Careers For Arts Postgraduates

Career Advice for Postgraduates

Monash Postgraduate Association
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Careers For Arts Research Postgraduates

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MPA Careers Seminar for Arts Research Postgraduates held
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Compiled by Dina Galanopoulos, Project Officer, MPA from notes taken by
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Speakers:
Introduction, Hilary Morgan, Executive Officer, MPA
Dr Ada Cheung, PhD in Roman History
Dr Stuart Dawson, PhD in Classics and Politics
Professor Terry Threadgold, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies

A summary of the seminar by participant Sarah Lawson can be found in Compass ‘99, page 46 “ ‘Overqualified and unemployable?’: an MPA Seminar on Careers for Arts Research Postgraduates”.

MPA 1999
Abstract

On 30 September 1998, the Monash Postgraduate Association conducted a careers based seminar for Arts Research Postgraduates. The focus was to explore the likelihood or not of a career in academia. In light of the reality that such positions are diminishing as the number of postgraduates increases and funding is reduced, alternative career paths were explored. In particular, ways to access employment outside the parameters of the university were considered.

Three speakers were invited to share their experiences post-PhD, how they survived and got to where they are today. Postgraduate participants were encouraged to identify the universality of their skills and apply them to positions outside of academia. It was concluded that communication and interpersonal skills, reading, writing, and research, flexibility and dedication were some of the skills needed to complete a research degree, be it Masters or PhD, and were skills which could be marketed to broaden employment opportunities for postgraduates.
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Opportunities to access academic careers are diminishing. They call this ‘logjam’. Career pathways, particularly in the Arts (and Science) are no longer clear.

Despite being armed with a higher degree it may be necessary for postgraduates to undergo a year of vocational training to prepare them for the realities of the job market.

The simple fact of ‘surviving’ ones thesis makes postgraduates ‘stress-proof’ and shows an ability to be dedicated to a project for a substantial amount of time.

Team work, group work and considering others opinions can all be achieved through tutorials. Humanities training gives an understanding of equity & access as well as cultural and moral viewpoints.
Introduction

Mention in conversation that you have graduated from an Arts discipline and hope that the dreaded question does not arise, ‘So what does that qualify you for?’ ‘It’s a generalist degree’ you reply, in the hope that your answer will satisfy their curiosity and save you a long and drawn out explanation of all the possible and probable career paths available. ‘Yes but exactly what type of work will you be doing?’

This is a question facing many Arts students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, as they approach the end of their degrees. Recent debate suggests that the higher up the academic ladder an Arts student climbs the more difficult it is to become employed: ‘too many graduates, too few jobs’ or ‘over-educated and unemployable’ are phrases which have recently been cast into the spotlight.

The Monash Postgraduate Association Executive Officer, Hilary Morgan, introduced this controversial issue at a careers seminar held specifically for Arts Research Postgraduates in September 1998 at Monash University.

“Arts is one of the largest faculties at Monash. It covers a diverse range of disciplines. Research postgraduates in Arts are almost double the number in the next largest research training faculty, that of Medicine. Research loads have increased greatly over the past ten years and current election promises indicate a further growth being allowed. Opportunities to access academic careers are diminishing. They call this ‘logjam’. Career pathways, particularly in the Arts (and Science) are no longer clear.
As an example I quote from an email from an Arts postgraduate who, while basking in the sun after submitting his thesis, said:

I don’t really feel anything at the moment. I guess that is the nature of a humanities based course. One thinks ‘what can I do now?’ At least engineers can feel smug in the knowledge that they could build box-girder bridges.

There has been much debate of late, of which I hope you have all been aware, and have had the opportunity to consider the issues about future directions for Arts education in Australia.

1. The Arts Faculty Review at Monash has stirred many ‘passions’.
2. There has been the recent national reviews:
   - Humanities – ‘Knowing Ourselves and Others’
   - Social Sciences – ‘Challenges for the Social Sciences and Australia’

Some would believe that the numbers of Arts research graduates should be decreased. Over-educated and unemployable? Drop your PhD, a Masters is more marketable!

However the strong sentiments of 2 senior academics were recently expressed in the following statements:

A strong humanities research culture will be a major factor shaping the future of work in Australia, playing a vital role in re-training and lifelong learning, as well as producing a more qualified population with creative and intellectual skills.

Professor Deryck Schreuder, VC University of WA

(Richardson J. in The Australian, Higher Education Supplement, 16/9/1998)
HSS research underpins our whole culture, our very sense of who we are, the enormous achievement of a tolerant, curious, progressive, educated Australian society in the past 50 years. It has made modern ‘Australia’.

Professor Don Aitkin, VC University of Canberra


The focus of this MPA careers seminar attempted to dispel the misconception that academia is the only viable future for Arts postgraduates, especially PhDs. The seminar exposed some realities about careers in academia and suggested alternative careers, as well as how to present oneself outside of academia. Three speakers were invited to discuss their experiences of becoming employed post-PhD. The valuable input and advice of two Arts PhD graduates, Dr Ada Cheung and Dr Stuart Dawson as well as that of Professor Terry Threadgold, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and Director of the Arts Graduate School, provided inspiration for Arts postgraduates, encouraging them to recognise and market their skills in order to broaden their potential employment base.
Dr Ada Cheung

Careers In The Field Of Publishing

The first speaker was Dr Ada Cheung who obtained a PhD in Roman History from Monash University in 1997. She is currently an editor of Lonely Planet Publications and believes that by the very nature of their courses Arts students are qualified for editorial positions. Skills obtained during their degrees such as writing, proof reading essays and theses, and marking essays could all be considered editing skills and adapted to suit such a position.

She stressed that communication skills are developed through various requirements of the course, such as presenting seminar and conference papers and teaching. Arts graduates also possess research skills; knowing where information lies and how to find it. Arts graduates need to recognise that these skills can be universal and use them to better market themselves.

Ada believes that the simple fact of ‘surviving’ ones thesis makes postgraduates ‘stress-proof’ and shows an ability to be dedicated to a project for a substantial amount of time and an ability to meet deadlines. The student-supervisor relationship could also be deemed important as it demonstrates an ability to empathise with sensitive authors in the editing world.

Computer literacy is another skill highly valued by employers. Whether postgraduates have been on a course or are self taught is irrelevant; the knowledge of a computer and how to find ones way around it is important. If postgraduates are self taught then this shows flexibility and an ability to learn quickly which is a bonus in any working environment. In fact, flexibility has become an essential prerequisite in today’s job market, which highly values multi-skilling. It is also important to stress one’s people skills, for example mentioning other employment could highlight customer service skills.
In writing covering letters, Ada suggested that all of the above information should be included in such a way as to address the job description thereby making a convincing argument of the applicants appropriateness for the position.

Ada identified some areas for postgraduates to look for employment if interested in an editing career. The industry blue newsletter lists jobs on the back. Contact details are: 1300 360 128 or email blue.newsletter@thorpe.com.au. The Monash Main Library has the Australian Booksellers & Publishers Monthly, which does not carry classifieds but is worth a look. Employment Agency, Book Staff is also a useful source. Contact Alison Aprhys & Melinda Buffon 0412 012 904.

The weekend papers are always a good source, as is the Monash Student Employment and Careers Service which has a folder on publishing. The Lonely Planet contracts out editing however proof reading is ‘the sort of easy money job that in-house people fight tooth and nail for’.

Ada suggested that postgraduates needed to ‘go for it and make their own luck’. They should tailor applications to fit the job, ask for job descriptions and avoid using the title Dr, as there is still a strong assumption that everybody with a doctorate is a know-all academic, until proven innocent. Postgraduates could still include it in their CV but don’t sign themselves as Dr.

She also suggested that voluntary work, preferably in some form of managerial capacity was a great way to learn other technical skills. This would demonstrate that postgraduates can relate to other people - ‘it is still a common perception that humanities postgrads spend their time sitting in a little room beavering away, with no outside contact’.

Ada advised graduates to be themselves in interviews as often referees will need to corroborate their story. It is also important that postgraduates inform their referees that they are applying for positions so they can prepare. If
personnel from Human Resources are conducting the interview they should use the appropriate jargon; teamwork, managerial skills, time management, leadership etc are all popular terms in the HR world. They should also emphasise their people skills, explain that research entails lots of individual analytical work and resourcefulness.

The final piece of advice offered by Ada related to those “two killer questions that crop up with depressing regularity: ‘What personal qualities make you ideal for this job’ and ‘So, why Lonely Planet?’” In response to the latter question postgraduates need to provide some praise as to why they are a great company or organisation to work for. If it’s a large company, they should tell them how much they’d love to work in a multinational corporate environment and are excited about the potential opportunities on offer. If a smaller company, they should explain how important ‘team spirit’ and the ‘personal dimension’ are and how these are lacking in the corporate world. With regard to the first question, Ada advised postgraduates to attempt to be as comprehensive as possible prior to this question and hope that they will have realised that you have already responded.

Lastly she urged postgraduates to keep applying for those jobs. ‘Go right ahead and feel unloved and unwanted, but keep applying.’
Dr Stuart Dawson

Entreprenurial Approaches To Developing A Career

Dr Stuart Dawson has explored many avenues since graduating from Monash University; the trials in setting up his own business, publishing a tutoring guide and other experiences gained by carving out his own career pathway. In telling his story he described how his skills and training from his research degree have been beneficial in other areas.

Stuart began by referring to an article, titled ‘PhDs offer no guarantees’ by Robin Wilson in the Weekend Australian, September 19-20 1998. The article emphasised that a weak academic job market was forcing graduates to seek jobs outside higher education. While some graduates were bitter about being deprived of an academic post others have acknowledged that their intellect can still be useful in other positions.

For example the article located:

• a mathematician on Wall St.
• an English PhD writing a manual for a computer company
• an art historian helping the J. Paul Getty Museum put a collection together
• a cell biologist working as a patent agent for a pharmaceutical company
• a biochemist producing a popular calendar called Studmuffins of Science
• and another biochemist working as a programs officer for the James S. McDonnell Foundation, which gives grants for research in neuroscience and the cognitive sciences in which a PhD is essential.
Not working directly in the academic arena does not mean postgraduates have to feel banished from intellectual pursuits. On the contrary, the above examples prove that positions can be found to use one’s doctoral training. In fact, some PhDs from the article were content to be free of the trappings of academic life; the long hours, late nights and often, initially anyway, the low pay.

Stuart’s experience was not unlike many of the postgraduates in the article to which he referred. After completing his PhD in Classics and Politics from Monash in 1996, cutbacks in funding to Humanities led to a shortage of related academic positions. Stuart therefore decided to broaden his opportunities by pursuing vocational training. This led to him establishing his own freelancing business, Pathways Research and Training Consultancy which he still runs today. Stuart recently re-entered academia at Victoria University.

Stuart stressed the need to do as much further training after the PhD that is necessary. Despite being armed with a higher degree it may be necessary for postgraduates to undergo a year of vocational training to prepare them for the realities of the job market. PhD qualifications mean that postgraduates will be able to quickly get through any extra training. In particular their self-directed and independent learning approaches will make any such tasks quite manageable compared to getting through a PhD.

Stuart’s advice to postgraduates was to market or sell their PhD skills by:

• repackaging and re-labelling
• focusing on the skills that they have acquired

Research qualifications can help postgraduates:

• get on top of new literature quickly
• get new qualifications quickly & independently
• work to own timetable and be self motivated
• expand their team skills & interpersonal skills - remember tutoring is a skill, it demonstrates people skills, collaborative skills and teamwork

Also research postgraduates must:
• remember that the covering letter sells
• maintain an open mind of where to find work
• decide to use the title Dr or not, as appropriate
• be prepared to do further training

Advice was given as to the benefits of publishing a manual of some kind. It was considered complimentary to the Thesis, as sometimes there is a craving for the practical instead of theoretical. Whatever you are working on you must be able to translate it to non-academics.

Finally to inspire everyone, Stuart referred to the article Keep Your Dreams Alive, by Claire Lowenthal, Dynamic Small Business October/November 1998. It’s about an unemployed 22 year old man who had decided to write a book called Collective Wisdom which comprised of interviews with famous Australians. He made 3,000 phone calls & succeeded in obtaining thirty interviews, including: Bob Hawke, Jeff Kennett, Poppy King & Cheryl Kernot. His book had been on the top 10 list for two weeks in a row, much to the surprise and initial doubt of the publisher.
Professor Terry Threadgold

Associate Dean, Graduate Studies,
Faculty Of Arts

Perspectives from the Faculty of Arts

Professor Terry Threadgold discussed the value of an Arts Research degree, emphasising the talents, skills and potential to be realised from undertaking a thesis. She also provided insight into future prospects in academia. The last 15 years have shown that not everybody will end up getting a job in academia. Thirty years ago when Terry did her postgraduate studies, there were six women postgraduates with her, four of them are now professors. She acknowledges that this is not the case any more. Academic appointments are few and applicants are many.

‘The university these days is totally different. Staff who have tenure must accomplish their tasks, tenure or not. If they are unsuccessful they are out. They juggle various tasks: administrative roles, teaching and finding the time to do their own research, which is usually in the evening. The hours are long and hard.’

Terry noted that a person working in the corporate sector would be likely to be earning three times the amount they could earn in academia. Terry has encouraged her own students to look at alternative employment. For example, one classic student, whose topic is Masculinity & Classical Greek Tragedy, is working part-time as a Research Assistant with the Aids Council, while finishing his PhD.
Terry, like the other speakers before her emphasised that postgraduates must market their:

- “writing skills
- research skills – their capability of synthesising complex information
- reading skills
- critical reading skills, they have learnt to be independent thinkers, they ask questions and do not take things on face value
- ability to resource for information”

She encouraged participation in conferences and giving presentations in an attempt to improve confidence and communication skills among postgraduates. It is important to be articulate. Team work, group work and considering others' opinions can all be achieved through tutorials. Humanities training gives an understanding of equity & access as well as cultural and moral viewpoints.

Flexibility, a skill raised by both prior speakers was also considered important by Terry. For example, the Faculty of Information Technology is often approached by large computer firms looking to employ interns. The computing firms found that computing students did not necessarily have the skills that they wanted. The Arts Faculty had subsequently been approached and six humanities students have been recruited of late.

On the topic of supervisors Terry believed that they should remain accessible to students and be prepared to provide references even up to five years after submitting the thesis.

Some places where PhD Arts graduates have received employment include:

- Victorian Government, Censorship & the Internet
- Policy development for the Law Reform Commission, dealing with rape & sexual assault issues
- Areas covering multi-media, public history, museums, tourism

Terry strongly encouraged Arts postgraduate students to broaden their area of interest to include potential employment outside of academia.
Summary

The main focus of the Careers Seminar, as stressed by all three presenters, is that Arts postgraduates possess a myriad of skills that are in demand outside of academia. It is simply a matter of identifying, marketing and repackaging these skills for different situations. Arts postgraduates, by the nature of their degrees have developed advanced writing, reading and research skills. Years of proof reading essays makes them eligible for editorial work as well as providing them with an ability to grasp new concepts quickly and independently. Having survived 3-6 years on one project shows dedication, motivation and an ability to meet deadlines and deal with stressful situations.

The requirements of an Arts degree to contribute to conferences or write journal papers or even those lucky enough to have tutoring experience will have developed extensive communication and interpersonal skills as well as a team work ethos. An ability to combine all of the above with employment or other family and life commitments means that Arts postgraduates are flexible, an asset in the current competitive job market. The clearest message coming out of this seminar is that Arts postgraduates need to sell themselves. They possess many and varied skills which need to be identified, marketed and presented to potential employers often outside the university environment. Arts postgraduates are encouraged to be persistent and not to give up hope.