

The Future of Postgraduate Training and Skills Development

What Postgraduates Want

The CUCD panel at the 2014 Classical Association conference was a roundtable discussion about 'The Future of Postgraduate Training and Skills Development' convened by Dr Genevieve Lively. As a current PhD student at the University of Glasgow, I was asked to begin the discussion by giving my ideas about 'What Postgraduates Want'.

Of course, everyone will have different backgrounds and requirements, but there are lots of things that are hard about being a postgraduate, including researching (especially in foreign languages); writing abstracts; being a teacher; being a member of staff (sort of); being supervised; getting involved in the department (or faculty); organising conferences and workshops; marking essays; thinking about the future; doing "enough". These things boil down into three groups: teaching, researching, and CV building, and I will discuss each of them in detail.

Teaching came up again and again when I spoke to other postgraduates about this subject, and that shouldn't be a surprise. Teaching is a brand new thing for postgraduate students, something they will mostly have no experience of and little time to prioritise. That means that training and ongoing support are essential because otherwise both postgraduates and undergraduates suffer. While general introductions to teaching practice are useful, the most helpful teaching advice I have received has been subject specific, even course specific.

Observing other people's teaching practice can be a quick and easy way to get new ideas and perspectives on teaching. Peer-observation can be thought-provoking for both parties without being time-consuming, providing models of what to do (or not). This is something Fiona McHardy also recommended during her talk, which followed later in the roundtable discussion. This year (2014-15), Classics at the University of Glasgow has introduced a peer-observation system whereby postgraduates and members of staff observe one another in teams. There was some initial reluctance among postgraduates who were worried about the criticism they might receive but the results have all been positive and constructive. Personally, this has made me think about self-presentation, and observing others has taught me new techniques for student engagement as well as how to deal with inevitably not knowing everything.

Essay marking is also difficult for postgraduates who have only ever been on the receiving end of that process before. Although by postgraduate level you are able to critically assess written work, it is often difficult to translate that into a mark that you are confident is a fair one. I think there are a lot of postgraduates who would appreciate spending more time with experienced essay markers to get a greater sense of doing the right thing – for the student whose essay they are marking as well as for themselves.

Another key area is researching. One PhD student emailed me to say: "I am in the final few weeks of my PhD and feel I would have really gained from having some honest advice both before and in the first few weeks of my PhD". This suggests that there could be more guidance at the beginning about what to expect, giving an outline of progress or milestones that you could reach in order to hit that three year

deadline. PhD students are ever more aware that they are working to a schedule and formalising this process further is not necessarily a bad thing to give people confidence that they are “on track”.

More training would also be beneficial in language learning. I am glad that my supervisors have supported me in learning Italian in the Modern Languages department at Glasgow and I have benefited from taking a structured course with regular assessment and feedback. The problem is, of course, that learning a language takes a long time. This is a problem that could be addressed earlier by integrating modern language learning into Classics (and other subjects) at undergraduate level.

The last challenge is training in careers beyond lecturing and academia. As there aren't enough jobs in academia there have to be effective resources available for planning careers outside academia, including applying for jobs, writing CVs, doing interviews. At Glasgow they do provide training days and workshops in each of these areas. But the other thing, of course, is having the time and opportunity to go off campus and get the experience necessary to fill in the gaps of your CV and make credible applications. Transferable skills aren't always enough, I think, to get a job.



Jennifer at Sacred Heart Primary School, one of The Iris Project schools in Glasgow. ©Martin Shields, *Herald & Times*

Doing outreach is a win-win in this respect, as it can feed into your research as well as being fun. Working with schools, organising talks, speaking to the media are all good ways for postgraduates to get experience outside academia that might help in the long run. I have been involved with the Communicating Ancient Greece and Rome project run by APGRD at the University of Oxford

<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/learning/communicating-ancient-greece-and-rome/school-trips-with-the-iris-project>) and the training they have provided in speaking to the media, writing pitches to newspapers, and working with external organisations has shown me that there are lots of opportunities out there.

So what do postgraduates want? In my opinion: help with teaching, honest advice about doing a PhD, and solid career guidance. Training doesn't have to be formal, expensive or time consuming. Some of the best training might come from a departmental meeting, supervision, or chat with the course convener about how they would grade a particular essay. Lecturers and professors have a wealth of experience to offer postgraduates and something as simple as making time for a coffee every once in a while could make a big difference.

In the discussion that followed we talked about how this kind of mentoring could benefit postgraduates as well as whether supervisors themselves needed training on this issue. It was suggested that more engagement with industry could help postgraduates to gain knowledge and experience outside academia, possibly taking advantage of alumni networks. Finally, we also thought about how to “sell”

the postgraduate experience to future employers, before we moved on to the next discussion point: 'What Postgraduates Need' by Dr Shushma Malik.

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