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NAVIGATING THE POST-DOCTORAL JOB MARKET 2021

Reflections and Advice



INTRODUCTION

The following advice is based on talks delivered at the GCYFRG-sponsored event 'Navigating the post-doctoral job market' held online in June 2021. The speakers were:

Dr Ruth Cheung Judge (Liverpool University)

Dr Naomi Tyrrell (Research Your Way)

Dr Rebecca Collins (University of Chester)

Prof Sarah Holloway (Loughborough University)

The post-doctoral job market is trickier than ever, particularly as numbers of graduating doctoral students far outstrip the available academic jobs. The advice in this booklet is aimed at PhD students who are beginning to think beyond their doctoral studies. This includes those looking for: temporary teaching and/or research roles in academia; permanent lectureships; or jobs outside academia. The advice in this guide is UK-focused, although some of the content may well have international applicability.

Throughout we use the terms Pre-92 and Post-92: These terms are shorthand ways of referring to universities that were established either prior to, or after, 1992. The broad generalization is that pre-92 universities place a higher value on research activity and grant capture than post-92s, whilst post-92 universities will focus more specifically on delivering good quality teaching. As such, you'll find that there are some suggestions for different approaches to applications depending on which general category the university falls in to. However, we are keen to stress that these categories themselves contain high levels of heterogeneity and there may well be 'older' universities, or departments in 'older' universities where teaching is the highest priority, and meanwhile, 'newer' universities or departments that are research-focused. Understanding of the general differences between these two categories is in no way a replacement for doing your homework about the department and institution that you intend to apply to. Scour the recruiting university's website and where possible arrange informal conversations with current members of staff – this will give you the best idea of the culture of the particular department you want to apply to and the best way to frame your application.

ALONGSIDE YOUR PHD

You might just have started your PhD, and be far more interested in planning fieldwork than thinking about life after doctorates. However, it's never too early to start positioning yourself to be in the best shape possible for job applications later on.



01. Keep an Open Mind

Most people with doctorates don't end up working in academic posts, and there are so many valuable ways of using your expertise outside higher education. Naomi Tyrrell suggests a really useful activity for thinking through potential jobs by reflecting on the work you're doing at the moment. She suggests writing three lists: keep; lose; add. Here you try and identify things that you like about your current occupation that you like and would like to continue in a future role, things that you don't like and would like not to have to do again, and things that you don't have at the moment that you would like. She suggests that these lists will give you a good idea of the sorts of careers that might work well for you.

Naomi recommended some useful websites: for doctoral students considering a career outside academia including: [Roostervane.com](https://www.roostervane.com), and has recently tweeted [this useful blog post on alt-ac jobs for post-docs](#). Naomi is admin of a supportive Facebook group: [AltAc Careers UK](#).

ALONGSIDE YOUR PHD



02. Network, network, network

The good news is that we're not talking about schmoozing with people that might offer you work. Rather, we're talking about building your support team. Workshops, reading groups, conferences and any other opportunities to meet PhD students and academics will help you build your network. Human Geographers in the UK would do well to look at joining relevant Royal Geographical Society research groups and Jiscmail (www.jiscmail.ac.uk) lists.

Particularly, please do join the Geographies of Children, Youth and Families Research Group! These new acquaintances and even friendships can then be drawn upon for advice as well as practical support such as sharing resources, opportunities, and offering feedback on papers or grant applications pre-submission. Networking with those working outside university can also help to facilitate moves out of academia. Naomi Tyrrell recommended maintaining a strong presence on social media platforms, particularly LinkedIn and Twitter, as ways of connecting with potential employers and non-academic support teams.



03. Develop skills in a broad variety of research methods.

Develop demonstrable, and ideally accredited, skills in a broad variety of research methods. Many PhD students will end up expert in a small range of methods, Sarah Holloway advocated for looking for free, short, accredited courses in research methods outside your area of experience that will demonstrate an ability to utilise a diverse range of skills in RA roles and teach a wide range of core research skills to undergraduates.

ALONGSIDE YOUR PHD



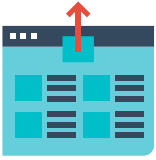
04. Gain teaching experience

Rebecca Collins emphasised that teaching experience, aptitude and creativity were the most important skills to be able to demonstrate in applications to post-92 universities, where teaching is prioritised over grant capture. (At a post-92 grant capture is only likely to be taken into account if candidates are otherwise broadly equal in their teaching experience.). By contrast, Sarah Holloway explained that at pre-1992 institutions, your research (evidenced in your ideas, publications and grant capture) plays a more important role in recruitment. However, she emphasised that teaching-income is essential to these institutions too, and that all new colleagues have to be keen and able to teach. Sarah suggested making sure you have a wide experience of teaching. Contributing in different ways to different courses – and getting experience of assessing, demonstrating, tutoring, lecturing, and supervising, if possible – is better than multiple years of experience on one course or in one mode of teaching.

In post-92 universities teaching is prioritised over grant capture.

At pre-1992 institutions, your research (evidenced in your ideas, publications and grant capture) plays a more important role in recruitment. However, teaching- income, derived from good quality teaching, is still essential . Thus, successful applicants appear keen and able to teach.

ALONGSIDE YOUR PHD



05. Publish

Quality is much more important here than quantity whatever level of academic role you're aiming for. Current REF requirements mean that most departments are focused on the potential for a few highly-regarded publications every four or five years. Universities are looking for academics with the potential to produce 3* and 4* outputs (For more info: www.ref.ac.uk).

one or two good quality papers in well regarded peer-reviewed academic journals is a sensible goal.

At a pre-92 university publications will be viewed as being of high importance, whilst at a post-92 they will be viewed as less important than teaching expertise. However, candidates for academic roles would still be expected to have published some work, appropriate to their career stage.

Remember that the turnaround of papers is slow (and slower than ever at the moment). One possible starting point is writing up your Masters or undergraduate dissertation if it was strong enough, perhaps with the academic who supervised it.

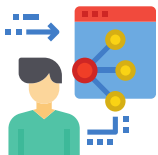
This can provide an excellent introduction to the craft of paper writing. Don't feel you need to wait to be invited to do this. Many supervisors will be happy to support students taking the lead on writing up papers from strong dissertations. Another strategy is to write literature review papers (though these can be challenging), methods papers or viewpoints to get going with this process before you've analysed your PhD data.

ALONGSIDE YOUR PHD



Two notes of caution here, however:

1. PhD students are often told that book reviews make good first publications or add useful volume to a publication list. However, they don't typically tick many boxes for recruiting committees and are very time consuming. By all means do them if there is a book you particularly want a free copy of – although beware that publishers are increasingly offering e-copies to reviewers! – but don't spend time on book reviews at the expense of working on papers from your own research.
2. Think carefully before you publish a key piece of your thesis in a book chapter. It can be good to have a chapter in a key text for visibility, but in Geography it is generally better to place your best material in quality journals as this is what recruitment panels consider.



07. Gain some Admin Experience

The vast majority of post-doctoral careers will include some element of admin, and it's certainly true that lectureships at both post-92 and pre-92 universities will include a significant administrative workload. Getting some experience in academic admin (or even admin outside academia, for example, from other forms of paid or voluntary work outside your PhD) is useful for demonstrating that you understand this side of the role, and for evidencing your organizational and team-working skills. Joining the committee of a research group can be a really useful way to do this (and it also helps with networking!) and demonstrates that you are proactive individual who can work with others.

APPLYING FOR JOBS

01. The academic job market is really tough

There is huge competition for permanent posts. Ruth Cheung Judge was really keen to emphasise the role that 'luck' (in terms of a job which is a 'good fit' coming up at the right time) plays in securing a post. For many of us, perseverance is the name of the game. Also, as above, continue to evaluate your priorities and consider jobs both within and out of academia. The impact agenda within universities now means that it is possible to move between academic and non-academic careers with more ease than in the past.

This means keeping connections, maintaining your networks and making sure to publish appropriately.



APPLYING FOR JOBS

02. Read the job spec – and respond to it

Rebecca Collins emphasised the importance of tailoring your job application to the job specifications provided. Sarah recommended putting a table within your application letter that clearly evidences how you meet each one of the necessary criteria. The point here is that the recruitment panel have to demonstrate to Human Resources why certain people are short-listed and others are not. In some institutions, the panel will be required to complete a grid assessing whether each candidate met the essential and desirable characteristics, whereas in other institutions this might be required in narrative form.

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These person specifications matter and so you must engage with them explicitly. If anything on the job specifications isn't clear (especially in terms of how you might evidence your experience), email the person listed as the point of contact. It's often useful to arrange phone conversations to give more room for friendly exchange of information. Not only does this give you the clarity you need, it also firmly imprints you on their memory – which can be helpful if they're the person sifting through applications or conducting the interviews!

APPLYING FOR JOBS

03. For lectureship applications, have a clear ‘USP’

Or a simple narrative that sums up your research interests and contribution to the department. Ruth Cheung Judge said that she found this quite difficult to determine for herself. For Ruth, it was through conversations with her support network that she was able to identify the key themes that unified her work, interests and future research plans. Make sure this USP or narratives comes through clearly in your application. Sarah Holloway emphasised that this needs to be institutionally specific, so you must tweak every application you submit and address a range of issues:



Articulate your fit to that specific institution

Discuss your unique intellectual contribution, but reflect on how that might allow you to build upon and extend the work of colleagues both within the Department and wider university. How will being in this department at this university bolster your research? How will your research benefit the department and the university? In talking about your research fit, it is ideal if you can engage with its social/economic/cultural impact, and your capacity to develop an impact case study in the future.



At the application stage, engage with your potential teaching contribution

You also need to engage with your potential teaching contribution at the application stage, as teaching is an important source of income for all universities. Talk about your philosophy or approach to teaching, your teaching experience, and identify specific potential contributions. Potential contributions should be identified both to named courses already delivered in the department, and in terms of new courses you might deliver.

APPLYING FOR JOBS



04. Demonstrate your capacity to be an effective post-doctorate researcher.

For Research Associate applications, you certainly need to introduce your intellectual agenda so the panel knows something about you.

You will also have to demonstrate how this links to the project grant funding the post, and identify why you are interested in that role. You do not need an exact match – a similar theme taken in a different direction will help you broaden your portfolio post PhD. You can also talk about how the skills you already have (e.g. managing a project, literature reviews, methods, forms of analysis, presentations/writing) mean you are well-placed to tackle the role advertised. Teaching is unlikely to be required, but you could demonstrate that you have capacity if it were needed.



APPLYING FOR JOBS

05. Interviews for lectureships will include presentations (at both pre- and post- 92 institutions).

At a pre-1992 university, the department want to learn about your research, impact and teaching. If they ask for a presentation on this, devote a greater proportion of the slides to research. The research slides should identify your unique intellectual contribution, and ideally flag any sources of funding, extant/in review publications, impact, and where you will be taking these ideas next.

The research slides should identify your unique intellectual contribution

Include some slides on teaching too. These should reflect on your approach to teaching, your potential contribution to existing modules, and a potential final year module. It might be useful to include a final slide on collegiality, which evidences your willingness to do your bit and your organisational skills (e.g. roles in RGS groups, conference organisation, last minute teaching taken on to help out). At a pre-1992 university you might not be explicitly asked to do any mock teaching, but your communication skills will be assessed from your presentation. This means you need engaging and effective slides, and that you need to talk about them without reading notes or turning your back on the audience, whilst evidencing passion and enthusiasm.

It is better to over-do enthusiasm than seem bored or boring!

APPLYING FOR JOBS

You're more likely to be explicitly asked to develop some mock teaching at a post-92. Presentations at a post-92 are also more likely to explicitly focus on your potential teaching contribution. There is a lot of variation in what is asked of candidates in presentations at UK universities. It's crucial to read the information you're sent carefully, and do ask for clarification if you're not clear. Interviews for RA posts may include a presentation or a test too – follow the instructions given.

Remember: Give the presentation you're asked for, not the one you wish you'd been asked for!



APPLYING FOR JOBS

05. If you're invited to interview, make sure you do your homework [again!].

If you are being interviewed for a postdoctoral research associate position, develop some familiarity with the literature around the project (e.g. do a Web of Science search and read the abstracts) and the PI or team's prior publications (ditto).

If you're interviewing for a lecturing post you need to be able to clearly identify how your own research narrative (see point 3 above) fits with, and extends, the current research and teaching in the department, faculty and university.

You can demonstrate your institutional fit by identifying how your ideas link with named individuals at the institution.

The key point here is that if they start the interview by asking "Why did you apply for this job", you need an answer that doesn't just say why you want to be a lecturer, but why a lectureship at that specific institution is the perfect fit for you because of what else is already done there.

You should also be prepared to explain your intellectual contribution to the panel, which may include non-Geographers, and be ready to discuss your next steps including future research, funding and publication plans. Think about whether your research has impact so you can talk to that theme. In terms of teaching, you may well be asked about your approach to teaching (so think of something!) and what you could offer to the Department.

APPLYING FOR JOBS

Develop some familiarity with the teaching in the department and be clear about which existing courses you feel you could contribute to. Sarah Holloway also recommended turning up to presentation/interview with a brief handout of a third year option course that you could deliver, not as you will necessarily get to teach it, but because it shows you want the job. At a post-92, this is exactly the sort of thing you'd be likely to be asked to present on at interview (as above).

If they ask you if you have any questions, it is reasonable to ask if the university offers any support to help new colleagues transition from ECR to established lecturer/SL. Examples might include mentoring, Continuing Professional Development training, pump-priming (funding), co-supervising PhDs etc. In terms of tone, you also want to portray energy and enthusiasm in the interview. The panel expects you to be nervous, so no one will criticise you for over-doing it in term of enthusiasm, but being self-deprecating, or trying to look ironically detached from the interview game is most unlikely to work.

People want upbeat colleagues who care.

06. Be friendly, try and relax, and make sure you're organized!

Ensure you bring along any paperwork required of you (you're often asked to bring a passport) and be kind and courteous to the administrative staff who will be on hand on the day to guide you along.



CONCLUSION

The post-doctoral job market is trickier than it's ever been. But, not everyone earning a PhD wants to work in academia – there are many other attractive, exciting and valuable options to choose from, many with a better work-life balance! It's a fact that there are not enough academic jobs; neither temporary nor permanent contracts, for all the doctoral graduates who do want to stay in academia. If you are committed to pursuing an academic career, there are certainly things that you can do to put yourself in the best position for success.

We hope this quick guide offers some helpful tips. However, it's really important to remember that there is a significant element of luck in securing an academic post. Missing out on these jobs does not mean you're not a credible candidate.



Contact

Geographies of Children, Youth and Families
Research Group

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