

What is on the other side of PhD graduation?

“Choose the life that is most useful, and habit will make it the most agreeable”

Francis Bacon.

The challenge for each of us remains to find the life that is “most useful” for our individual circumstances and disposition. Whilst a PhD may be part of the traditional route to an academic or research career, the imbalance between the numbers of people completing a PhD and the available academic and research opportunities mean that many successful PhD graduates may have to consider life beyond the research or academic environments.

“At the University of Leicester, we strive to provide professional development planning with some clear objectives”

For many PhD researchers (PGRs) there is a need to explore career opportunities beyond the academy. As part of our career management provision for PGRs at the University of Leicester, we strive to provide professional development planning with some clear objectives, specifically to enable participants to:

- review their professional development planning to date;
- overview their realistic career options;
- revisit their short, medium and long-term goals;
- put in place an action plan for their continuing professional development, with realistic timelines.

Straightforward? Unfortunately, one of the main challenges to the provision of professional development and career management training to the PGR population is lack of engagement, by PGRs in the training provided. Whilst this phenomenon is not fully understood, there are specific issues as to why PGRs do not attend such opportunities, and more general issues around why professionals in the wider working world do not attend such training.

One such issue, specific to the PGR community, is that for the most a PhD is a training to become an academic and/or researcher. Why then should they assume they are not going to be successful in achieving their desired outcome? As “motivational speaker” Tony Robbins advises, when it comes to following a career goal, one can either: (a) exclude all alternatives; or (b) have one or more alternative route(s) planned. During a recent Vitae Researcher Development conference one plenary brought this into sharp focus with a question about “workforce planning”. The point raised was that lack of apparent planning in terms of linking the number of

PhD completions to workforce need (in the academic, research and wider world of work) as a determinant of the number of available PhD places.

Considering professional development planning more broadly, Jim Schreir, in a recent posting on “Careerealism”, suggests there are five ways to get employees to take part in professional development training:

1. **make it relevant**, to the participants career situation;
2. **set the stage**, i.e. anticipate the participant question “why are we here”?;
3. **make it experiential**, rather than powerpoint and words;
4. **include self-assessments**, by enabling participants to measure their own learning;
5. **connect with instructors**, by enabling participants to see that instructors have been through similar experiences and thus identify with them.

In conclusion there appears to be an assumption and a challenge in play here.

1. The assumption, by some PGRs, that engaging with professional development planning is only appropriate for those who have decided to look beyond academia and/or research for their future career. This contradicts the realities of the contemporary working world where academics and researchers need to develop a career plan and broad range of skills, e.g. enterprise skills being one example. Please see vitae.ac.uk and the expectations of the research councils for doctoral training centre applicants.

2. The challenge is for researcher developers to design and deliver professional development training that is relevant, contextualised, experiential and to make a connection with participants. For the PGR to choose the (professional) life that is “most agreeable” we need to work together to develop the professional development habit which is “most useful”.

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