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PhD employability: Career pathways and recruiter insights

About this ebook

This ebook is a summary of the special interest session run by **jobs.ac.uk** at the Vitae International Conference 2017. PhD Employability and post-doctoral pathways have been hot topics within research/academic circles for some time now. It is well understood that the ever growing number of PhD qualified candidates can no longer expect to take the traditional academic route.

Academic job markets in many research intensive countries are becoming saturated. Over the past year or so we have seen some research starting to emerge that helps us understand what might be going on and what do such labour market conditions mean for PhD qualified candidates as well as those who work to support their careers.

Contents

1-Our agenda	3
2-Expectations	6
3-Translations	9
4-Importance of work experience	11

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Our agenda

Our agenda

- *To share our insights on the topic*
- *To facilitate a discussion*
- *To start forming practical solutions to the challenges*

During our special interest session, we wanted to contribute to this discussion by sharing our views, insights and knowledge on the topic. Our aim was to facilitate a discussion and to start forming practical solutions to the challenges as we see them.

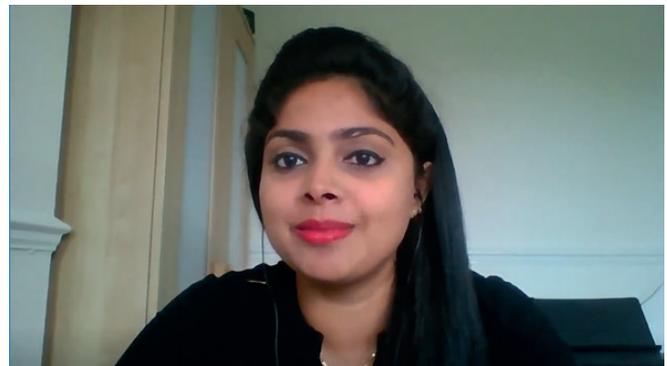
We drew on some of the insights from our survey of around 5,000 doctoral and post-doc candidates, and from interviews with a MCSA funded PhD student, Arathi Kizhedath at Newcastle University and a Head of People Development and former Head of Careers Centre at ETH Zurich, Martin Ghisletti.

The session was structured in the following way:

- 1-The context
- 2-A round of data, interviews and a group discussion
- 3-Summary of the key points.



Martin Ghisletti, ETH Zurich



Arathi Kizhedath, Newcastle University

Career Pathways following Doctoral Research 2017 – survey of circa 5,000 respondents conducted by **jobs.ac.uk**

Our contribution

So what specifically were we contributing to? Our particular contribution related to two of the three key areas that we believe stand as challenges to PhD employability - Expectations and Translation. The third is the lack of awareness of the labour market outside of academia. However, by addressing the expectations and translation, we believe the lack of awareness is no longer an issue.

What we have known so far is that the unemployment levels amongst PhD holders has been low which is encouraging. We have also known that only a small percentage of PhD holders work in academia. That has not necessarily been a problem, but what has? In the clip that follows, Martin Ghisletti outlined these issues.



Challenges to PhD Employability- Click the image for play

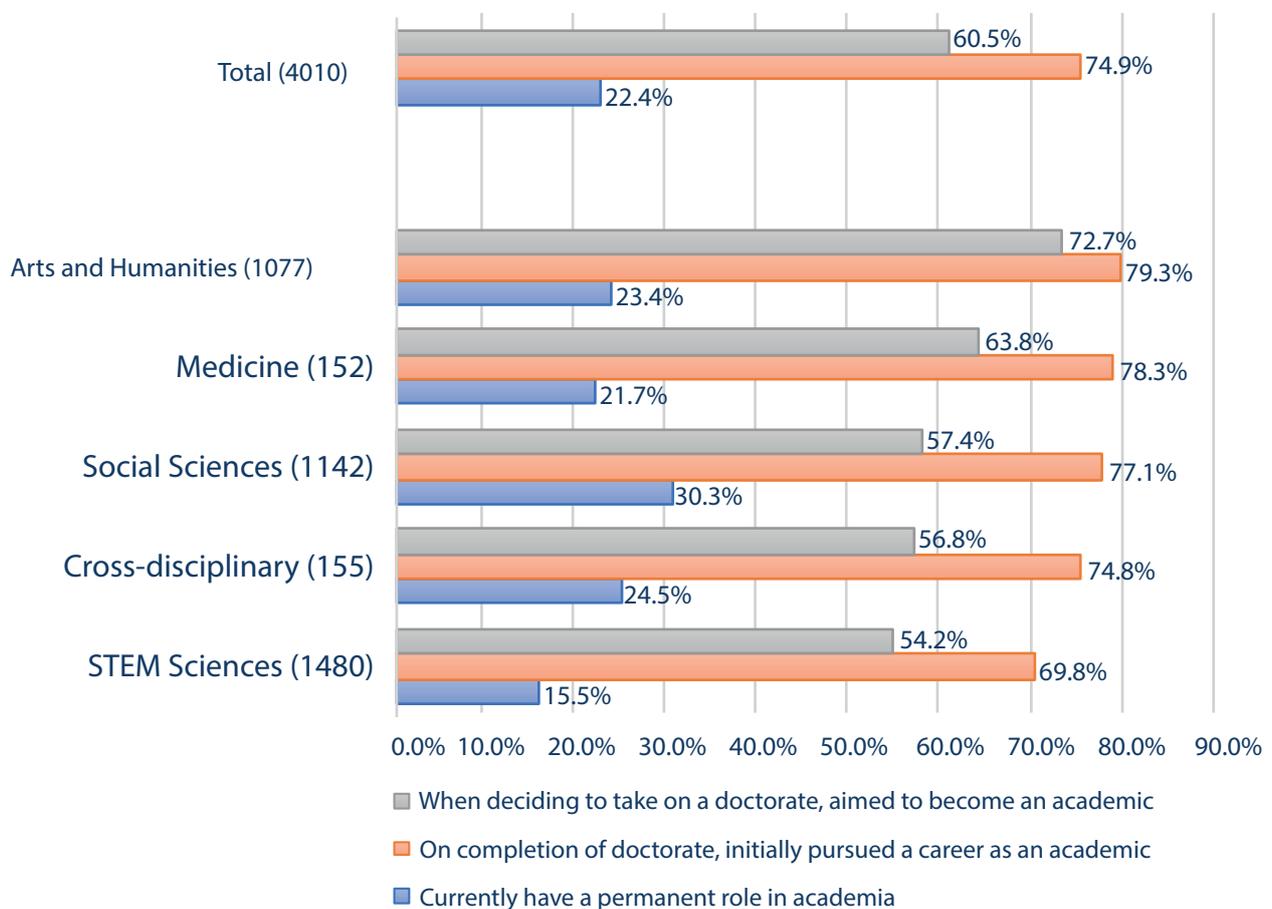
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Expectations

Expectations

As Martin has outlined, there seems to be a mismatch of what a PhD student expects and what he or she is likely to get. We compared our survey to see how well it supported Martin's data. Our survey certainly corroborated the experience at ETH Zurich. More than half of our respondents embarked on a PhD with an aim of becoming an academic, and an even larger percentage pursued an academic career on completion. What our findings suggest is that, during the time at university, the idea of an academic career seems to incubate further.



As a way introducing potential solutions to this issue, we looked at another video clip which describes how ETH Zurich deals with it.



Managing expectations at ETH Zurich- Click the image for play

Discussion: Managing expectations and opening horizons

We then turned to our group and asked them to discuss and share their experiences of managing expectations. We were interested in finding out what doctoral researchers within their institutions thought and how the participants (researcher developers) help them or how could they help their doctoral researchers in broadening their horizons if they didn't already.

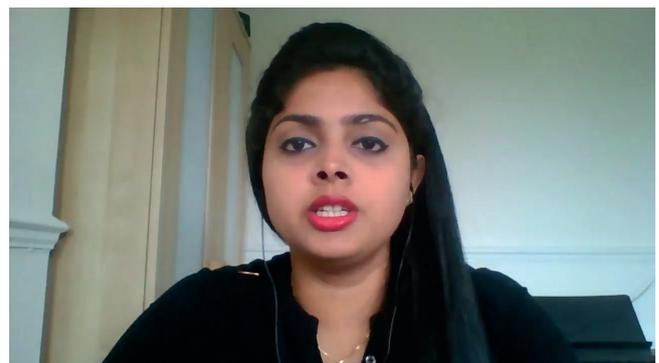
The vibrant discussion led to the following points:

- Sharing of the statistics relating to the labour market should be framed in a positive way – academia is one of many options, instead of putting academia on a pedestal.
- Early conversations framed in such a way are desirable.
- Assuring doctoral researchers that it is OK to have another career, and also providing training for the PhD supervisors, so the message gets reinforced.
- Providing opportunities for doctoral researchers to develop skills suitable for any career e.g. management skills.
- Having conversations around what is being funded in research may also be useful- it may provide an indication of the likelihood of an academic career within the particular field.
- Encourage doctoral researchers to speak about career options with their non-academic friends in order to gain a broader perspective.

We then concluded this section with Martin and Arathi's top tips.



Top tips from Martin- Click the image for play



Top tips from Arathi- Click the image for play

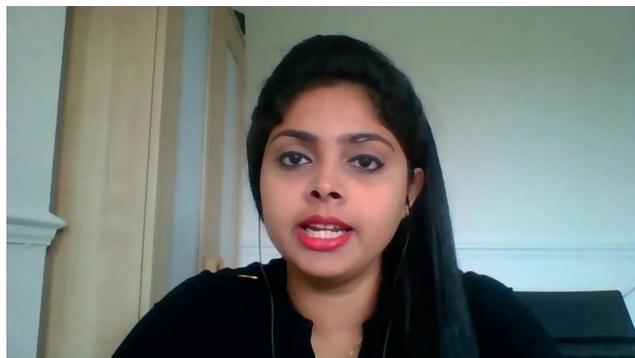
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Translations

Translation (or transitioning)

We then moved onto the next section, to discuss transitioning into the labour market. As mentioned earlier, some research has been emerging to highlight the various careers PhD candidates have been taking alongside academia. However, the labour market outside of academia is complicated – we used ETH Zurich as an example. 80% of PhD students within the university are international. Most of them will not go into academia and VISA restrictions outside of academia make it more difficult to access the local labour market.



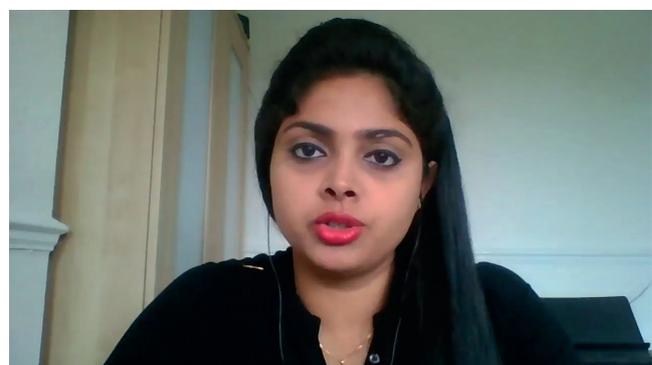
Top tips from Arathi - Click the image for play

But translating the skills and the experience gained whilst working towards a PhD has its own challenges. Firstly, as discussed earlier, doctoral researcher may not have considered various career pathways. Secondly, it is not always clear how that work translates into the variety of pathways. Yet, the skills gained during working towards a PhD must be useful – low unemployment levels would suggest that. Our survey also supports this – 80% of the respondents claim that they use the skills gained during the PhD in their current roles. The majority of the respondents do not work in academia.

We turned to our interviews with Arathi Kizhedath and Martin Ghisletti for some tips.



Top tips from Martin - Click the image for play



Top tips from Arathi - Click the image for play

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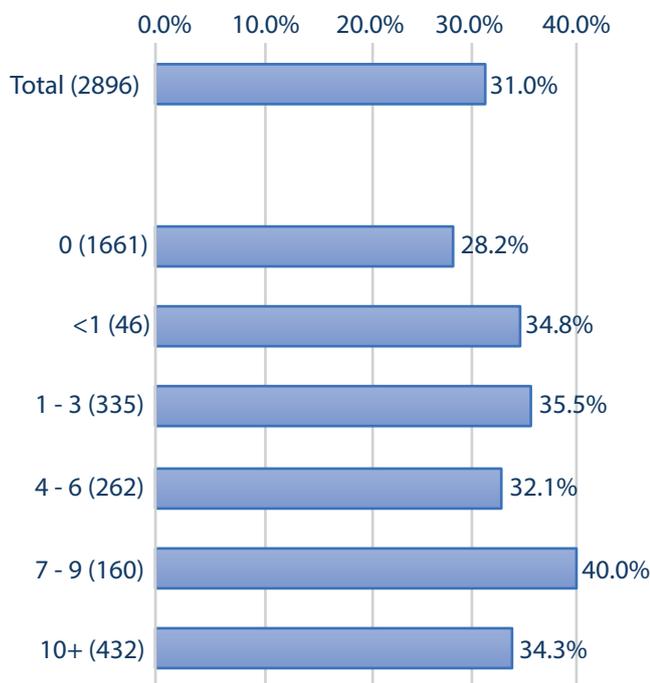
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Importance of work experience

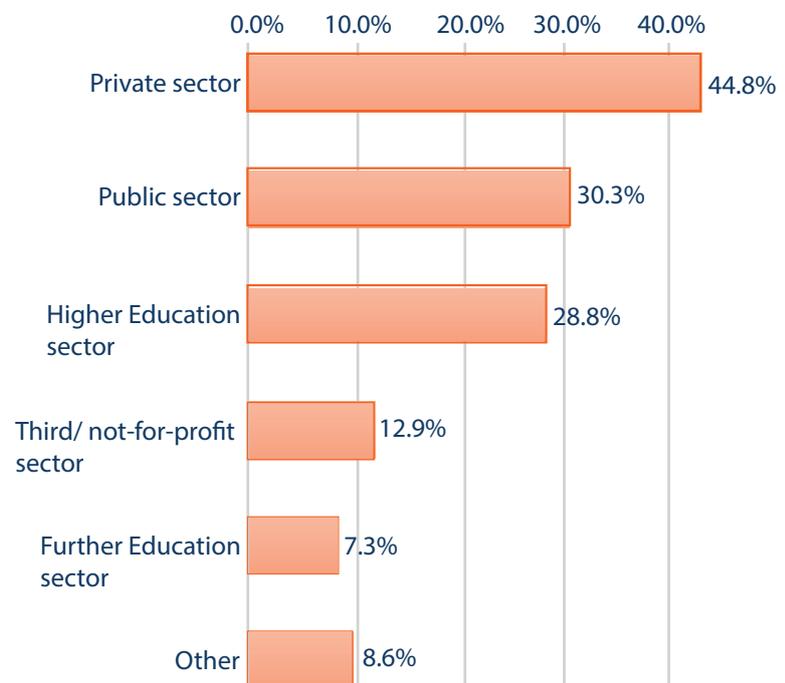
Importance of work experience

Finally, the link with the industry has been repeatedly emphasised as a way of broadening horizons. Not only does it purport to help open minds to other opportunities and to aid an understanding of what it takes to get such roles, our survey also suggests that prior work experience may be beneficial in securing even an academic position!

Permanent academic position by work previous experience



Previous work experience by sector



Thank you!

We thank the participants for contributing to our discussion and providing some vital points on the topics covered.

Martina Mallett - Alison Osborne

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