertz
Academic Coordinator at Unisanté
Doctorate in Humanities, Medieval French Literature
2019



Claire-Marie Schertz in Unisanté's offices. ©Shervine Nafissi

With a PhD in Humanities, Claire-Marie has been working for over three years as academic coordinator and project manager at the University Center for General Medicine and Public Health, Unisanté.

While her current position may seem a far cry from her expertise as a PhD in medieval literature, it is nevertheless in line with her interest in interdisciplinary contact, and it enables her to deploy her organisational skills and creativity in the service of the academic community in the region.

The heart as a guiding light

It was her passion that gave direction to Claire-Marie in her choice of studies. She began with an interdisciplinary Bachelor's degree: with one foot in the humanities, for its enriching and fulfilling nature, and the other in HEC, where she studied economics because she was thinking of going into international relations. "I've always been interdisciplinary", she says, "I'm a letter writer who loves maths". But she quickly abandoned the idea of international relations and chose instead medieval French during her Masters; "a friend had told me it was brilliant!" She even tried her hand at research in this discipline. It was "a bonus for the fun of it," she says, and an experience that led to her being offered the chance to continue in the same vein with a doctorate. Claire-Marie accepted the offer fully aware of the realities:

"I was conscious from day one of the unforeseeable nature of the academic career. A colleague who had been one of my teachers, had warned me: "It'll be hard, and it won't necessarily lead to an academic career."

As part of an SNSF project, Claire-Marie studied the late fourteenth-century works of Philippe de Mézières. But not only. UNIL compensates for the salary gap between SNSF doctoral candidates and doctoral assistants by offering the former a percentage employment to carry out other academic activities. In this capacity, Claire-Marie coordinated the Centre for Medieval and Post-Medieval Studies. She was involved in organising events, communications, publishing and teaching: activities that added many strings to her bow, in addition to her work as a researcher.

Perseverance and good advice when the going gets tough!

Then came the last stages of the doctorate, with its share of stress and challenges to overcome. "First of all, you have to finish your thesis. That's the main objective, and it's tough!" Claire-Marie was nearing the end of her contract, and it was only after a hectic period during which she was awarded a (small) end-of-thesis grant, held a temporary job, and gave birth to her first child, that she was able to complete her doctorate while living in Portugal, where her partner had taken a job following a career change. On their return to Switzerland at the end of 2019, Claire-Marie defended her thesis. Then in Spring 2020, the Covid epidemic broke out. And a second child joined the family.

It was "tough" too, because the professional step after the doctorate was difficult to work out, especially because it was now clear to Claire-Marie that she didn't want to continue down the academic path:

"We're afraid, because we say to ourselves, studying Philippe de Mézières at the end of the 14th century, on the job market, what can that lead to?"

It was the support she received, from an encouraging employment counsellor and through workshops and individual coaching given at UNIL, that restored Claire-Marie's self-confidence and enabled her to become aware of her skills:

"You're capable, but you don't know you're capable! I had skills that I wasn't aware of and that weren't necessarily recognised in my disciplinary environment, where academic careers were valued above all else. I wasn't aware of the importance of putting words to these skills, and which words, to promote them on the job market."

Claire-Marie kept a close eye on job vacancies. Jobs that matched her profile as a PhD in literature were rare, especially as the employment situation was so tight during Covid. The job-hunting process tested her patience to the limit. To put into perspective her disappointment at the negative responses, Claire-Marie kept in mind the figures for the integration of PhDs on the job market:

"I'd heard the statistics that were very much in [their] favour. Having these figures in my head gave me hope when the going got tough - an interview where you didn't get the job, for example. You tell yourself; it'll be the next one."

And then one day, soon after the birth of her second child, she saw the ad for the job she holds today.

"I really fell in love with it! Particularly in terms of the tasks involved, the links with the academic world in Lausanne, and the 'challenge' it offered. The profile they were looking for wasn't exactly my own, but it required a number of skills I did have: I'd done research, taught and worked in university administration, and I was able to highlight them well."

The skills essential for my work

As a project manager, I need to be highly organised, know how to set priorities, and have excellent writing and speaking skills. These are highly operational skills that I've developed through my various activities. Interpersonal skills are also essential in my role, which requires me to work with people from all departments and at different hierarchical levels.

In particular, my experience as coordinator of the Center for Medieval and Post-Medieval Studies enabled me to get to know medieval researchers from all sections, and to experience interdisciplinary collaboration. This experience has served me well in my current cross-disciplinary role, and on top of the many oral presentations I gave during my thesis, has helped me to develop the self-confidence I need when addressing academic audiences.

Other aspects of my work are more directly linked to research skills, such as the ability to synthesise and analyse. My job also involves proposing and creating new initiatives, which requires creativity and imagination.

Taken together, these skills make up a diverse range of competencies that I bring to my current position. They're a continuation of the experience I gained during my doctoral research, but also in my role as coordinator of the Center for Medieval and Post-Medieval Studies, as well as volunteer activities I did at the same time.

After a recruitment process delayed by Covid, Claire-Marie finally got the job she had been hoping for and started her new role in March 2021.

And if you had to do it all over again?

Even if the end of the doctorate and the transitional period after it were tough on her, Claire-Marie wouldn't change anything about the route she's taken:

“I've made choices that I'm happy with, and I've always made them out of passion and interest. I also realise that I've been very lucky. There's a part of our lives that we can't control. To have done something rewarding and to now have a job where I can fulfil my potential is truly an immense opportunity.”

She adds that being able to draw on a variety of skills and having acquired professional experience in fields other than research were assets in the transition to a job that interested her. She encourages researchers at the outset of their careers to take advantage of all the options available to them:

“I think it's important to think about diversifying, and to take advantage of the various workshops and training courses that exist. And always think about developing your skills as much as possible, because an academic career is very precarious and can lead to enormous frustration. When people have made huge sacrifices and it doesn't work out, without their having ever imagined themselves anywhere else, it can lead to massive disappointment. I've seen it all around me.”

Projects for the future

Claire-Marie has been in her post for three years, and now has her sights set on perfecting her project management skills and obtaining a certification in this field. Unisanté is a newly created institution, and Claire-Marie believes that she can still accomplish some great projects and contribute to the fundamental work being carried out there. “I think I'll be around for a while yet,” she concludes with a broad smile.

Lausanne, February 23, 2023