

Humanities Postgraduate Research Student Newsletter 2011

Issue 4 | January 2011 | Employability

On Employability ...

Every year postgraduate researchers in Humanities put together a student newsletter based on our annual theme – welcome to issue 4 ‘on employability’ which presents a snapshot of our career-focussed activities alongside advice from students and staff.

Humanities have held an annual Career Day for the last five years. We use the event to tackle issues facing our postgraduate researchers as they decide what to do next. Moving out into the wider world of work after many years spent at University presents something of a challenge. Increasingly the feedback from our PhD students following their attendance at the event is that they feel, paradoxically, both under- and over-qualified for jobs. Apprehensive to apply for posts which do not state that a PhD is an essential qualification, and nervous about going all-out for an academic post without solid teaching experience and a strong list of publications. Added to this is the additional uncertainty that students with further degrees in the arts and humanities are facing. What exactly are they qualified for? The majority of humanities subjects lack a natural vocational trajectory; so, where should they go and what should they do? We decided that we would make ‘employability’ our annual theme for 2010, stressing the benefit of the transferable skills gained during PhD candidature which lend themselves to a multitude of possible careers and offering practical advice on how to get into academia. The message to our students: start thinking about your career as early as you possibly can, take advantage of the assistance available to you and be proactive! To showcase our efforts, we have invited students and staff from Humanities to share their knowledge with us in this issue of the newsletter, bringing together a whole host of career experience and advice.

We have ‘Top Tips’ and perspectives from academics, including Professors Patrick Stevenson, John McGavin, Michael Kelly, Jeanice Brooks and Joachim Schlör, on how they got their careers started, what to do and what not to do. We have recommendations from our core trainers, Chris Lewis and Jenny Carl, on how Humanities’ transferable skills training can prepare you for life post-PhD. We have a report on Humanities Career Day 2010, the focus of our employability year, including a list of ‘our skills’ which we can take forward into the job market. We have information from the University’s Career Destinations service on what they offer to postgraduate researchers and we have a summary of student activities including a New Orleans’s roundtable event, the international student view, how to create a journal and organise a conference and, with a nod to Nietzsche, advice on why we are all so employable – we just need to realise it.

So take some time to read through, and, if you are a student studying with us, to start thinking about where you might like your career path to take you. As Archaeology student Iza Romanova’s ‘Voices of Experience’ career flowchart (p. 13) aptly illustrates, things do not always work out the way that you think they will. Take some advice from Vitae, the UK’s researcher network: think big and ‘allow chance to play a role in your career’,¹ because you never know where you might end up!

¹ Vitae PGR Tips, Issue 41, April 2010

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/4069-244631/PGR-Tips-issue-41-creating-luck.html>

Who'd be a university lecturer?

You don't want to know how I became an academic. No, really: I more or less fell into it after realising that I couldn't write fast enough to be a journalist and couldn't make a living out of travelling. So just before the last Age of Austerity in British public life dawned in the early 1980s and the door was slammed shut on recruitment of academic staff, I spotted an opportunity to join what was then the Language Centre here at Southampton and tried my luck. It was a very junior lecturing post with a heavy teaching load and very little time for research, but it was more attractive than translating government documents that no one wanted to read (my previous 'career') or teaching languages to schoolchildren who didn't believe that France existed and anyway didn't care (I had just completed a PGCE).



Professor Patrick Stevenson
Head of Research and Professor of German and Linguistics Studies

At this time, I had no research experience but I was hired by an appointment committee apparently willing to take the chance that I could re-invent myself – a callow young Oxford graduate with a degree in French and German literature – as a linguistics scholar, able and willing to develop this 'new' area of the curriculum by assisting its pioneer at Southampton, Dr Rodney Ball. So over my first 2 years in the post I squeezed in an MA in Linguistics at Reading University around my full-time teaching and administration tasks here.

After completing the course, I asked my tutor in Reading – the inspirational Peter Trudgill, who introduced the field of sociolinguistics in Britain – what I should do next. When I had asked my undergraduate tutor the same question 6 years earlier, he had advised me not to even think of doing a PhD unless I was willing to devote years of my life, living in poverty, to the production of a thesis that would almost certainly not get me a job at the end of it (my enthusiasm at that time was for modern German poetry, so you can see his point). Peter was different. He said: 'Look, sociolinguistics is big in the US and it's just taking off here but no one is doing anything on German – this is your chance, get in there and write a book on German sociolinguistics.'

Well, I'd expected him to tell me to do the conventional thing and follow my MA with a PhD, but I have to say the prospect of doing this part-time over maybe 8 years didn't greatly appeal, and my previous tutor's advice was still ringing faintly in my ears. What if I had nothing to show from 10 years as a lecturer but a PhD thesis that would just gather dust in the library? So with the surprising support of my line manager, I embarked on a writing project of a more commercial nature and – to cut a very long story short – wrote a book together with Stephen Barbour at Surrey University that was published by Cambridge University Press in 1990. *Variation in German* is not a very catchy title, I admit, but Peter was right: it did fill a gap in the market and came at just the right time (timing is all in this game), as Modern Languages programmes around the world were beginning to diversify from their exclusively literary orientation and incorporate 'new' fields of study such as linguistics.

20 years on, my first book now seems horribly out of date but, astonishingly, is still selling. I have since published about 10 more books but *Variation* established my reputation in the field and I am still often introduced at seminars and conferences as 'one half of Barbour and Stevenson'. It was also this experience that gave me the self-belief to continue, and although my job has changed beyond recognition since I started here 30 years ago I am very glad I seized the chance to have a go when it presented itself. (By the way, I did actually make an honest man of myself eventually and gained a PhD by publications as a staff candidate.)

I told you you wouldn't want to know how I became an academic: the chances of being able to fall into a post almost by accident are now so remote as to be inconceivable. But what I would say to you is this: take advice but also trust your instincts, be prepared to take a risk, and try to position yourself to take advantage of opportunities by working out where research in your field is going. And don't expect to land the dream job straight away: get experience wherever you can, be flexible – adapt to survive! – get to know people in your field and accept all invitations to give talks, as vacancies often come up unexpectedly and it will do you no harm if you're known 'out there' as a good person to work with.

Employability

Professor John McGavin
English; trainer 'Writing for a PhD'

Is that the right word? It certainly serves the utilitarian ends of those who have to justify spending money on research to those engaged in other things. But it doesn't quite sound like a clarion call to keep young people from play and old men from the chimney corner. It is an irritatingly weasel word (very much of its time), revealing an uncertain view of whether postgraduates are customers or social agents. It pretends that employability is something you get from your studies (as well as the degree), but it does this precisely because it was recognised that a declining percentage of young scholars would find jobs in academe and so what they did had to be re-imagined in terms of skills.

You might think from the above that I oppose the notion of employability. The opposite is the case. But it seems to me that we first need to understand it in different terms, dispelling the political clouds and seeing it and ourselves clearly. Not many postgraduates reading this would contentedly imagine their work as a retreat from social usefulness. I doubt if any would deny that they have responsibilities to their fellow human beings, whatever their subject. And that's where 'employability' comes in. Call it 'contributing', 'engaging', 'helping', 'giving

benefit' – it's what we do or could do that matters. We have been called (an old-fashioned word but I don't care) to study, as others are called to politics or to entertainment or other professions. But that calling is not the end of what we do; it is only the route or part of the route.

If 'employability' means thinking hard about what you do; becoming aware of its conceptual scope and limitations; identifying the skills which your research has given you, and how they could be deployed to benefit others; acquiring a body of knowledge and envisaging how this allows the world to be seen in a clearer way; learning lessons which can promote that most fundamental of human ethical skills, imagination – if 'employability' means those things, and I believe that it does, then it is a great thing. It does not mean 'getting' a job, but knowing clearly what you have done and what you can do with it.





Flaming poi outside the Nuffield Theatre (photo: Richard Seely on Flickr).

Featured Images

Many images featured in this edition have been provided by the worldwide photo-sharing community at flickr.com. They are provided under a new type of image licensing called 'Creative Commons' which photographers can use to freely share their images for a range of uses, particularly non-commercial and educational purposes. It is a fantastic research resource as well. Why not have an explore? www.flickr.com

Top tips for 2011: 7 Questions on how to get into Academia

Answered by those who should know...

With special thanks to Professor Jeanice Brooks, Professor William Drabkin, Professor Michael Kelly, Professor Mary Orr, Professor Joachim Schlör, Dr Scott Soo and Dr Michael Williams.

Did you always plan to become an academic?

...Always? From when I was a child? From when I left school? As both my parents were Classics[!] teachers at the same university in New York City, my career horizons were, so to speak, 'environmentally limited'. At university, I discovered that my aptitude for Mathematics and Physics was far below that for Music, but I became fixed on, or rather towards, an academic career only in my final undergraduate year, when the senior Professor of Music encouraged me to become a musicologist. (Bill Drabkin)

...No, my first job was an office cleaner, and one which I was quite happy with. I began thinking about academia in the final year of my undergraduate degree. (Scott Soo)

...No, although there are plenty of teachers in my family. I only really considered becoming an academic after I completed my undergraduate degree and then decided to take an MA. Then one thing led to another, and became fascinated by research, and found that I enjoyed teaching, so here I am. (Michael Williams)

Thinking about your career trajectory, was there anything that you did during your time as a PhD student that you would do differently today?

...No. I worked and played very hard and had amazing friends and experiences, including being very involved in organising PGR events and activities. My quandary was the decision to pursue a PhD not with my inspirational undergraduate teacher but at Cambridge for the 'value-added', but almost non-existent PhD supervision. I made the right decision, although I vowed I would never supervise a PhD as I had experienced the process myself! (Mary Orr)

...At the start of the third year, I thought I could have been more productive in the first year of the doctorate, but with greater hindsight I realise I was very productive. Productivity is not simply measured in outputs, and this is especially so in the first year as you engage with lots of new and exciting ideas. Some and perhaps most of these will be discarded as the project takes on greater shape. It's a necessary process without an immediately tangible result. (Scott Soo)

What most helped you when it came to submitting your thesis?

...Not my supervisor – maybe the knowledge that it will never be perfect, so I thought I might as well submit it rather sooner than later. (Joachim Schlör)

...My written English needed a lot of help. A friend of mine (who had studied English, not Music, at university) went through my thesis, almost word for word, to ensure that I used the best words, phrases, sentences to say what I wanted to say. Sure, my thesis supervisor went over the main arguments in my work; but without that additional help with the English language, I would never have learned to write academic papers properly. (Bill Drabkin)

...Not necessarily in this order: comfort food, wine in the evening, and encouragement from my supervisor. (Scott Soo)

...Having friends and colleagues read the draft thesis and give me feedback – the more ruthless the feedback (within reason..) the better! (Michael Williams)

...Having a few months rent-free accommodation from my parents for the last part of writing up. (Jeanice Brooks)

Getting the first job in academia: which skills did you find useful?

...Really the most useful skills were on the teaching side. I had done some part-time teaching as a PG, and had a chance to learn from my mistakes by the time I got a full-time job. I also found organisational skills helpful in handling the huge diversity of jobs academics have to do. (Michael Kelly)

What was the most terrifying moment of your first interview for an academic job?

...A joke I made to the head of the department about the sandwiches at the buffet lunch being a bit dry: it was met with cold silence. (Scott Soo)

...Lunch. (Jeanice Brooks)

What was the greatest surprise of your early career?

...Not so much a surprise, but the insight that there is a world outside of academia which is as interesting and valuable (and can even be studied...). (Joachim Schlör)

...That I eventually managed to get an academic job that was 'permanent'. I had 4 temporary posts of increasing lengths of short duration in very different parts of the UK. And all entailed enormous teaching loads often far from my research areas with new materials to prepare. (Mary Orr)

...The amount of time spent preparing classes, but also how good the two-way experience of teaching is. (Michael Williams)

Can you remember the best advice you were ever given?

...The best advice was: 'Everyone is a guru if you know how to listen'. I understood this to mean that before you unleash a devastating critique on someone, you should first think about what you can learn from them – you might then have a more productive discussion with them. (Michael Kelly)

...If you dare to publish, there will always be idiots who will write bad reviews, don't understand what you're doing, tell you what kind of book you should have written instead – never answer. Never. (Joachim Schlör)

...I was given no advice whatever, just left to my own devices. This has led to a much slower career trajectory than that of most younger colleagues. But I don't think I'm any the less happier for it. (Bill Drabkin)

...Never become defensive when answering questions during presentations or job interviews. (Scott Soo)

...When you're first starting out, avoid writing reviews and concentrate on your own work; aim for the best journals and don't bury your work in conference proceedings. (Jeanice Brooks)

Transferable skills: a postgraduate's view

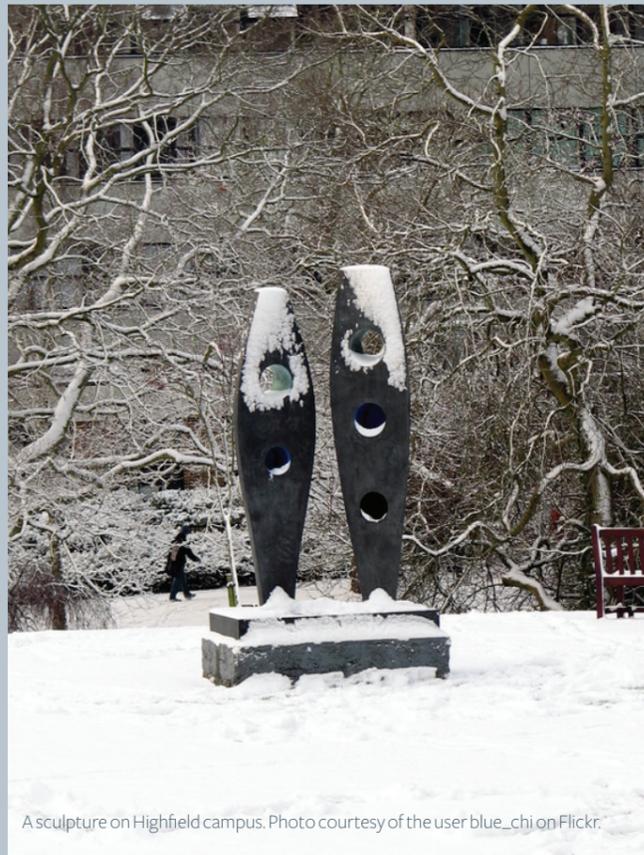
Zubair Shafiq
Lecturer in English and Film Islamia University, Pakistan

I am a lecturer from the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan (IUB). I have joined the University of Southampton with a vision to gain a better understanding of practical research. I have learnt from my previous experience that having a good degree is not enough to get a good job. Employers expect and demand more than just a degree. I remember a situation in an interview where the employer said, "I have seen your degree and qualification. It's okay. What else do you have to offer?" I think at this point the university plays an important role: apart from our degree, we also need to have a grasp of important transferable skills.

From my experience so far, staff at the University of Southampton has been very supportive. I started my PhD in March 2010 and over the first three months, I had the opportunity to attend training sessions on personal effectiveness, on key skills such as net skills and endnote, even on how to get published, writing for a PhD and an introduction to research ethics. Other useful sessions included poster making, subject specific seminars and student run conferences. The best thing I found here is that I can attend a training offered by any discipline within the university without any restriction. Even if I find some training in Engineering, Science or Mathematics which is relevant to my needs, I have no restriction to join and attend that training and also don't have to pay a single penny for such wonderful sessions.

This training not only provides opportunities for the exchange of ideas, information and experiences but are also part of networking. After every session, we have to write a reflective report. In the beginning, I felt it was a 'difficult' job but considering its merits, I wish we had such a system at IUB, my home university. It's not only a certificate that matters: these reflective reports encourage me to be attentive during training sessions. Secondly, they are a revision of all important points discussed during the sessions. And, above all, the best thing is that they are a wonderful way for improving writing skills! It has been a joyful and informative experience.

In my opinion, transferable skills are desirable in every university; the University of Southampton is no exception. They ensure a higher degree of employability. I must say that with all those training programs and excellent supervision, the University of Southampton has everything to offer for a student to become a good professional!



A sculpture on Highfield campus. Photo courtesy of the user blue_chi on Flickr.

Take a chance...

Christian Lewis
Core trainer and part-time PhD student in Archaeology

Throughout the academic year, Humanities operates a wide and varied number of short two-hour courses and training workshops. Mapped against the Research Councils Joint Skills Statement, these take into account many of the topics (and challenges) faced by postgraduate researchers. Some are designed to help develop and revisit study skills while others introduce key transferable skills. Transferable skills help you to demonstrate your adaptability (and 'employability') and are vital tools in today's fiercely competitive job-market. It is not just the judges of Saturday evening talent shows that are looking for the 'X-factor'; in today's job market you need to be highly qualified, highly experienced, and highly employable. It is essential that you build added-value to your C.V.

Since October 2008, I have been running a number of core transferable skills workshops. Sharing experiences from my background in commercial project management, complemented by previous and current experiences of participants. The sessions have proved very popular and feedback has been very positive. Topics covered include project and time management, networking, and team dynamics. The advantage of these sessions is two-fold. Short-term, hints, tips, and techniques can be applied to effectively (and efficiently) manage your current research, but each also has additional long-term benefits. Take project and time management for example, by successfully completing your project you have in effect demonstrated that you can effectively manage a large-scale project. Taking on board some of the theories and techniques discussed

in the two training sessions, lessons learnt can often provide crucial experiences to recount in competency-based interviews.

Diversity is one of the strengths of the Humanities postgraduate community but as noted by Anne Lloyd in last year's newsletter 'research is like thrashing around in your own personal goldfish bowl'. During my sessions, I always suggest that at all times you need to be open to opportunity. At previous networking workshops participants have done just that—taken advantage of an opportunity and built networks. You never know who you might meet at a training session, or who they might know, and ultimately how that meeting might impact on your future career!

The job-market may be fierce but if you seize opportunity, keep a record of training you attend and note how it enriched your research experience. One day, it might just provide the key to securing your dream post!

Thinking critically

Dr Jenny Carl
Core trainer and Research Fellow in Modern Languages

Transferable skills and employability are currently very high on the agenda and they play an important part in how universities market their degree programmes. However, I would like to draw your attention to the broader skill of critical thinking, which does not get as much publicity but which is crucial for a successful PhD candidature and subsequently for a post in academe (and other walks of life, too). In his article in the Times Literary Supplement on 7 May 2010, Keith Thomas stressed that "linguistic sensitivity, capacity to evaluate an argument, an understanding of the past and an awareness of cultural difference remain indispensable for any kind of public activity."

Developing critical thinking skills will help with regard to the publication of articles and book reviews – and might open the way to eventually turning your successful PhD thesis into a book. Moreover, it will enable you to acquaint yourselves with many different and varied subject areas, understand their underlying principles and develop your own stance on them. At a time when academic jobs become rarer and there are many more applicants for any given post, this ability will make you stand out from the crowd. And it will give you more flexibility as it will enable you to put yourselves forward as a suitable candidate for a wider range of jobs. In the above mentioned article, Keith Thomas aptly quotes J.M. Keynes who stated that critical thinking acquired in humanities will develop people's "intelligence and character in such a way that [they] can pick up relatively quickly the special details of the business [they] turn to subsequently."

My own experience is a case in point. I am currently working on multilingualism in Europe as one part of my job, and on the German language in central Europe for another part. Yet my background is in European Studies where I had a strong focus on social sciences. What connected the different stations of my C.V. is my interest in discourses and the way they connect with individual and collective identities. Nevertheless, each time I had to learn about the surrounding subject area from scratch and, crucially, was able to convince people that I would be able to do this thanks to my ability to make sense of new and different subjects and the confidence of saying: 'I can do that'.

The PGR training programme at the University of Southampton delivers sessions on aspects related to critical thinking, such as how to write academic book reviews (a good way to get into academic publishing), how to revisit and streamline one's research question and how to deal with criticism as part of the reviewing and feedback process. These sessions help with the PhD process and they also offer opportunities to reflect on your own competencies.

The courtyard outside the new Mountbatten building on Highfield campus. Photo courtesy of the user lovestruck on Flickr.



The Humanities Career Day 2010

Dr Eleanor Quince

PGR Coordinator and Employability tutor, Humanities

For the last few years Humanities has held an annual Career Day for Postgraduate Researchers, offering a glimpse into the varied careers available to those graduating with a PhD.



From left to right: Christian DeFeo, Collaboration Support Manager at Southampton, Angeliki Petruts from the Directorate-General for Translation at the European Commission, and James Murrell from the Ministry of Justice.

Branwen Hide from the Research Information Network (RIN) talking to PhD student Hannah Ewence at the Humanities postgraduate career day.



The introduction of a new member of staff in the University's Career Destinations centre (Rich Carruthers, p12), to work specifically with PGRs, enabled us to create a bigger and better Career Day - the apex of our 'employability' year.

The Speakers

The day began with a brief introduction from the organisers, followed by a series of talks from invited speakers with PhDs who had gone into careers outside of academia.

The first speaker was James Murrell, a Southampton alumnus with a PhD in History who now works as Senior Executive Officer in the Judicial Appointments Division of the Ministry of Justice. James's talk, entitled 'From Lecture Hall to Westminster Hall: Non-academic Pastures Post-PhD', explored his career working for the government. Realising that academia was not his vocation, James took a temporary job at Westminster, summarising reports for Ministers. When his contract ended James sent letters to the various government departments asking if there were any posts that he might apply for. He got one reply from what was then the Ministry of Justice, and he got the job. James has worked in Westminster ever since, progressing through the ranks to his current, senior position. James was keen to stress how helpful having a PhD had been: 'a PhD is a big project which has to be self-managed and self-motivated. It requires planning and organisational skills, the ability to communicate complex theories to a wide audience: skills that employers look for'.

James was followed by Christian DeFeo, a recent graduate of Humanities' PhD in Creative Writing programme. Christian currently works in the University's Research and Innovation Services department. His remit is to assist academic staff in creating bids for funding, with contract negotiations and with enterprise activities. Christian's talk, 'Life after the PhD', focussed on the opportunities available for recent PhD graduates within the Higher Education sector. Christian stressed that an awareness of the wider research

agenda could be helpful in offering alternative career paths, after all, Universities do not just employ academic staff. The bodies which monitor and assess research through methods such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) encourage academics to raise funds for their research and to consider the impact their research has beyond their immediate field. Former PhD students are uniquely placed to assist: they understand how research works but also the business context that it works within.

Next up was David Allard a former PhD graduate who now works as a senior journalist for the BBC, producing 'South Today', the regional television news programme for central southern England. David offered a glimpse into the fast-paced world of radio, TV and online news. The BBC employs over 2000 journalists, from varied backgrounds and with varied specialisms. We live in a 24/7 environment and BBC News reflects this with regular bulletins and updates from its reporters based all around the world. When asked if a PhD would be an asset when working for the BBC David stressed that the attention to detail that doctoral study requires is a definite advantage: 'BBC News's reputation rises or falls on the quality of its research, whether it be sourcing pictures for an hour long documentary or checking facts for a two minute radio feature. Accuracy is one of the BBC's core values'

Following David, we had a presentation from Jez Brooks on opportunities for PhD graduates within IBM. IBM is a world-leader in IT services and consultation working with clients across the globe in all industries from retail to sport, health to entertainment. IBM offers a unique opportunity for PhD graduates: the chance to join a graduate employment scheme at a higher salary rate and to experience a range of different paths within IBM to find the one that suits you. Jez was keen to assure the Humanities audience that background did not matter: his PhD, from the University of Southampton, is in bio-chemistry. And was it useful for his career with IBM? 'Not the Bio-Chemistry, no', but Jez worked as part of

his well-honed leadership and interpersonal skills helping him to become head of the graduate employment scheme for IBM. After an enjoyable networking lunch at which students could chat informally to speakers and pick up literature from a range of information stands, former PhD students Hannah Fluck and Catherine Edgcombe took to the lectern. Both Hannah and Catherine have taken up jobs with Hampshire County Council. Hannah works as a Senior Archaeologist where the knowledge gained from her PhD in Archaeology has proved invaluable: 'my general archaeological knowledge is constantly being challenged; I never know quite what is going to come up next!'; Catherine, who has a PhD in History, is a trainee accountant: 'postgraduate qualifications can be valuable in non-academic careers – even ones which seem very far removed!'. Hannah and Catherine presented their personal experiences of life outside the confines of academia. Catherine has been a trainee since 2008 and admitted that while it was difficult to go back to starting something, her love of learning has seen her through. Hannah still researches in her 'spare' time maintaining her links with Southampton, but admits that it isn't easy: 'you have to be flexible and accept that you can't always have your cake and eat it!'

Next was a talk from Branwen Hide a former PhD student who now works for RIN – The Research Information Network. RIN is a small policy unit funded by the UK Higher Education Councils, the seven research councils and the three national libraries. The projects that RIN undertakes are designed to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the research information landscape; how researchers and institutions can make use of online tools for example. Branwen talked about her work with web 2.0 – how to network, keep up-to-date with current debates and literature and how to use the web to find jobs and funding opportunities. Branwen took her job with RIN as a way of keeping in touch with the research environment and she has used web 2.0 to publicise herself and her work with the network. Branwen has a personal webpage, a blog, a twitter account and is on facebook – she believes that PhD students are great communicators and this skill can be used to not only to get a job, but also to keep one!

The final talks of the afternoon were given by Dr. Victoria Vaughan and Angelique Petris PhD. The speakers investigated the opportunities and the problems associated with work outside of the

UK. Victoria, who gained her PhD in Music from Southampton, came to us via weblink from Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Ohio, US where she is the Assistant Director of the Opera Theatre Department. Angelique, who attended University Paris 7 in France, is a staff translator with the European Commission's Directorate-General for Translation. Victoria's talk explored the differences between the UK and US education systems and the culture shock she encountered when she moved from one to the other in order to embark upon an academic career. Victoria took the decision to enter a US university as a student first, immersing herself in the system before searching for a job. Her MSc in Opera no doubt added to her employability: 'but it also helped me to speak their language: in America at job interviews you need to be 'big-headed' and forceful about your achievements; not something UK-educated job-hunters are very good at!' Our different languages have proved to be the basis of a career for Angelique who works in Greek, French, Italian, English, Spanish, German and Portuguese. Angeliki, who is based in Brussels but currently on secondment in London, highlighted the many opportunities for talented linguists. Like Victoria, she acknowledged that the transition from one country to another was not always easy, 'but PhD students are problem-solvers and will always find a way'.

The day finished with an evening lecture from Professor Patrick Stevenson on his academic career. Read Patrick's own account of his talk on page 2.

Branwen Hide from the Research Information Network (RIN) talking to PhD student Hannah Ewence at the Humanities postgraduate career day.

Our Skills

So what skills do our speakers think that PhD students bring to the wider world of work?

Project Management – setting goals, achieving milestones. The PhD is your project and you manage it

Self-Motivation – commitment to your PhD, the drive to complete it, ability to work independently and be self-reliant

Commercial/research awareness – an understanding of the business context in which research is undertaken

Analytical/accurate mindset – ability to critically engage with, précis, analyse tranches of data accurately

Leadership – an understanding of what motivates others to achieve, especially during difficult personal or economic times

Interpersonal skills – ability to develop networks and to forge lasting working relationships with supervisors, advisors and other students

Flexibility – being able to take what you know and apply to other areas; being willing to try new things and explore alternative paths

Communication – both written and verbal, construct coherent arguments, articulate ideas, write in a style appropriate to purpose

Problem-solving – the ability to recognise and validate problems; to tackle the issues that arise in a creative and positive manner

What our students thought...

'All in all, I found most of the talks useful and I also found it interesting to know how different speakers got to where they are now. Thank you for organizing all of it, and for the free lunch of course.'

Esteban, Modern Languages

'I think career day was a really useful training session for Humanities graduates if you don't know what to do for your career prospect.'

Sherry, Film Studies

'Overall, I must say I was very happy to have attended this event and hope that there are more like it in the future. I think their contribution to our career search is enormous and I am very glad to have formed part of this. As I said I hope there will be many more and that the speakers continue to come from varied backgrounds so that we can discard employers we have been thinking about, consider others we previously disregarded, and become inspired by career paths we never even thought about before!'

Anna, Modern Languages

'As a PhD student who is not dead set on a career in academia, it was very refreshing to attend a career day which not only acknowledged the possibilities of career paths outside academia, but actively encouraged you to consider them.'

Will, Music

'I appreciated the opportunity to attend this session that has given me clear guidelines to implement over the next three years. I will definitely attend the next one. The catering for vegetarians was very good too!'

Tracey, History



From left to right: Hannah Fluck, senior archaeologist at Hampshire County Council; David Allard from the BBC; Catherine Edgcombe, accountant at Hampshire County Council.

Career Destinations

Rich Carruthers
Work Based Development Coordinator Career Destinations

Career Destinations host a range of bespoke services for our postgraduate research community including specific web resources for career development incorporating profiles and advice from our postgraduate alumni, www.soton.ac.uk/career/pgr.

We all know how important academic qualifications are, however, it is often the skills developed during your studies that help make you stand out from the crowd. I am the Work Based Development Co-ordinator for PGRs and work within Career Destinations to ensure researchers are represented by the service. Through a variety of service provision we encourage all our students to reflect on their skills development throughout their studies and extracurricular activities.

Together with Humanities, I have helped to establish internship and placement activities alongside a variety of one-off presentations and events during 2010. One of the most popular of these was the PGR Career Day that occurred in March 2010, as commented on by one of our students, "I really hope that career day continues to be an annual event as it is extremely helpful to have a day specifically tailored to exploring the opportunities available to Humanities PhD students after they have completed their studies." (Jennie Cobby, Final Year History PhD, March 2010).

Only by seeking engagement from employers and alumni can we really begin to understand the values and skills required to secure employment on completion of your doctoral studies. The work undertaken by Career

Destinations has helped to transform our way of approaching employability and skills development of our research community.

During future academic years we aim to build on these successes and provide more bespoke services that will directly impact on you, our research community.

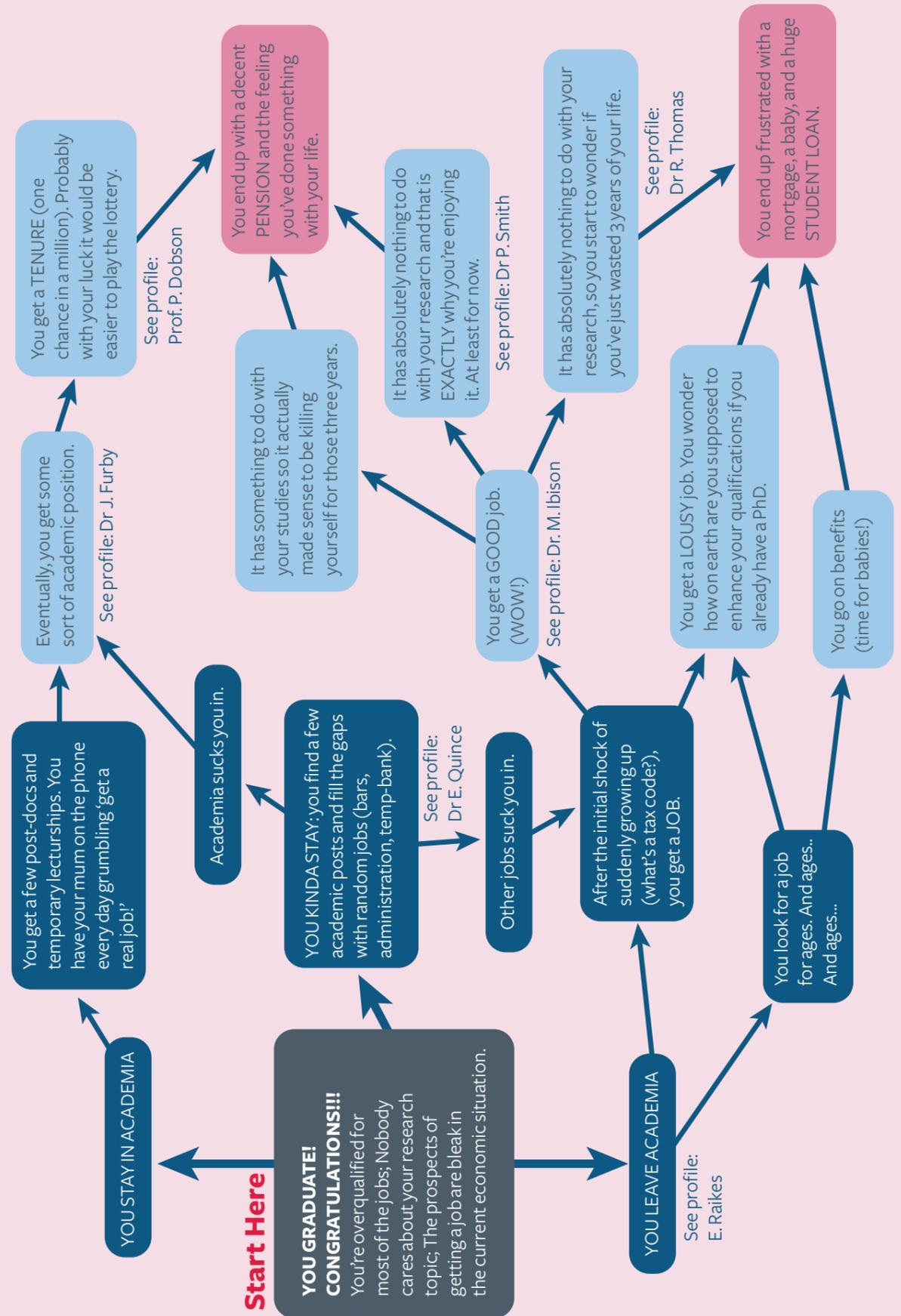
For further information on the work undertaken by me (Richard) and Career Destinations please visit www.soton.ac.uk/careers/pgr. It's never too early to begin considering your future.



Rich Carruthers from the university's Career Destinations, speaking at the Humanities Career Day.

Voices of Experience

Iza Romanowska



To read more career profiles go to: <http://www.soton.ac.uk/careers/pgr/voices/index.html>

Navigating the job market: Route 66

Meike Reintjes

2nd year PhD student in Modern Languages and Student editor of this newsletter

In early April 2010, thanks to generous funding through the graduate school and Modern Languages, I went to New Orleans to attend the Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA). While it was a huge conference, small workshops with an intellectually challenging yet friendly and supportive atmosphere ensured that postgraduate students like me were not intimidated or scared off but could participate as equals. With 'big names' buzzing around, it was nevertheless a 'family event' in the nicest sense – and it was fascinating to discuss research projects with scholars from hundreds of different institutes from dozens of different countries.

However, one of the most valuable events of the conference was a panel organised by Chadani Patel & Atia Sattar: for the opening afternoon they had invited six high profile scholars from different American universities who, guided by a number of question put to them by the organisers (who had consulted all graduate students attending the conference) offered their expertise on “How to Navigate the Current Job Market”. While their advice was tailored to the specific needs of young scholars with a degree in Comparative Literature, most of the key points can be generalised for the vast majority of disciplines. To put it into a nutshell: getting a job is about fit. While there are certain criteria, such as a submitted thesis, publications and teaching experience, which tend to be covered by almost any training, postgraduate brochure or guide, the actual job application should not be underestimated. Summarising the experts' advice on a good job application Chandani, one of the organisers of the panel, writes:

‘When preparing for the job market, have realistic expectations from yourself; if you are used to working one way, do not all of a sudden expect to work a radically different way to meet your goals. Make a plan and enhance your already existing working methodology. Before applying for jobs, be sure to look at a successful model, that is, the applications of fellow graduate students who now have academic jobs.

Be sure to look at their dissertation abstracts, cover letters, CVs and teaching philosophies. It is imperative that your CV is easy to read. The reality is that there are a lot of applications, members of the screening committee may not bother to read beyond the first paragraph or two of your letter, or the first page of your CV, it is doesn't immediately start to give them the information they need.

Tailor your job applications to specific jobs highlighting those aspects of the job that the department is looking for, whether it is more of an emphasis on teaching or your versatility as a scholar. Be sure to have written samples available for your recommenders before applying.’

Done all that? Than make sure you get a mock interview with members of your department. Try to think of yourself as a future junior colleague – and if you are not too busy with the very basics such as breathing, you might even try to be entertaining... And to end on a positive note: despite all rumours about the alleged inferiority of a British PhD as compared to the US one, American universities seem to be quite interested in applications from this small island.



Rich Carruthers from the university's Career Destinations, speaking at the Humanities Career Day.

Getting organised

Michael Gale PhD student in Music

Louise Rayment PhD student in English

Louise and Michael were successful in gaining funding from the AHRC for their conference—‘Music, Literature, Illustration: Collaboration and networks in English manuscript culture, 1500-1700’—which was held at Chawton Manor on the 16th and 17th February 2010.

As well as developing skills in applying for funding and organising a conference, Louise and Michael invited Heidi Bishop from Ashgate publishing to give talk on how to get published as part of their conference.

When looking to develop the skills that will help you to find a job after your PhD, you might focus on publishing some of your recent research or perhaps looking to gain some teaching experience. Organising a conference is probably not high on your list of priorities. However, it can provide an amazing number of those all-important ‘transferable skills’ and, although it is not without its stresses, it can also be both a rewarding and enjoyable experience.

One of the most important of these skills is the ability to identify an academic area which is ripe for development, and then secure the necessary funding in order to make that happen. Writing funding proposals and circulating a call for papers

Are not only useful skills for those hoping to pursue an academic career; being able to identify a gap in the market, sell your ideas to external agencies, and hone them into something which fits into a very small box on a proposal form are definitely useful transferable skills.

Studying for a PhD can be a solitary pursuit, but organising a conference will bring you into contact with a wide range of people and is a great way to make contacts and friends, both within your own specialist field of interest and beyond. It demands both leadership and co-operation (with a co-organiser, other academics as well as venue staff, caterers etc.) – as well as time management, but fitting it all in is well worth the effort. Apart from being advantageous for your long-term career progression, it can also enable you to reap more immediate benefits, such the opportunity to get involved with a spin-off publication or research network, adding yet more skills to your CV.

Louise Rayment (left) and Michael Gale talk to Heidi Bishop from Ashgate Publishing at the conference.



Why I am so employable...¹

¹ With apologies to F. Nietzsche

Jane White

PhD student in Philosophy

With a previous career path from medicine to medical journalism to cofounder of a successful medical communications agency, Jane provides a perspective from 'the other side'.

Things really are different in the ivory tower. Knowledge is valued, your ideas count, deadlines are much stretchier, procrastination is an art form and for most of the time you are answerable only to yourself. Out in the big wide world none of this applies – or at least not in the business world. Here, there is a team who is relying on you, a workload to be done in real time and a company whose success depends on you delivering your bit.

In one of my previous lives, I had the pleasure of hiring [and sometimes the pain of firing] newly qualified post docs to work as part of a medical publishing team. The company was lean and mean but rewards were high – working with the leading medical specialists around the world, foreign travel, quick career progression and a share in the profitability of a company that became the one of the most successful agencies in Europe. But the attrition rate among post docs was high and it even became a bit of a heart-sink among fellow team members when the latest recruit proudly announced that they had just 'finished their PhD'.

On paper a post doc was a winner: relevant expert knowledge, sophisticated research capabilities and writing skills; all of which made for an excellent fit with the job. Initially I confess I had a bias towards selecting them. However, the promise was not always delivered. The warning signs were usually there in the interview when I asked the candidate why they thought they might be the man/woman for the job and got the standard reply. They had a PhD, they would confidently tell me, and therefore not only had an in depth knowledge of some – usually obscure – thesis topic but had also a whole raft of other buzz-word skills; self motivation, good time management, an ability to plan and problem solve and good communication skills, to name a few. However, it rapidly became clear to me that a PhD was no guarantee of these skills or the ability, or sometimes willingness, to apply them to the job in hand. For some, good time management translated into making sure they started work by 2.00pm and kept Fridays free for football. Problem solving meant that they had once cured the paper jam in the department photocopier. Communications skills boiled down to winning the pub prize for demon speed texting and as for keeping to deadlines – well that one often never became clear. I exaggerate for effect but not very much.

More fatally, that CV-enhancing trait of 'self motivation' sometimes translated into a rather arrogant reluctance to listen, learn and more importantly adapt to the new workplace. This unshakeable conviction of many post docs that they would be super employable simply by dint of having done a PhD did them great disservice. Yes, a PhD suggests the candidate has above average capabilities and maybe some softer skills that tick the employability boxes but theoretical employability is not enough. Your employability will be measured by what you can do not what you know and what you do is what you will be paid for. There is no room for those who might know a lot but cannot apply that knowledge to the job.

So this is the hard lesson – a PhD is not a passport to success. It does not do the work for you. No one will care very much about the topic that you have lovingly studied and more importantly, transferring your softer skills will not be as easy as you thought. Harder still, they will not be your USP. There will be many competing candidates with those skills in bucket loads who have already got several years ahead of you in proving them in the market place.

So what can you do to convince me of why you are so employable?

Well, at interview, firstly demonstrate that you really want the job. Then provide back up for all those skills you have highlighted on your CV. If you are a good researcher come armed with your background research on my business sector. If you communicate well give me an elevator pitch on how your thesis has contributed to its field or if written skills are your strength show me relevant examples of what you have done.

If you manage to secure the job then this is when the real work begins. Employability is not just about getting the job it is about keeping the job. So, what are the key points?

Point one. Do the job and deliver what is asked of you. If you don't know where to start – then ask someone. If the work is not getting done, communicate to the team; a client account may be depending on it. If you can do more than is asked of you that is even better and don't tell me about the ways in which the company

could do things better until you have delivered the job you have been given!

Point two. Show that you are willing to learn – from everyone, qualified or not – they know a lot more than you do about the job they are doing.

Point three. Fit in. This is a game you need to play. You need to dress right, behave appropriately, learn the jargon, turn up on time – every day! – and answer the phone in whatever way the company prefers. This all matters. Once you have earned respect for what you can contribute you will be in a better position to risk reverting to old habits and taking your shoes off under the desk because it helps you think better [although this generally remains unadvisable].

Point four – most important of all – leave that sense of your own importance behind. Thinking you are employable just because you are clever enough to have a PhD is going to be a major hindrance to staying

employed. Be humble about what you still have to learn and you will quickly win the support and help of your colleagues.

In my organization, those post docs who were wise to the points above learned a great deal, saw the world, got promoted, led teams, carved careers and more than a few went on to set up their own businesses.

So, leave the ivory tower attitude behind you. Take advantage of the many opportunities now on offer in the university to acquire additional skills and actively seek ways to put those skills into practice. Add doing to your knowing and your employability will increase exponentially as will the opportunities and the rewards.

The new Health Sciences building on Highfield campus. Photo courtesy of the user lovestruck on Flickr.



The Emergence of student potential

Hannah Ewence and Christen Elaine Ericsson
Co-editors of the journal Emergence

In the lead-up to the annual Humanities Postgraduate Connection student conference last year, HPGC committee members began to explore the possibility of compiling all of the conference papers with the view to publishing them in a format that would be accessible to an academic reader, which would do credit to the high quality of the research, and which would preserve those papers for years to come. Yet as our ambitions grew, it became clear that a one-off publication was simply not ambitious enough! Instead we began to talk of and plan a journal which could accompany the annual conference, thus providing an opportunity for all participants to pick up two great items for the CV for the price of one!

The first problem to resolve was the small matter of funding which Humanities promptly agreed to provide. However, the confines of the budget meant that, as co-editors, we had to undertake a considerable amount of the design, formatting and copyediting ourselves – skills which neither of us felt tremendously confident in. Besides these challenges, we also confronted quite a tight deadline in which to compile, publish and launch the inaugural volume – a deadline which, truth-be-told we came within a matter of hours of not meeting!

Despite all of the last minute panics, as well as the longer-term challenges of its production, the journal, entitled Emergence in recognition of the intellectual dynamism of Postgraduate research in Humanities, has been a success. The first print-run was distributed within hours, and a second print-run was required to meet demand for Emergence's launch party which we hosted in December. Since

then, we have led training sessions on setting up a journal, have had the inaugural volume catalogued by Hartley library, and seen Emergence go digital (www.soton.ac.uk/hpgr/documents/emergence_master.pdf). The second volume, which will bring together the proceedings of this year's conference – 'The Defining Moment' – is in production as we speak.

Although it is still early days, the most satisfying aspect of being involved with the launch of Emergence is that, as an academic endeavour which represents the ethos and aspirations of the PGR community in Humanities, it looks set to continue. Moreover, on a strictly personal level, it is an undertaking which has promoted us to develop numerous practical, transferable skills, and is an achievement which 'translates' well into any career path which we might choose to follow. This, for us, is its legacy.



A word from the HPGC

The theme of this newsletter (in case you had not guessed already!) is 'employability'. A great way to enhance your very own employability is to get involved with the Humanities PG Connection: run by students, for students; supporting the postgraduate community through our student-led seminar programme, our social events and our annual conference.

Join us for informal, discussion-based seminars, led by your peers and introducing you to their research. Or come along to the many social events - from Induction in October, through to a Christmas meal in December, a BBQ in August, and much more in-between. And of course, the event of the year, the must-attend humanities postgraduate conference! Here, you can practise presenting your research to a friendly, supportive audience – a valuable experience for every emerging scholar and definitely a big bonus with regard to your future employability. Again, this event is 100% student-orientated, from the papers being given to the chairing of the sessions, the attendance, and the organisation. Each year we also edit a collection of the best papers from our conference into the 'Emergence' journal which is published online, in print, and has copies in the library.

So, how do I join the HPGC? This is the easy part, because you don't need to. Every humanities postgraduate student will receive our emails, so it's a simple case of reading what's on, and picking what you want to do! There is no minimum or maximum commitment – simply turn up to as many events as you wish, or get in touch with one of the committee members at Induction if you want to join the committee and get your own ideas rolling on what 'Humanities PG Connection' should be about.

If you have any questions regarding the HPGC, please feel free to get in touch with either Hannah Ewence (hee106@soton.ac.uk) or Christen Ericsson (cee106@soton.ac.uk).

About this newsletter...

The newsletter was edited and designed by Meike Reintjes (PhD student in Modern Languages) and Will Lingard (PhD student in Music). If you are interested in editing future issues please contact Eleanor Quince.

Next year's annual theme for Humanities Postgraduate Research students is 'community'. We should like to hear about the communities which you are involved in: inside and outside the University; academic and non-academic. If you are part of a community and would like to tell us about it, please email Eleanor Quince, emq@soton.ac.uk

