

The Future of Postgraduate Training and Skills Development

What Postgraduates Need

Academic jobs have always been extremely competitive. Recently, growing numbers of PhD and DPhil students has combined with financial uncertainties in the public sector to make arguably some of the most competitive years of all. However, we must not lose heart. Excellent projects such as Professor Eleanor Dickey's blog [Hortensii](#) ensure that the insecurity postgraduate researchers face in terms of job prospects continues to attract attention and be taken seriously.¹ In addition, there are many things that postgraduates themselves can do during their own studies to maximise their employability, both within academia and outside it. We must remember that doctoral work equips us with a wide set of skills that a whole range of employers consider valuable; for some academia is the ultimate goal, but we should not assume that teaching and/or research positions in Higher Education Institutions are for everyone. Consequently, a greater number of universities are offering their students a variety of skills training opportunities that allow postgraduate researchers to bolster their CVs beyond the traditional activities of academic research and teaching.² A combination of established and newer training programmes can help to give students a range of options following graduation. However, it can take time for us to decide which career path we want to follow. Therefore, I will discuss how to acquire the specific skills that universities demand of potential candidates applying for their first jobs, and how those same skills can also be valuable for employers outside of the academy. All of the routes I suggest and advice I offer is based on what I have seen and done; I cannot and do not claim to be speaking for anyone other than myself. I studied for my PhD in Classics at the University of Bristol, and graduated in July 2013. Since September 2013, I have held a temporary lectureship in Ancient History at the University of Manchester. This piece is the product of my participation in the CUCD panel at the 2014 Classical Association Conference (University of Nottingham), in which Jennifer Hilder and I presented companion papers on postgraduate 'wants' and 'needs'. While this article is aimed at (and addressed to) those currently studying for a PhD/DPhil, I hope that it will also be useful for academics already in post, particularly current supervisors of doctoral students in Classics and Ancient History.

For those intending to pursue an academic career, reading the 'Essential' (let alone the 'Desirable') criteria in the 'Further Particulars' of a vacancy post for the first time can be somewhat daunting. Teaching experience (often including language teaching), publications, and administrative experience are three fundamental aspects of an academic job, but how can a postgraduate gain this experience *ahead* of their first academic post? The answer, or at least part of the answer, I suggest, is to take advantage of less obvious opportunities that can provide similar experience and many of the relevant skills. Widening participation programmes, private tuition, and university internships, for example, can allow a postgraduate to gain valuable, transferable skills that will help to fill out a CV and cover letter for most

¹ <https://hortensii.wordpress.com/>.

² Many training programmes adhere to the guidelines and principles laid out by Vitae's Researcher Development Framework: <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework>.

types of job. Certainly, completing a PhD/DPhil thesis in a timely manner is the priority and ultimate goal, but we cannot ignore the fact that the majority of jobs in the 'current climate' (some postdoctoral research fellowships excluded) do not just require a completed thesis, but a wider set of developed academic skills as well. Similarly, we cannot deny that a first academic job demands the ability to cope with a wide variety of tasks in a limited amount of time. CV-building beyond the thesis goes some way towards preparation for this.

Teaching

Teaching experience at university level can be difficult to acquire, particularly experience of teaching groups larger than ca.15 students. Seminar teaching is extremely valuable, but it also helps if you can demonstrate the capacity to lecture to a hall full of first or second year undergraduates. Here, widening participation and outreach programmes can help. Giving talks in these programmes allows you to lecture to a large group of students in a university environment on broad topics in Classics and Ancient History (i.e. not just your own research specialism). Your students are likely to be in the process of completing their A-Levels (16-18 years old), and are therefore fairly close in age to first year undergraduates. Crucially, in addition to looking good on your CV, preparing for these lectures will help to develop skills in pitching your material at the right level. After years of intense research, widening participation teaching forces postgraduates to take a step back and work on communicating classical subjects to non-specialist audiences. To get involved in widening participation, contact your departmental Admissions Officer and put yourself forward. It is a fun and worthwhile way to bolster the 'teaching' section of a CV. Personally, as a PhD student and as a lecturer, I have greatly enjoyed going into schools and talking to students about Roman history. Many of these students had not studied the ancient world before but were very keen to ask questions and participate in discussions. Increasing awareness of our discipline amongst students in this way is, I think, extremely rewarding work.

Also familiar from job descriptions is the line: 'the candidate will be able to teach ancient languages'. Classics and Ancient History departments can have large cohorts of *ab initio* Latin and/or Greek students, and often need their new staff (both temporary and permanent) to contribute to language teaching. At the same time, however, this can be an extremely difficult experience to gain as a postgraduate, particularly if you only started learning these languages yourself at undergraduate level. A solution that helps you to gain some ancient language teaching experience, and will help your own language skills considerably, is personal tutoring.³ A growing number of schools in the UK are offering GCSE and A-Level Greek and Latin to their students, not to mention fellow postgraduate students in related disciplines (e.g. History) for whom knowledge of an ancient language might prove useful. By providing private tuition on a one-to-one basis, you can learn how to articulate complicated rules of grammar and syntax effectively to another person (not an easy task to begin with). While studying for my own PhD in Bristol, I was lucky enough to have two tutees over two and a half years: one teenager also studying Latin and Greek at school, and one postdoctoral fellow only studying Greek with me. Apart from giving me language teaching experience to add to my CV and discuss in an interview, it also required me to build up a bank of teaching materials for two different types of student. These materials have proved very useful in my first academic job.

³ There are many tutoring companies across the UK that need teachers for a range of subjects, and can organise either home visits or online tutorial sessions. One example is 3A Tutors Limited, based in Bristol: <http://www.3at.org.uk/www.3at.org.uk/info.php?p=9>.

Conferences and Publishing

In an ideal world, all postgraduates would be in the position to include at least one substantial publication on their CV by the time they apply for their first academic job. However, this is not always an easy goal to achieve for a number of reasons. For some, a lack of time is to blame, for others, a lack of opportunity, and for a third



Group photo from the *Eleventh UNISA Classics Colloquium: Integrity and Corruption in Antiquity* at the University of South Africa in Pretoria, October 2010. Pictured here are academics at all career stages: postgraduate researchers, recently graduated postdocs, established 'in post' staff and distinguished professors. I am in the third row up, the second person in from the right.

group, anxiety about committing words to print so early in a research career. All of these problems, I think, can be helped by active participation in academic conferences.

It goes without saying that participation in conferences throughout postgraduate study is immeasurably useful in getting your research out into the wider world and for obtaining feedback from experts in your field. However, we must not underestimate the broader opportunities that can arise from having our research heard by others at small specialist colloquia and large

annual meetings. Presenting a paper could lead to an invitation from an academic or postgraduate to present your research at a future conference or seminar series, which allows your work to benefit from the suggestions and comments of an additional audience. Moreover, it could provide the (gentle) encouragement you need to publish your first chapter or article. Organisers of specialist conferences often publish a volume of conference proceedings, for which you could revise and submit your paper. Alternatively, comments you receive from your audience could give you the confidence required to revise your paper and send it to a journal. I published my first article in a supplementary volume of a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the proceedings of a conference I attended in Pretoria, South Africa in the third year of my PhD. It was reassuring to know that my paper had already undergone scrutiny by the conference participants before the written-up article went to peer reviewers. Ultimately, presenting research papers has a multitude of positive outcomes that go beyond the conference itself, and can lead to some impressive additions to your CV.

Administration

Proving that you have relevant administrative experience for an academic job can often be the hardest part of a job application to write. Convening (organising and running) an entire course by yourself, or acting as an officer within a department are tasks that postgraduates cannot usually perform. Here, as with teaching, the key is to

show that you know what it takes (and have experience in aspects of what it takes) to be trusted with academic administration from the start. For me, that meant a part-time (paid) university internship.

I cannot stress enough the benefits of working part-time within your own department or institution instead of for an external company. Universities understand the timetables and pressures placed on students and often offer flexible contracts where hours can be changed according to individual needs. During the final year of my PhD, I worked in my university's Research Office for 15 hours per week (on which days those 15 hours of work were done was entirely up to me) as the intern on a project focused on developing postgraduate skills training. I quickly became very familiar with organising, attending, and presenting at high-level meetings in an administrative instead of an academic context – tasks that departmental officers often undertake. Even aspects of the job as mundane as sending and answering large numbers of emails proved relevant for convening/organising a course unit where a large number of students are often in frequent contact. Moreover, it proves that you have taken time to acquire as many of the skills you can to meet academic job criteria and gives you convincing evidence for your interview panel. To find out what opportunities your institution offers, check regularly your Careers Service website for jobs aimed specifically at postgraduates.

Beyond the Academy

Perhaps the most important aspect of the suggestions I have just made is that all of them equip postgraduate students with skills that are also applicable outside of academia. When I was working in the university Research Office, all of my colleagues had doctorates. In fact, a PhD/DPhil was an essential criterion for their posts. There are a variety of employers in the private and public sectors that value the attributes of postgraduate researchers. By presenting at conferences and/or teaching, candidates with doctorates can prove their experience of, and comfort with, presenting ideas coherently in front of groups. The ability not only to learn languages but to help others learn them too is impressive on any CV. In addition, the independence, focus and drive required to undertake and complete a significant research project are extremely valuable transferable skills. Whether applying for an academic job or not, passion and enthusiasm about past, present and future projects and opportunities are appealing and contagious.

I realise that all of the CV-boosting activities I have outlined here require time away from a doctoral thesis. However, the reality of the job market in which we are competing is such that a PhD/DPhil alone is no longer enough to gain most types of academic employment. Similarly, other professional employers value skills training beyond specialised research. As it is highly likely that, in your first job, you will have to juggle a large number of unfamiliar tasks, pushing yourself as a doctoral student to find time for widening participation lectures, language tutoring and possibly some administrative work is a skill well worth acquiring in and of itself.

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