

The impact of the poor academic job market on PhD graduates

and what we individual academics can do about it

Numerous reports have pointed out that for several decades the number of PhD graduates (both in the Humanities and overall) produced each year has increased at a significantly greater rate than the number of permanent academic jobs.¹ The result has been an increasingly unpleasant situation for the graduates, many of whom fail to find permanent academic jobs, or indeed any academic jobs,² or in some cases any jobs at all.³ Indeed in Classics the job market is now so bad that there is no student so good that he or she can be assured of getting a permanent job: since most jobs advertised are in specific subfields, and there is no way of predicting in advance what those subfields will be, one needs to have a certain amount of luck (in addition, of course, to a great deal of merit) in order to have any chance at a permanent position.

The effect of this situation on our younger colleagues is crippling. First-class young scholars who have spent all their lives in an education system where merit is consistently rewarded suddenly find themselves unsuccessful; naturally they attribute this failure to their own lack of merit. For a while such an assumption may cause them to work harder, but when hard work fails to produce results they often collapse in anguish, their self-confidence shattered. Many people who could have been happy in good non-academic careers if they had left academia after the BA find themselves with far fewer options once they have done a PhD: not only have they invested many years in a degree that turns out not to be of any practical use to them, perhaps accumulating debt along the way,⁴ but they have often been damaged psychologically by the failure to succeed in their chosen profession, and the emotional investment in the academic profession entailed in completing a PhD can leave people without the will to start over in another career.

We established scholars have not been, at least not collectively, as good as we could have been at facing up to the role we play in this damage. Of course, we mean well; hardly any of us would recruit a PhD student while thinking consciously, and not saying to the student, that this particular student will never get an academic job. Despite the pressures we face to recruit more and more PhD students, we often warn applicants about the tight job market, and we usually support our students and encourage them when dealing with that job market. But

¹ See e.g. <http://www.economist.com/node/17723223>, and the other articles collected at <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/more-information/>.

² The latest statistics I have obtained from the NUS, as yet unconfirmed, are that across all fields, three years after graduation only 19% of UK PhDs are employed in *any* type of academic job; the majority of this 19%, of course, is not in permanent positions.

³ In the US there are more than 30,000 PhDs on public assistance (see <http://chronicle.com/article/From-Graduate-School-to/131795/>); comparable statistics for the UK are not available, but the sad fact is that a PhD in Classics does not convey an advantage in the non-academic job market and may even constitute a disadvantage (see <http://www.economist.com/node/17723223>).

⁴ For the level of the debt problem in the US, see http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/01/15/phd_debt_project_google_doc_survey_collects_figures_of_graduate_school_debt.html; although this problem is much less severe in the UK it is growing fast here as well and cannot be ignored.

most of us are unaware of just how bad the problem is, since it has gotten far worse since we ourselves were on the job market; when warning applicants about the job market we often suggest that the really good ones will be fine, and when our own good students are unsuccessful we may chalk that up to temporary bad luck and encourage them to keep trying, even when leaving academia might be better for the student concerned in the long run. We have generally not considered it our problem that our former students are very often worse off than they would have been had they not studied with us -- but arguably it is time we thought more about this issue.

At the same time it is not obvious what the solution to the problem is; it would be wonderful if more permanent academic jobs were created, but we ordinary academics do not have the power to do that to any significant extent, and lobbying for others to do so would simply waste our time. And slashing admissions to PhD programmes would be simply suicidal (as well as unhelpful: see below). Is there anything we established academics can actually do to improve the situation?

To explore the options available to us a pair of online surveys were conducted in spring 2014; the first asked for suggestions about what could be done and the second asked respondents to rate the helpfulness of those suggestions. There were 152 responses to the second survey, of which just over half came from Classicists (both jobseekers and established scholars). Unemployed and recently unemployed respondents also rated the severity of various aspects of the problem.⁵

A key to the way forward, in my opinion, came from these evaluations of the problem itself. Most respondents rated practical difficulties like poverty as less damaging to them personally than the morale problems associated with failure to secure an academic job. Issues such as a sense of failure, uncertainty about the future, the demoralisation of producing endless applications (more than 60 per year in the case of some respondents) and the anguish of not knowing whether it is time to give up seem to be worse than the poverty and the constantly moving around from job to job. This is important, because while without money that we do not have we cannot do anything about the practical problems, we may well be able to ameliorate the morale problems. Many adjuncts and even independent scholars do not mind their positions *per se*; what they mind is how being in those positions makes them feel. And we could do something about that, because very often those feelings are directly caused by the (usually unwitting) actions of established academics.

Some established scholars expressed an opinion that if the jobless feel like failures that is their own fault; we are not a counselling service and it is not our job to make people feel better. That is of course true: our jobs do not include any responsibility for former students once the PhD is awarded. But there might be something to be said for our making an effort to help not because we are obliged to, but because by doing so we can make a significant difference to people we know and like, people whose suffering is painful to see. Even if we owe our former students nothing, everyone might benefit from our helping them now.

Two main courses of action that would be useful emerged from the more than 30 different options suggested by respondents. First, we could try to make

⁵ The full report of the results can be found at <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/full-report/> and a summary at <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/what-to-do-and-why/>; see also other resources on the <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/> site, which was set up specifically for this project.

life better for PhDs who remain in academia without (immediately) getting permanent jobs, and second, we could try to reduce the number of such people. Really substantial improvement in their treatment and working conditions can never be effected as long as there is such an excess of supply over demand: it took the Black Death to make agricultural labour valuable in medieval Europe, and it will take a mass exodus of academics to make the labour of those who remain valuable. This second course of action will be discussed below.

Respondents generally agreed that in terms of making life easier for struggling PhDs the most useful thing we could do would be to allow them to retain their university affiliation after they graduate. Recent graduates commonly report hardship caused by losing their e-mail accounts and (at least online) library access immediately after their vivas; if they have not managed to secure a job at an institution with a good library this loss makes it extremely difficult for them to produce the publications essential for academic survival. This state of affairs damages the institution as well as the students, for it reduces the chances both that the students will succeed in the academic job market and that they will retain goodwill towards the institution. For these reasons Oxford Classics has recently started giving its PhD graduates Academic Visitor status for several years after graduation, and this is a model that other universities could follow with profit.⁶

For those fortunate enough to land some sort of academic job, CUCD already attempts to offer assistance by means of a protocol on temporary hires.⁷ Respondents revealed that this document is almost completely unknown and unused, while also noting that it is excellent and would make a real difference if implemented. It was suggested that CUCD could cause this document to have much more impact by sending an annual reminder of its existence to department chairs.

One of the major complaints non-permanent academics have is that they are routinely marginalised or ignored entirely on departmental web sites and noticeboards. Although this issue may seem minor to us, it is clearly an important factor in the dissatisfaction felt by sessionals and as such is worth serious attention. Some universities rely on sessionals for the majority of their teaching but do not put the names of those lecturers anywhere in the public domain; this can result in someone who has taught for many years at a single institution having no public persona there at all. Other institutions may list sessionals' names but in a way that marks them out as inferior to an excessive degree, for example without contact information. This sort of policy is bad for departments, not only for sessionals, because it makes the people actually doing the teaching difficult or impossible to contact. I cannot see that anything could be lost by ensuring that our web sites and noticeboards accurately reflect the reality that the sessionals exist and do a lot of work: artificially marginalising them simply humiliates them and inconveniences everyone else, for no real benefit.

Conferences were a sore point for many respondents. Those without permanent (or any) academic jobs feel a strong compulsion to attend conferences,

⁶ We are trying to implement it at Reading but do not yet know if the proposal will be adopted. That there is a need for it is strongly suggested by a recent survey of current PhD students at Reading. When asked if they would be likely to use such a scheme, 94% of respondents said they would, often providing enthusiastic comments as well. Colleagues at other institutions trying to implement such proposals may find that conducting a similar survey is a good way to demonstrate to the administration that there is a demand for them.

⁷ See <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/classics/cucd/tempstaff.html>.

both in order to remain connected to the field and to increase their chances of securing permanent positions, but high fees cause them hardship. Organizers could help by offering fee discounts not only to students but also to others with low incomes; after all a sessional lecturer may have a substantially lower annual income than a student, but at most conferences only students are eligible for bursaries. Organizers might also consider being sensitive to the fact that scholars without an academic affiliation feel humiliated when affiliations are displayed; of course affiliations are useful and cannot be entirely dispensed with, but often they are used more than necessary and in a way that could be seen as insensitive.

But important as such measures are, they will not solve much of the problem unless the excess of supply over demand is also reduced. At present, no matter how poor an academic job is or why the previous person doing it has quit, there will always be plenty of good applicants; this gives universities little real incentive to improve working conditions. Since universities are under tremendous budgetary pressure, it is not to be expected that they will treat people significantly better than they currently do unless the ratio of supply to demand changes. In the immediate term that can only be achieved by actively helping PhDs find satisfying careers outside academia. Professional associations such as CUCD could play a major role here if they chose, and departments could certainly help, but the biggest potential for change probably comes in the attitudes of individual academics: we can all help.

Results suggest that the main reason struggling academics do not seek non-academic employment is that they are afraid to leave academia, the only world they have ever known and one which, at least in the Humanities, is surrounded by frighteningly sharp boundaries. Our former students who have gone on as university-level Classicists are part of our community; we remain in touch with them, we help them, we expect them to help us on occasion, and we are proud of their achievements. But the minute a former student gets a non-academic job, he or she has left the profession permanently and completely; we do not normally maintain long-term connections with such students, and we do not expect ever to see them participating in the academic community again. If we do not actively call them failures, we tacitly give them reason to believe that that is what we think of them, for we are no longer interested. In order to give people the courage to leave academia, we need to de-stigmatize that decision and make the boundaries of our world less sharp. It would cost us very little to stay in touch with our PhD graduates who go on to other types of career and to invite them back occasionally to talk to current PhD students about career options (thus benefitting current students not only from the information they receive but from the tacit encouragement that we value such career choices). The staying in touch could be done cheaply and easily by adopting a system used by most major US universities: allowing graduates to keep their student e-mail addresses for life.⁸ We might

⁸ The e-mail addresses normally work only as a forwarding service after the student graduates, not as a full account; that makes giving them cost-effective for the institution. Some UK universities allow graduates to use a *different* university e-mail address as a forwarding service after graduation, but that system is largely useless: students do not bother to update the forwarding service, since it is attached to a new e-mail address rather than the old one at which they have built up their network of contacts, and therefore it does not give the universities a reliable way of contacting alumni. Only the retention of the student's *original* e-mail address, which is worth

ourselves gain much by being friendlier and more inclusive towards our non-academic PhD graduates: they might bring both valuable outside-world expertise and financial support to our departments.

In addition to offering moral support for the transition by such a change in attitude, we could offer practical assistance in finding non-academic employment. Many resources already exist to help PhDs find such employment, and we could make sure our students and former students know about these resources.⁹ Given the shortage of Classics teachers in schools, school teaching is an obvious alternative career for those who love the ancient world too much to give it up, but the transition to school teaching is not as easy as it should be; we could be fighting much harder for an increase in PGCE places for Classicists and for non-PGCE routes into teaching.¹⁰ And we could avoid suggesting to our PhD students that schoolteachers are inferior to academics; if we do, we have only ourselves to blame when our best students prefer unemployment to school teaching.

Lastly, we could make sure that we do not deceive students about what an academic career involves. Some recent analyses argue that academia is like a drug gang because the poverty-stricken workers at the bottom will endure anything for a chance at the rosy life at the top; they are lured on by an image of the carefree existence of the eminent professor who draws an enormous salary for doing practically nothing.¹¹ Perhaps that image once reflected reality, but it has not done so in my day; if our students are lured by it to endure deprivation and humiliation, it should be relatively easy to acquaint them with reality.

In the longer term, of course, the problem of oversupply could be alleviated by reducing the number of PhD students and/or by making the PhD into a better preparation for non-academic careers. Although both these moves seem like good ones at first glance, they both have serious problems. Many people want to do graduate work, and on the whole those who have completed PhDs do not regret having done so even when they end up unemployed; respondents of all types overwhelmingly thought that we should not deny eager, qualified applicants the opportunity to undertake a PhD simply because they are unlikely to find a job afterwards.¹² At the same time applicants and PhD students ought to be better informed about the job market: many respondents indicated that they had been led to believe they would get a job if they did well in their graduate study, and overall there seems to be a high level of unrealistic expectation.¹³ It will not be easy to ensure that students know the facts before embarking on a PhD, but it would nonetheless be worth attempting.

Making the PhD a better preparation for non-academic careers could be attempted in either of two ways: one could change the actual nature of the degree, or one could keep the degree as it is but market it better (including to employers).

keeping in the student's eyes owing to the contacts attached to it, can ensure that students will continue to update the forwarding service.

⁹ See the links collected at <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/for-phds-who-need-a-non-academic-job/>.

¹⁰ For example, there is a lovely programme that places PhDs in schools (<http://www.researchersinschools.org/>), but it does not accept Classicists: could we persuade them to change that policy?

¹¹ See <http://alexandreaonso.wordpress.com/2013/11/21/how-academia-resembles-a-drug-gang/>.

¹² See <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/full-report/>, answers to question 1a.

¹³ See <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/full-report/>, answers to question 7.

Numerous anecdotal examples of people who have gone on to successful non-academic careers after a PhD exist -- clearly it is perfectly possible to do so -- but they do not change the fact that a PhD in Classics is not normally a positive asset in the non-academic job market: the people involved in those anecdotes could also have had successful non-academic careers after a BA or MA in Classics. The PhD really is a pre-professional degree, and any major change in what the PhD students of a particular university or country do in order to make the degree more attractive to non-academic employers is likely to disadvantage those PhDs in the academic job market; as most PhD students want academic careers, there would be a severe recruitment disadvantage to changing one's programme in a way that handicapped one's students in the academic job market. Moreover respondents, including current students and the unemployed, expressed satisfaction with what the UK PhD is; they really enjoy having unstructured time to devote single-mindedly to one academic project. We need to be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater by meddling with something generally perceived as good for what it mainly does.

Better marketing of the PhD could bring some results, however. We could try to keep in mind the need for PhDs to be employed when dealing with non-academic organisations. For example, we could put more pressure on our publishers to employ copyeditors and proofreaders with real qualifications in Classics; such people are an asset to an author during the publication process, so we would benefit ourselves that way too. And we could help our PhD students put a positive spin on the time they have spent with us, by ensuring that they learn to present their research to non-academic audiences. For example, we could set up an arrangement with a local press outlet to carry columns produced in turn by our PhD students in which they presented their scholarship in a way accessible and appealing to the public; that might also have a beneficial 'impact' function for us.

One reason the PhD is so emphatically a pre-professional degree is that many institutions give preference in funding (and sometimes even in admissions) to candidates who express a desire for an academic career, thereby artificially enhancing the percentage of their PhD students who want such a career. If no such preferential treatment were given, PhD programmes would contain a higher percentage of students who have no intention of seeking an academic career and are doing the PhD for its own sake. Such a shift would in itself reduce the oversupply problem by ensuring that some of the PhDs graduating each year would not be going on the job market, and it would also benefit other students by providing them with examples close at hand of people who do a PhD without intending to become academics. Such examples would help bridge the gap between students' expectations and reality and help them find the concept of seeking non-academic employment more palatable. Of course, there are good reasons for the current preferential treatment system: we do need to make sure that enough future Classicists are trained to replace those who retire. But at present there is no danger of that not being the case: we could make all funding and admissions decisions purely on academic merit and still have plenty of choice at hiring stage.

Many other suggestions were also discussed, but the majority turned out to be either unworkable or positively unhelpful. Schemes to improve certain PhDs' employability in the academic job market, for example, simply move the problem around without solving it (the same number of PhDs end up with jobs, and all that

changes is which people those are) and, if adopted by everyone, would end up just raising the overall bar for hiring. Likewise the provision of more post-doc positions actually makes the problem worse in the long run, by increasing the length of time during which a PhD who has not found a permanent job can remain a viable candidate for one (and thereby both increasing the number of people on the job market each year and raising the average age at which people who are not going to get an academic job discover this fact and start retraining to do something else). The full list of suggestions offered and the arguments presented for and against them can be found on the web site set up to report this survey.¹⁴

In short, the problem our PhD graduates face is a serious one there is much that we, individually and collectively, can do to improve the situation for them. The Hortensii group has accordingly been set up to encourage such action. If each person who reads this article implements just one of the suggestions it contains in his or her own department, the improvement will already be noticeable. I hope very much that you will do so, and that when you do, you will send news of what you have managed to change to Hortensii, care of E.Dickey@reading.ac.uk. Thank you!

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¹⁴ The full report can be found at <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/full-report/>, and a summary of it at <http://hortensii.wordpress.com/what-to-do-and-why/>.