

STEP 1

Building an academic career

What you need to know before you graduate

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63% OF CURRENT PHD STUDENTS WANT AN ACADEMIC CAREER, BUT ONLY 28% ARE EMPLOYED IN THE SECTOR 4 MONTHS AFTER GRADUATING.^[1]

Both internationally and domestically, there is growing debate about the extent to which the PhD prepares graduates for an academic career^[2,3]. Academic careers can be research-focused, teaching-focused or a combination of both. In the light of a highly competitive academic labour market, doctoral students that want an academic career need to maximise their chances of success by creating opportunities during their PhD.

SHOULD I FOCUS ON RESEARCH OR TRY AND TEACH DURING MY PHD?

In a recent study of senior managers' best advice to early career academics, many of those surveyed responded with the single word, 'Publish'^[4]. However, the Australian National Research Student Survey (2011), noted that 45% of HDRs do some teaching during their doctorate^[1] and an analysis of job adverts shows that early-career applicants are expected to demonstrate their capacity to teach. More than half of academic job applicants in the United States were asked to submit a statement of teaching philosophy.^[5] If you don't teach during your PhD you may find it harder to evidence your teaching capacity, but teaching too much will limit your capacity to progress your research and develop those crucial first publications before graduating. Speak to your supervisor about your career goals early on in your studies, and ask their advice on building a balanced publication profile and teaching portfolio.

HOW DO I GET WORK AS A TUTOR/DEMONSTRATOR/LECTURER?

- Speak to your supervisor about your desire to build teaching experience, ask them if they have any need for tutors, or whether they will recommend you to colleagues.
- The Australian Higher Education Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency recommends that staff are qualified one level above the one they are teaching. Therefore, PhD students are well placed to teach undergraduates. Send a short CV to your Head of School, and any coordinators of large units. Explain you are a PhD student and ask for work. Identify subjects (particularly first-year) within your department or university that you could teach.
- Staffing allocations are often completed 3 months before the semester starts, so ask early, and send a polite reminder nearer the time.
- If you are struggling to get regular teaching work, then ask if you can mark assessments.

- Create opportunities (such as shadowing other tutors, mentoring students, volunteering in peer learning programs, private tutoring etc) to gain teaching experience. Offer to give a guest lecture or write a tutorial (on your specialist PhD area).
- Register for teaching development programs offered at your institution. Even if you haven't done any teaching you will build skills, and be able to demonstrate your commitment to supporting learners.

HOW CAN I DEMONSTRATE IMPACT?

There is a lot of discussion about demonstrating research impact, but you also need to show the impact of other work done during your studies. Only 16% of PhDs participate in any professional teaching development during their candidature.^[4] One way of demonstrating your commitment to a broad academic career is to take up opportunities to learn your craft. Most institutions offer some form of sessional academic workshops— and some offer far more comprehensive programs like QUT's *Teaching Advantage*. Here are some things you can do during your studies:

- Register, participate and record your engagement with development opportunities. Keep course outlines as well as any certificates for future reference.
- Seek opportunities to promote your work or publish. You could submit a piece to 'The Conversation', or contact textbook publishers and offer to write case studies, or a book chapter.
- Structure your records in a portfolio (see Teaching Portfolios guide) and write short reflections.

- Initiate evaluations of your practice – if you give a guest lecture, research seminar or tutorial ask the unit coordinator to email you their feedback – add it to your portfolio. There is a northern English saying: “shy bairns get nowt” – it means you need to be assertive. Ask for feedback, tell people why you want it – if someone says something nice ask if they would be prepared to put that in an email to you.
- Seek feedback from students using both the institutional survey systems and your own (e.g. minute papers, email, audience response technologies). Ask them to be specific – an email saying ‘best tutor ever’ is nice, but not useful – much better to say ‘the way you used real-world examples to illustrate complex theory really helped me learn’. Add the data to your portfolio and reflect on what you have learned.
- It was great to meet you last week and I’d love to stay in touch. Please let me know if you’re planning any visits to XXX so that I can invite you to give a research seminar in my School [*check you’re allowed to do this first*].
- Send thank you emails – to your supervisors, to academics you have taught with, to people who have helped you in some way. Thank them for their support and reiterate your career goals.
- Consider seeking international recognition of your commitment to learning and teaching through a professional body like the *UK Higher Education Academy*. Several Universities, including QUT, have a scheme to help you do this.

WHY SHOULDN'T I PURSUE AN ACADEMIC CAREER?

Academic careers are changing, and new PhD graduates face a challenging career context. This list points out the pitfalls and offers some suggestions:

- Many PhD students want academic careers, however not all decide to pursue one. There are many alternative career paths. Arrange for an interview with a University Career Advisor early on in your candidature to explore alternatives options.
- Not all universities are the same, and not all universities value teaching and research equally (despite what it may say on their websites). Be clear about the kind of career you would like to have, but be prepared to compromise (at least initially)
- Causalisation is rife within Higher Education and many early-career academics are forced to accept short-term teaching and research contracts because there simply aren’t enough permanent full-time jobs on offer. It is easy to fall into a situation whereby you work multiple part-time jobs to try and make a decent income and career planning becomes impossible. Try and step back and review your options and set goals to change your situation, seek advice from a mentor or trusted colleague, remind your network of your career intentions, seek advice from the Careers Service at the University you graduated from.
- If you do too much teaching your capacity to publish will be reduced; you need to find the right balance so that you don’t close down options.
- Many Australian industries have explicitly stated that they want more PhDs in the workforce – even if your ultimate goal is an academic career – spending some time in industry first may give you real-world insights and credibility with peers and students.

HOW CAN I MAKE MYSELF LOOK MORE PROFESSIONAL?

- Add an *email signature* to the bottom of your emails. State that you are a PhD student, your school and your contact details. Update it regularly e.g. Tutor in X, or Read my latest article in X.
- Create a short CV (2-3 pages) and update it regularly with a record of your research outputs, teaching and esteem factors (commendations or awards) – have it ready to go when requested, but tailor it each time for the audience. Seek feedback on it from your University Career Service.
- Maximise your networking opportunities, get a Business Card, either from your institution or order online and exchange cards with people you meet, and send follow-up emails. Building a network of contacts is an important stage in building a career, over time some relationships will get stronger and they can be mutually beneficial. Some useful hooks to follow-up people you’ve met at conferences are:
 - I thought you might be interested in this article I read recently (or wrote).
 - I’ll be at the XXX Conference in July and would welcome the opportunity to talk further.

References

1. Edwards, D., Bexley, E., & Richardson, S. (2011). *Regenerating the academic workforce: the careers, intentions and motivations of higher degree research students in Australia: findings of the NRSS*. <http://research.acer.edu.au/>
2. Bexley, E., Arkoudis, S., & James, R. (2013). The motivations, values and future plans of Australian academics. *Higher Education*, 65(3), 385-400.
3. Probert, B. (2014b). Becoming a university teacher: the role of the PhD (O. f. L. a. teaching, Trans.) *Office for Learning and Teaching Discussion Paper 3, October 2014* (pp. 28). Australia: DIISRTE.
4. Sutherland, K., Wilson, M., & Williams, P. (2013). Success in Academia? The experiences of early career academics in New Zealand universities. Wellington: Ako Aotearoa, p. 26.
5. Kearns K and Sullivan C. (2011) Resources and practices to help graduate students and postdoctoral fellows write statements of teaching philosophy. *Advances in Physiology Education* 35: 136-145.

Further Reading

- ABC Science. Six ways to improve scientists career prospects <http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2014/02/26>
- Coates, H., & Goedegebuure, L. (2012). Recasting the academic workforce: why the attractiveness of the academic profession needs to be increased and eight possible strategies for how to go about this from an Australian perspective. *Higher Education*, 64(6), 875-889.
- Higher Education Academy. (2013) UK Higher Education Professional Standards Framework. <http://beyondthephd.co.uk/> [Great resource from Manchester University, UK]
- <http://fromphdtolife.com/> [Interesting blog from Canada on post-PhD futures]
- <http://theprofessorisin.com/> [Advice and resources from a retired US Professor turned Blogger and