

PhD candidate? Why and how to develop a career plan

Emmanuel Adukwu is the Deputy Head of the Department of Applied Sciences at the University of West England. His previous role included being the Employability & Widening Participation Lead for the Department. Here he offers some career-planning advice for PhD candidates. This article was first blogged on the [Aspiring Professionals Hub](#), an information portal and academic & career skills training provider, of which Emmanuel was a co-founder.

After several conversations with some PhD students/candidates, I was struck by one common thread – the lack of awareness or astuteness in planning or developing their own careers, and lack of confidence in seeking help.

So why this article?

Many PhD students, whilst studying for a higher degree, approach their careers in a manner no different from undergraduate (UG) students, i.e. they typically wait to the end of the PhD and then panic, which manifests itself in last-minute CVs, poor application outcomes and pressure to make career choices. With a PhD come high expectations and occasionally, sadly poor post-PhD career outcomes. Thus, it is imperative that PhD candidates understand the importance of the PhD.

As a PhD candidate, you need to view your project as a form of project management – think about it; *you are given an idea or a project, you investigate challenges around the idea, often work with different stakeholders (sponsors, supervisors, other students, graduate school, community, peers at conferences etc.), proffer solutions and produce a report, which you are expected to and usually defend to an expert committee.*

Advert

How does this differ from a project coordinator/manager in a business, clinical or engineering sector? A project manager typically gets a project, forms a team, works with the team to develop the idea (sometimes alone, just like in a PhD), a process that includes a feasibility assessment (proposal stage during PhD), the main element and eventually presenting and defending the report to the clients (in this case the external examiners and often the project sponsors during the PhD).

So if the experience of the PhD student is similar to that of different roles in industry, e.g. project manager, it is imperative that PhD students or candidates are better equipped to engage beyond the walls of academia, are responsive and supported in developing their own individual personal and professional skills.

Are we preparing our PhD students well?

I am not aware of any other sector where individuals have a two- or three-year hiatus where they do not actively engage in the planning of their careers like you'll find with PhD students. Often, without proactive supervisors to challenge the PhD student to explore, seek and engage in professional development, many PhD students do not seek help and ferociously burrow into the 'work', forgetting they need to proactively plan life beyond the temporary work/degree (which is what it is!).

In an article published by Adam Ruben (2019), the line 'How...do I find an employer willing to overlook my most flagrant disadvantage: my PhD?' is the reality many PhD candidates are either willfully ignorant about or grossly unprepared for!

It is possible that a lot of these students respond to the type of mentoring or lack of, from supervisors and in some cases are beholden to the supervisors, which really impacts their judgement on their own personal career development. Also, where supervisors are not good mentors, not dynamic, not commercially aware and not engaged with the sector, the risk is that the PhD student is looking through a narrow lens and sometimes becomes a clone of the supervisor and exhibits the same traits.

The challenge for many of these PhD students is that for every however many PhD students, there might just be one lecturing or one postdoc job and many have ended up working in lower paid jobs unrelated to their PhD (believe me, it happens more often than you think).

For many, the outcomes of this have been cited as 'leading to poor mental health, difficulties in being able to obtain a mortgage and embarrassment'. As some have said, they are forced to remove the PhD degree from the CV to get an entry-level job.

So who is responsible?

This should be a collective responsibility; however, the final buck stops with the PhD student/candidate.

Unfortunately, universities in the UK do not typically provide robust or tailored career support for postgraduate (PG) and research students, as the focus is squarely on the UG students. The [Graduate Outcomes Survey \(GOS\)](#), formerly known as the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE), only targets UG students and for many careers services, this is where all efforts are focused. Following discussions with many PhD candidates in the USA, the challenges are not much different. It has also been identified as an issue in Canada – read [here](#).

I have questioned and challenged this lack of support for the PG student and research community at several UK institutions and employability leaders' events, and will continue to do so, but we are far from an ideal situation. Graduate schools and careers/employability services should be expected to provide adequate support for PG students and researchers (they are fee payers too!). In addition, PhD supervisors' training should include helping the PhD student with better career planning and development.

For the PhD student

It is important that any student who is embarking on a PhD should learn to ask for help early on in the process, even before deciding on the PhD. Ask questions about the career support being offered by the PhD supervision team, the graduate school, department and the university.

In addition, as a PhD student, you need to understand the value of external engagement, conferences and networking beyond your office, laboratory or studio to your career development. Going to a conference should be more about the opportunities available to you, rather than bouncing off on a high to present your research, getting drunk with your group/lab mates or shopping trips. Don't get me wrong, both are equally important, but conferences can provide excellent spaces for you to network and increase your visibility within your field.

Recommendations

- If you are a PhD student, ask for help, always! This is a key strength and not a weakness.
- Use a career planning or auditing tool to map your career journey. If you are not sure how to do this, speak to a career advisor.
- Understand the link between your PhD and your sector and build those links from Day 1 of your PhD.
- Keep networking as your network is your net worth (*Your job search – who you know matters but who knows you matters even more!* Article [here](#)).

Further reading

- Julian Kirchherr (2018). A PhD should be about improving society, not chasing academic kudos. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/aug/09/a-phd-should-be-about-improving-society-not-chasing-academic-kudos>
- The Postdoctoral Conundrum – To Postdoc or not to PostDoc. Dr Victor Ujor (click [here](#) for article).