



**Project led by the London School of Economics  
Academic Career Paths of Social Science PhD Graduates**

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This project examined the career paths and experiences of recent social science PhD graduates working in academia in the UK and USA. This document presents the project's findings in the form of a summary report and set of recommendations, which we hope will prove useful both to PhD students considering a career in academia and to career professionals advising students and early-career researchers.

## **Background**

The project was conceived as a response to a relative paucity of good-quality, robust information about career paths in academia in the social sciences, and the problems that this information gap poses both for those aiming for such a career and those responsible for advising them. The project team were also keen to address – where possible – the impact in this sphere of recent improvements in professional and career development support for early-career researchers.

## **Research method**

The project was a collaboration between the London School of Economics and Political Science, the University of Cambridge, the University of Oxford and University College London. The research comprised three stages:

1. An on-line survey of PhD graduates now working in academic positions in the UK/USA. The survey was divided into four main sections: section 1 covered experiences during the PhD focusing especially on teaching experience and career plans; section 2 covered respondents' current role; section 3 covered previous roles and section 4 asked respondents to reflect on their PhD experience in the light of their subsequent career path. A copy of the survey questions and discussion of the related research issues can be found in a separate document.
2. A set of eight interviews following up from the survey:
  - A number of survey participants had agreed to provide contact details for the follow-up study – the selection of who to contact eventually was largely made on the grounds of geographical proximity to the researchers (based in London and Oxford). There was a high response rate from the initial request to interview - indicating the importance of these issues in the interviewees' lives.
  - All but one of the eight individuals interviewed were now established in permanent academic positions. The majority of interviewees were former LSE PhD students.

- Interviews were conducted by three researchers, all current PhD students at the participating institutions. The interviewers used a topic guide which followed up on issues revealed as important by the survey results.

Synopses of a sample of these interviews can be found in the document accompanying this report.

### 3. A second set of interviews/focus groups:

- While the first set of interviews generated a very rich set of individual accounts, all interviewees had been in their jobs for a number of years. The team decided to seek out and interview PhD graduates currently in their first post, partly in order to get an idea of whether recent policy developments were having any noticeable impact ‘on the ground’.
- The group contacted was restricted to LSE alumni for practical reasons. 6 PhD graduates, all in their first jobs, were ‘interviewed’, four in a focus group context and two in a one-to-one context (the original intention had been to run two focus groups, but schedules could not be reconciled to enable this). Participants were offered book vouchers as a recompense for giving up their time.

## Key findings

- Both the survey and interview data indicate that there is something of a mismatch between the skills and experiences respondents developed during their PhD, and what they felt with hindsight they should have focused on to facilitate the job search process and progression within their careers.
- In particular, teaching experience emerges as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for success in the job market: everyone has it, so it’s needed to get a job, but on the other hand it is very rarely the key or determining factor in a successful profile.
- Students and early-career academics need to be pro-active in order to build up a profile that will enable them to get a position, and to progress further.
- Rather than being able to identify a set of ‘career paths’, this research indicates clearly that there is a great deal of uncertainty in the early stages of an academic career, before a permanent position is achieved (which may take five years or more).
- With this in mind, those interested in pursuing an academic career benefit from the following personal attributes: dedication and a passion for the job; resilience in the face of a tough job market; confidence in the face of criticism; tolerance in the face of heavy demands especially in the early stages of a career.

The remainder of this report discusses the research findings in more detail, focusing in turn on: skills and experiences during the PhD; looking for a job; and early-career experiences. It concludes with a set of recommendations for students and advisers based on these empirical findings. Any information referring to interviewee names, their research fields or departments etc has been omitted or changed in order to ensure anonymity.

## 1. Skills and professional expertise built up during the PhD

‘Skills’ are explicitly and implicitly addressed at several points in the survey: first, participants were asked whether they actively built up professional and transferable skills during their PhD. Later on participants were also asked to describe different aspects of the PhD which proved beneficial to their careers so far, and to discuss whether they felt there were any opportunities that they had missed during their PhD. **Table 1** displays information about ‘skills’ in a very wide sense of the word, drawn from all parts of the survey, and including teaching as a ‘skill’.

**Table 1: Importance of skills and competencies as discussed in the survey**

<u>RANK</u>	Skills acquired during PhD studies	Beneficial aspects of PhD time	Skills / aspects influential for gaining current position	Regrets and missed opportunities during PhD time
1	Teaching activities (35) & teaching training (26)	Research competence (14)	Research record (33)	Publish more (11)
2	Working as research assistant (16)	Networks (11)	Publication record (25)	More skills training (7)
3	Work experience outside academia (8)	Teaching experience (11)	Teaching experience (14)	More careers advice (6)
4	Skills training (4)	Skills (10)	Network & personal contacts (9)	Various aspects: insufficient networking, no work experience outside academia, better funding, better supervision and work-life balance

Numbers in brackets refer to counts of replies, N = 43, multiple replies possible

The table ranks the various skills and competencies identified by survey participants in three different contexts: those acquired during the PhD; those considered beneficial in participants’ careers to date; and those considered influential in gaining their current position. The table also ranks the most frequently cited ‘regrets’ about missed opportunities during the PhD.

The table illustrates a key finding of our study: that there is something of a gap between those activities participants engaged in during their PhD studies (teaching, working as a research assistant, working outside academia) and those activities considered most important with hindsight (publishing and networking). It seems that it is the apparently more neglected aspects of the PhD experience such as networking, publishing, and going to conferences - on top of teaching - that are crucial both in the job market and for subsequent career development.

The following paragraphs discuss the various skills, experiences and regrets referred to by participants in more detail, drawing additionally on findings from the interviews and focus group discussions.

### **Teaching**

Building up teaching experience and taking part in teaching training is effectively the most frequently shared form of ‘skills development’: A very large majority of survey participants (81%) built up teaching experience during their PhD studies. Teaching work was typically carried out at the home university and in many cases supported by training, provided mostly at institutional level. Participants’ descriptions of the scope of their teaching duties and responsibilities vary greatly in depth and detail which makes them difficult to compare. Most participants’ teaching experience could cautiously be described as ‘frequent’.

Clearly teaching is something that is valued highly by both survey participants and interviewees. Survey participants describe teaching as ‘enjoyable’ and as ‘essential for the job market’. Nevertheless, roughly a third of those participants who did teach describe it as ‘both detrimental and beneficial’ to their PhD: helpful to build up a teaching portfolio and good for broadening one’s horizon, but also time-consuming and badly paid. An enthusiasm for teaching is also apparent across many of the interviews we conducted: Josephine describes how teaching gave her the confidence to ‘stand in front of people’ and deliver good presentations; Timothy points out that it is through teaching that he engages with core texts on a very deep level and comes up with ideas for his research. It is also clear that being a good teacher ties into many interviewees’ idea of what it means to be an academic – for example when Josephine says quietly: ‘I know I am good teacher.’

However, this passion for teaching is not necessarily matched by its importance in the job market: survey participants tend to see their teaching experience as one but not the most influential factor in finding their current position: teaching experience comes third after research record and publication record (see column 3, table 1). In a similar vein, our interviewees considered teaching experience an important asset for one’s overall academic career, but mentioned it less frequently than research competence, and networking. During the interviews, Jill and John (each from the group of more experienced interviewees) both point out that teaching experience is important for an academic career, but only to a certain degree. John even goes as far as to say that one year’s teaching experience is sufficient from his point of view. By contrast, none of the other important skills / aspects are discussed with such a qualification – the extent to which someone invests in publishing, networking or being a good presenter seems to have no such quantifiable limits. Given the fact that teaching experience is so widely shared, it seems that it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for building an academic career .

### **Research competence, research record and work experience**

Skills and professional experiences built up during the PhD are mostly acquired through practice and very rarely through classroom-based skills training (see column 1, table 1). This very implicit notion of ‘skills’ that we find in the survey data corresponds with findings from the interviews: several interviewees talk about *picking up* skills and building professional experience *along the way*. Research competence is the most frequently-cited positive outcome of the PhD in the survey data, but due to the question format, most participants simply list research competence as a factor without further elaboration. The interview data shed some light on this. For our interviewees, research competence entails: being able to move to from a descriptive approach to an analytical one; being able to work with theories, if not build them; developing rigour in a topic area; building up expertise; getting people to

think differently about a topic; being able to engage in critical thinking; and knowing how to develop and back up an argument. Again, however, it is clear that research competence is also developed in an implicit manner, through constant engagement with one's topic, by working through materials again and again, by engaging in intense discussions and by being challenged in one's approach. Lori, a post-doc in her first job after the PhD, points out that there is no way of formally learning about it: 'You pick it up as you go along, I don't know if you can actually be taught to be analytical, I wish it could, because it would have saved me time.'

### **Taking charge of one's development**

Several of the more senior interviewees, while fully acknowledging the implicit nature of many skills, competences and experiences, do nevertheless stress that their development needs to be based on a very deliberate effort to be proactive about giving presentations, networking, communicating one's research and going to conferences. Figure 1 shows the various activities that were discussed in this context. Jill says: 'I think the more opportunities PhD students have to learn those skills, the better. But it's not something that just happens. You really have to go actually out there and do it.' Simon explains that he decided very early on in the PhD to *push himself*, and make use of every opportunity to present his work in order to improve his presentation skills. In a similar vein, Dominic describes how he carefully built up his teaching portfolio, moving from undergraduate teaching to working with Masters students to lecturing, all while doing his PhD. John describes how networking is a long-term strategy: 'After I'd been to several conferences, people started to recognise me, I started to recognise them, and you feel part of the bigger community. More importantly, your name gets to be a little bit known, so chances are if you apply for a job, somebody's going through the sifting process of people's CVs, might well recognise your name. So it's an opportunity to make yourself known.'

Figure 1: Opportunities to be proactive during the PhD

<p>Build up a network of peers, informal mentors, colleagues Practice and develop presentations skills Get yourself known via conferences Organise conferences, seminar papers Get involved with academic associations or journals Become a good communicator who is able to disseminate one's findings <i>as discussed by the more senior group of interviewees</i></p>
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Such a notion of being proactive and working systematically on one's professional development (that is development outside the immediate context of research expertise and teaching) is less frequently discussed by the less experienced of interviewees. Here the obligation to publish is more of an immediate interest, if not concern. At the same time, the 'younger generation' clearly made much greater use of the skills-based training sessions which have become more accessible since the implementation of the Roberts recommendations. In this context, the junior interviewees talk about choosing sessions according to very specific needs and discuss both the responsibility to find out what is available when training is offered on a voluntary basis and the potential benefits of a compulsory skills development programme.

### **Resilience**

What becomes very clear from the interview data is the importance of personal motivation in pursuing an academic career - a development which begins during the PhD. Most

interviewees display a quiet determination to keep going, even if progress is sometimes difficult and one seems to be moving ‘two steps forwards, one step back’ for a long time, as Dominic puts it. Interviewees also describe a need for tolerance to deal with the boring elements of their work, the ability to persevere and the readiness to work through material again and again. Confidence is an also important factor: confidence in being able to ‘get there eventually’, as Margaret says; confidence in dealing with criticism and confidence in being good enough in one’s work. Again, these developments are mostly implicit. In some situations, however, training seems to be useful, for example with regards to John and George’s struggles with procrastination and deadlines. Susan describes how she sometimes struggled with translating her PhD work into a feasible action plan and felt that the training on project and time-management she eventually received when she was already a lecturer would have been most useful earlier on.

## 2. Looking for jobs

### **Search process**

On completion of their PhD, survey participants mostly sought lectureships (71%) and Post Doctoral Research Fellowships (61%) (multiple replies possible). Positions as research assistants or research officers were less popular. Participants’ experiences of the job search were addressed in two separate questions in the survey, one asking whether participants found it ‘easy’ to get their first job and one inquiring whether participants were eventually ‘successful’ in obtaining the sort of job they wanted. Interestingly, those participants who considered themselves successful in finding a suitable position did not necessarily find this an easy process. It also remarkable that there are no participants describing themselves as ‘*not successful*’ in their job search and that there is a large number of missing replies for this question. In the same vein, a number of survey participants carefully describe themselves as ‘successful after a prolonged search’, ‘partially successful’ (due to working fixed-term only) and as ‘not yet successful’.

### **Difficulties**

Participants who found their job search ‘difficult’ frequently referred to the difficult job market, serious competition and specifically to a lack of jobs in their preferred region or country. Participants also explained how they had held temporary positions for a while, described a lack of advice and guidance on the application process, referred to poor interview performances and stated that the skills acquired during a PhD were hardly recognised outside academia. Only a very small number of survey participants (5) consulted a careers advisor at some point during their PhD. Our interview data underline that mobility in particular is an issue when looking for jobs. The less-experienced academics discussed this at length, seeing a danger in focusing only on major institutions and major cities, while not knowing whether working at less prestigious institutions might have a negative impact on future career prospects or might lessen one’s ties with the academic community. Interview data from this group also show that looking for the first job in particular can take a lot of patience: Lori and George each spent one year looking for their first jobs and sent out more than 15 applications before finding a four-year-post-doc (Lori) and an annually-renewed fellowship (George).

A lack of guidance through the job search process is also evident in Florence’s account: Florence, who completed her PhD in 2003, recalls how she had to learn how to write an efficient academic CV from scratch, without external support or advice. The ‘younger generation’, by contrast, did benefit from increased institutional support and frequently were

able to work with a careers advisor specialising in PhD students and academic careers. What transpires from interviewing the ‘older generation’ is a very acute awareness of the enormous impact of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) on the employment policies of academic departments: depending on which cycle of the RAE universities are in, the need to have publications is more or less crucial in the recruitment process. Hence, when preparing her interview for her current position as a lecturer, Susan made sure she knew about the intricacies of the RAE and its impact on the department to which she was applying. Jill was looking at the end of the current RAE cycle when we interviewed her in February 2008 and said: ‘I think publication is still going to be important, but I think people can afford to take more of a risk at this stage of the RAE cycle over the next year or two with appointing people that they think are very, very good and show a lot of potential.’

Finally, networking, no matter how proactively pursued, clearly has its limits. Simon, a German national, says he has been unable to keep his German network strong and explains that, although very active in organising conferences and other events, he is not part of all relevant networks. Timothy also speaks of the risk of aligning oneself with what he calls the wrong faction and talks with a certain amount of disappointment about the politics in his current department, which he is about to leave for a new job abroad.

### **Advantages when looking for a job**

Survey participants describing their job search as ‘easy’ gave various explanations: participants expressed satisfaction with obtaining ESRC post-doc positions and said that they found a job after only one or two interviews or even before the viva. However, participants do not explain why it was easy for them (for example due to competence or effort), at the most they refer to being ‘lucky’. Here the interview data provide some additional insights: job searches can be made easier (though not necessarily easy as such) if applicants have insider knowledge, prepare their application carefully, have been briefed about the particularities and politics of the department or have a chance to make informal contacts. Dominic, for example, was partly able to get his current job as lecturer due to having worked in the institution before – so when asked by the interview panel about his contribution to the syllabus, he could pinpoint gaps and offer solutions, while the external candidate was left guessing as to what could be relevant. When Susan interviewed for a lecturer job at a new institution, her mentor knew the department very well, and carefully briefed her on how to present her expertise in a way that it would appeal to everyone across the whole department, which was somewhat fractured on her area of expertise. Jill, Margaret and Kirsty were approached informally for jobs: Jill was put forward for a position by her supervisor before having completed her PhD; Margaret, who had to work throughout her PhD to raise her family developed a network and a continuity of relevant employment which led to a post-doc before she had completed the PhD; and Kirsty’s first job was offered to her by her viva examiner. And finally, Lori had the instinct to pick up the phone in order to, as she puts it, prepare the ground: ‘When the post came up and I saw it, I knew that this was a good match, I spoke to the programme lead and to the person who is now my mentor here, so I rang her up and chatted about it, so they got to know me over the phone, and I think that made a difference.’

### **Becoming permanent**

One particular hurdle for academics in their first or early jobs is the transition from temporary to permanent employment. This was discussed at length by all six interviewees from the ‘younger generation’. Indeed, for some of our interviewees, the bottleneck moment in their careers is not securing their first position, but knowing that they will have to find a permanent

job at some point. While this particular issue was not addressed in the survey, one survey participant did volunteer that he decided to leave academia when he found himself unable to secure a full-time job as a lecturer five years after completing his PhD. Among the more experienced interviewees, Florence still finds herself in temporary employment five years after completing her PhD, a fact which, she says, makes her ‘cynical.’

### 3. Early careers

#### Number of jobs held and nature of first jobs

Survey participants were asked to list their current and previous positions, salaries and job titles. At the time of the survey (valid N = 36), 14% participants were in their first job, 44% in their second job, 31% in their third job and 11% in their fourth job. These data provide a fairly good picture of starting positions immediately after the PhD: roughly half of the survey participants started out in more research-oriented positions such as post-docs, and half started out in more teaching-oriented jobs, such as teaching fellowships (see figure 2). This pattern is replicated in the constitution of our group of more junior interviewees. Given the competitive job market, it is not clear to what extent this pattern is a consequence of deliberate choices or a result of navigating a demanding job market with a high degree of flexibility. Dominic, one interviewee who was able to make such a choice, explains: ‘My supervisor said you should apply for post-docs because going straight from PhD to a full-time job is often quite a shock. And one of my friends, who’s a lecturer in my old department, she really recommended doing a post-doc in-between. It gives you the chance to really get some publishing. You do get some more teaching experience but you’re not dumped in with a full load. So I thought that was a very sensible idea.’

#### Paths

Meaningful patterns across a longer time-frame are difficult to establish, due to the small number of survey participants who had held several positions and the consequent paucity of relevant data. The problem is aggravated by a lack of information as to whether jobs were full-time or part-time. Figure 2 shows job type (more research- or more teaching-oriented, as indicated by job titles) in relation to number of positions: the first two jobs after the PhD are roughly balanced out across teaching- or research-oriented roles. The third job shifts more towards a teaching role and the fourth job is, so far as can be gleaned from the title, clearly a teaching position. However, one would need more data on third and fourth jobs to see if this convergence towards teaching jobs is indeed a true pattern.

Figure 2: Type of job by number of positions

1 <sup>st</sup> job more research-oriented: 48% (19 of 40 participants who provided valid data on their first job)
2 <sup>nd</sup> job more research-oriented: 45% (14 out of 31 participants who had been in up to two jobs at the time of the survey)
3 <sup>rd</sup> job more research oriented: 27% (4 out of 15 participants who had been in up to three jobs at the time of the survey)
4 <sup>th</sup> job more research-oriented: none (0 out of 4 participants who had been in up to four jobs at the time of the survey)

#### Salary data



Unsurprisingly, a number of participants decided not to provide information on salaries in their responses to the survey. From the data that was provided, we can say that starting salaries range from £12,000 to £40,000 (though some salaries quoted may be for part-time work). There is a certain progression of salaries across time, with most academics in their third jobs earning between £25,000 and £45,000 and academics in their fourth job earning between £35,000 and £45,000. However, it is remarkable that the highest salaries among all survey participants were actually earned by the three PhDs who had left academia (and been contacted to complete the survey erroneously) and worked with the UN or the WHO, receiving around 100,000 USD each.

### **Pressures and support in the first job**

The more junior interviewees are acutely aware of the pressure to establish themselves via publications and of the expectations resulting from the Research Assessment Exercise (now to be replaced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF)). Two interviewees from this group had recently had departmental introductions to the new REF standards and were deliberating what to do in response. A number of interviewees from the 'younger generation' expressed concern about how to balance time for generating publications with a dedication to teaching. This concern ties into the hopes of securing a permanent job in the near future. The more junior group of interviewees also voiced a hope for alternative career paths within academia: the focus group participants in particular brainstormed on how universities could help to establish academic careers with a clear focus on teaching and less pressure to publish.

It is not clear how many of the more junior interviewees took part in a mentoring system but it seems that indeed working with a mentor, and ideally one who is formally assigned and available early on in the new situation is beneficial. Certainly, Dominic's account stands out as he was able to discuss most of his options, decisions and aims with peers, supervisors and mentors. Hardly any other interviewee seems to have had such a consistent, long-term pattern of support in their career development.

### **Institutional continuity**

The data reveal a tendency amongst graduates to remain at the institution where they did their PhD. 30% of all survey participants started their first job at the institution where they had completed their PhD. In the more junior group of interviewees, those academics who had also started their career at their PhD institution described this as a mostly positive experience, with a relatively easy transition from being a student to being a member of staff. By contrast, Susan, from the group of more senior interviewees, felt uneasy, never quite sure whether she was still someone's former PhD student or a member of staff. When she eventually left her home institution, she felt recognised as a full member of staff from day one.

Institutional continuity is also an issue when it comes to future career plans, as the single largest group (12 participants) is planning for a promotion at their current institution. The hope of staying or returning to one's PhD institution was also discussed among the focus group participants, expressing a certain uncertainty regarding institutional preferences: whether for example the universities of Oxford and Cambridge prefer to hire from among their own PhD students, making it difficult for 'outsiders' to join, while the LSE would perhaps prefer to see their PhD students return after having worked elsewhere. Jill, from the group of the more experienced interviewees, points out however that opportunities for career progression sometimes need to be sought outside the home institution.

The more experienced interviewees described various plans for their careers, such as researching a new book, starting to apply for larger research grants, being promoted within a certain time-frame, all underpinned by a consideration of the needs of partners and families.

Finally there is an element of negotiating power and limitations to networking in the accounts of the more senior interviewees. Florence explained that she was given an extension to her current contract due to the fact that her number of publications made her the most valuable staff member in terms of RAE standards. In retrospect Florence realised that she could have used this to negotiate a permanent position. Susan described how she had to redefine her position within the department and learn how to say no in order to make her teaching load more manageable. Simon thought that some of the jobs he was interested in did not necessarily go to the best qualified candidate but to those who were in the best network for this particular job.

## **Recommendations for PhD students considering an academic career in the social sciences**

### **1. Be clear about what you want and explore your motivations**

Have a long hard think and intensive discussions with your peers, mentors or a careers adviser about what it is you are hoping to ‘get’ out of an academic career. Most of the academics we interviewed talk about their work with a sense of deep commitment, if not dedication. Some enjoy their teaching very much and almost everyone engaged with their research on a very personal level, stressing that this is precisely the type of work they wanted to do and for which some had left previous careers. Susan said at the end of our interview: ‘I read books and talk to my students about books and get paid for it - isn't that wonderful?’

Most of our interviewees also cherish the freedom they have in choosing and developing their own areas of research. Dominic says: ‘The good thing about academia is if you get bored with what you're teaching, there is leeway to come up with new things. Right now, I'm becoming less interested in one of my courses and am developing more of an interest in a new thing. And so that's something I would develop a course on. So I don't think I'm ever going to be bored with my job.’

### **2. If you are unsure about pursuing an academic career, consider the alternatives**

If this uncertainty becomes apparent while you are completing your PhD or soon after then do talk to a careers adviser or any contacts you have working in areas outside academia that you may be interested in. This can help you work out whether your uncertainty reflects your true aims, and how realistic your perceptions of life ‘outside’ are. Such conversations will also be important to help establish how the skills and experience you have gained might be transferable to non-academic areas of work.

Sophie was in her first academic job and realised: ‘The benefits in academia are not enough to attract me to it, and the things that I love doing in my work are not central to academia, and that's the realisation I have come to, so I am pretty clear that I am leaving. The job that I had post the PhD, which has been research in my field, with lovely people, has really helped me clarify what are the components of my work that I love and that's been what I look for now.’

### **3. If you are clear that academia is the place where you want to be, consider the following frustrations and pressures**

Embarking on an academic career also means: finding one's way through a competitive and inflexible job market; living with the uncertainty of temporary contracts or part-time employment; balancing teaching and research; living up to the pressures resulting from the RAE/REF; facing meagre financial rewards for relatively long periods; and having to reconcile commitments to partners and families with a certain obligation to be mobile. Against this back-drop, it is not surprising that the idea of being lucky or unlucky and of needing to be at the right place at the right time comes up again and again in both our survey and interview data.

Dominic says of academia: 'The old days of academia when there was a lot more freedom to do everything have gone. Now everything seems a lot more regulated and everything has to go through various panels and committees. You have to have minimum student numbers in order to run courses, so the market always seems to be involved which certainly didn't appear to be the way in the past. Some of it is good. For example the fact that students are now required to do a lot more compulsory courses in a PhD than before. But again, that sort of restricts creativity and freedom a little bit.'

#### *4. Don't just have a plan, have an action plan and sharpen your profile*

When asked about their decision to start an academic career, most of our interviewees refer to a gradual process rather than an active decision. At the same time, most of our interviewees seemed to have an implicit dream or a basic plan of 'staying on' after the PhD. What sometimes seems to be lacking (or is at least not discussed in such terms) is an action plan, an assessment of one's strengths and potential weaknesses and any explicit decision to work towards a career goal. This may be because our respondents prefer to see their development in more vocational terms – viewing themselves as a researcher, an expert or a teacher – and are to some extent reluctant to picture themselves as people who are not just having but actually managing a career.

George says: 'When I started each of my degrees, I never really had a sense of what I was going to do straight afterwards, so there was actually never really an ambition to go into academia until very late on in the PhD process. I am sort of quite surprised I ended up here, because it was never my intention to do this at all.' He also says: 'When I went through the PhD I had very minimal information and training on how to get an academic job, and very limited explanation of what it involves and what the processes are and what's expected of you, for a whole variety of issues, whether that's going to conferences, how to get things published, what kind of CV you should be developing, in terms of development, but also the sort of style of the CV, how to begin develop professional networks. All the things which I feel I am only learning now actually, having started this fellowship. And I feel that I did lack a lot of those skills, which I am still struggling with, because I feel very much behind the game, whereas a lot of people who are much younger than me and at the early stage of their research have got better sets of skills, so that's a competitive disadvantage in many ways.'

#### *5. Become savvy on the academic landscape as a job market.*

There are a number of steps you can take to enhance your chance of success within the competitive market. This research has highlighted the importance of the following:

- Consult a careers advisor, ideally one specialising in working with PhD students
- Talk to your supervisor / mentor about their experiences (especially of recruiting new staff)

- Organise a job talk at your department to gain first-hand experience of this demanding element of the application process
- Research the implications of the RAE/REF if you wish to work in the UK
- Find out what the job situation is in other countries and how a British PhD is viewed elsewhere, for example if you are interested in a potential job in the US

## **6. Find a way of networking that suits you**

Many people resist the idea of networking and consider networking as perhaps too instrumental or just very daunting. In fact, effective networking should not only be a two-way process of give and take but also can/should start with asking other people questions about their work or careers, taking the focus off the questioner. Consider the experiences of Dominic, who in all likelihood wouldn't call himself a great networker. Yet he had someone to discuss his plans and moves with at all stages of his career: his supervisor; the teacher who ran the PhD seminars and gave him his first teaching job; a very encouraging friend from his Masters who also did a PhD and acted as referee later on; one of the senior academics he met when he went abroad; his boss during the post-doc; and two colleagues with whom he collaborates on student exchanges and on essay marking.

## **7. As you prepare for the job search, decide about your priorities and the sacrifices you are willing or not willing to make**

- Mobility – are you prepared to move, go abroad, move away from what are considered to be the top universities and the major cities? How will this affect your personal life?
- How flexible are you about the type of job you will accept?
- The job search process is potentially a long one – there may be up to a one year gap between finishing the PhD and getting the first job. There is an element of rhythm inherent in the process, which needs to be borne in mind when planning applications and a timetable for thesis completion.
- The process is one that incorporates an element of luck ('being in the right place at the right time') so patience and/or a 'plan B' can be helpful.
- Even once a job has been secured, an element of uncertainty often remains, due to the prevalence of fixed-term or annually-renewed contracts. This can make long-term forward-planning challenging.
- Be prepared for a 'shock to the system' if you go straight from a PhD to a lecturing job, the teaching load will be high, but there will also be intense pressure to publish and establish yourself at the same time.

## 8. And finally: Develop patience, resilience and confidence

Developing these attributes is necessarily a very personal journey, but the attitude adopted by Margaret during her PhD is indicative of a quiet positivity that may help others: 'I knew, also, that I was going to finish. It might take time, but I was going to get there.'