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 Orlean’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’, 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 knew 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).

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 sociolinguistics.

20 years on, my first book now seems horribly out of date but, astonishingly, is still selling. I have since published about 20 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 follow 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 wussed 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.
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 teachers at the same university in New York City, my career options 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 fixated 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)

...Having friends and colleagues read the manuscript and having them 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 happy 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)

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 a 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)

...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)

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)

...No, although there are plenty of teachers in my family. I only really considered becoming an academic after I completed my undergraduate degree. (Scott Soo)

...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)

...Always? From when I was a child? From when I left school? As both my parents were teachers at the same university in New York City, my career options 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 fixated 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, 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)

...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)

...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)

...Having friends and colleagues read the manuscript and having them 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 happy 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)

...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)

...Lunch. (Jeanice Brooks)
Transferable skills: a postgraduate’s view

Zubair Sharif
Lecturer in English and Film
Islamia University, Pakistan

My own experience is a case in point. I am currently working on Zubair Shafiq training programs and excellent I must say that with all those higher degree of employability. It is no exception. They ensure a writing skills! It has been a joyful a wonderful way for improving during the sessions. And, above encouragement me to be attentive. I wish we had such a system beginning, I felt it was a ‘difficult’ write a reflective report. In the first three months, I had the opportunity to attend training sessions on personal effectiveness, on key skills such as net skills and endnote, within the university without any restriction. Even if I find 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 ‘difficult’ 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 session. 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!

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 be employable. It is essential that you build added-value to your CV.

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 sense opportunity, keep a record of training you attended 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 academia (and other walks of life, too). In his article in the Times Literary Supplement on 5 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 running 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 PhD, and on the German language in central Europe for another part. Yet my background is highly expertise in European Studies where I had a strong focus on social sciences. What connected the different stations of my CV 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 as 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 Humanities Career Day 2010

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.

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
The final talks of the afternoon were given by Dr. Victoria Branwen. She has a personal webpage, a blog, a twitter account and is on Facebook. She has used web 2.0 to publicise herself and her work with the network. As a way of keeping in touch with the research environment and she found it interesting to know how different speakers got from where they are now. Thank you for organizing all of it, and for the free lunch of course.

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 it 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 from 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 they’re 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
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.” (Jannie Cobley, 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.
Navigating the job market: Route 66

Meike Reintjes
and 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 & Atta 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, 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? Then 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.

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.
Why I am so employable ... 1

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 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 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 have 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 3.00pm 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 so for keeping to deadlines – well that one often never became clear. 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 may be 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 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/hpgc/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.

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.

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. cee106@soton.ac.uk or Christen Ericsson (cee106@soton.ac.uk).

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 practice 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.

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.