

Towards an academic career

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Question:

I'm in my first year of doing my doctorate and I think I'd like an academic career. My undergraduate grades were not that great but my research work is going well. Is an academic job likely to be possible? What suggestions do you have for getting to this goal?

Answer:

Your undergraduate grades won't count against you: strong research makes you a contender for an academic job. We applaud you for setting your goals high and starting early to think about how to achieve them. Yes, an academic career is achievable and highly rewarding too. But you'd do well to start now and get yourself organised towards this goal: there is much that you can do over the process of your doctorate to put yourself in a strong position.

The Maori concept of 'Ako' by which teaching, supporting and learning are one process is a helpful one for thinking about the competencies you will need to show when you apply for an academic job. At our institution, academics have three areas of activity which are research, teaching and academic service. Ako would allow for the fact that these overlap, mesh together, and are part of the one, but it is also helpful to unpack and see them as parts. To some extent the amount of time that is actually spent on each is flexible, but most universities expect that a lecturer splits their time into 40% research, 40% teaching, and 20% service. You want to look strong in each of these areas when you apply for that first academic job.

Research publication

While your primary focus is on finishing the doctoral thesis, it is nonetheless a good strategy to publish before you apply for your first academic job. Consider the following:

Publishing a journal article

Where does the paper fit? What journals do you read for research? Make sure that the journal is peer reviewed. The review process takes months, which you might need to take into account if hoping to have a strong CV for a job application. Having something accepted and 'in press' is ok.

Toughen up for the review and editing process: it can sometimes be challenging dealing with criticism and editorial comment from reviewers, but we all have to cope with this and take from the process what is helpful. It is usual to get rejections before acceptance, and it is a productive strategy to have another journal in mind each time you send an article out for review so that if you should be rejected, you modify the article according to reviewer suggestions if they seem helpful, but aim to get it off to the next journal as soon as you can.

The process is not all negative. A reviewer of this article has pointed out that reviewers' comments are in fact gifts even though:

... it took a long time for me to realise that I did indeed learn from every one of them—and that that learning was a cumulative effect that aided me in becoming a better thinker, scholar, teacher supervisor and mentor. (Anonymous, 2009)

We completely agree, and thank the reviewer for this well expressed truth.

Other journal contributions

You could consider reviewing a book: ask your supervisor if they can recommend you as a reviewer – it is a good way of establishing collegial contact with editors, honing your writing skills (and you get a free book too!).

Publishing a book / the thesis

Sadly, the truism that ‘a book is not a thesis’ is true! If you want to write a book from the thesis you may need to rework it substantially for commercial appeal. Talk to your university press. For example, at Auckland, the Auckland University Press provides advice about the publishing of a thesis and the potential for commercial appeal (<http://www.cce.auckland.ac.nz/aup/>).

There are likely to be other publishers in your area who specialise in educational publication, or who will be interested if there is a generalised market for your topic. Again, in New Zealand there is Pearson Education at <http://www.pearsoned.co.nz/>.

How do I gain teaching experience?

Many PhD students are employed by a university to tutor or lecture, or as graduate teaching assistants, whilst completing their thesis. Think strategically about which courses you teach in and consider the following questions:

- Is there a ‘foundational’ course that you could teach in that will show you have a good grounding in your chosen discipline?
- Can you gain experience teaching at a higher level, for instance a stage 3 or Masters level course, as well as at the foundational level?
- Can you teach on a course that is very close to your research area?
- Can you contribute to the content of the course? Could you ask to give one or two of the lectures, for example?
- Can you gain experience in an area that you feel is currently weak, to show you have a degree of breadth in your experience?
- Could you teach at another university?
- Can you design a course in its entirety? Either as an exercise, or to include in a CV, or for teaching in your department or another department. Some institutions provide courses for the community. At Auckland for example, the Centre for Continuing Education pays reasonably well (see <http://www.cce.auckland.ac.nz/cce/about/>).

Teacher development

If you are planning on becoming an academic, or even if you are interested in tutoring or working as a graduate teaching assistant while doing a doctorate, tutor training is an important part of your professional development. Most institutions offer some guidance for teaching to new tutors. Usually training is optional; we advise you to take the option as this testifies that you are serious about being a great teacher. An example from our institution is the Centre for

Academic Development's Academic Practice Group which offers an 'Introduction to Tutoring' (www.cad.auckland.ac.nz).

What is service?

'Service' covers a broad area of activity, from administrative tasks to service on university committees and other bodies. In a sense it is the supportive, sustaining and collegial element of the job. At its most positive, it could be seen as a 'kaitiaki' or caretaking protectorship role. There are service roles that you as doctoral candidates can also perform: attending departmental staff meetings, being doctoral student representatives on faculty or university committees, or becoming involved in a group such as an association of postgraduate students at your university.

A useful source is the UK website (<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/>). It offers nine suggestions that could assist you to win a job against candidates of equal academic merit:

- Acquiring publications in well-recognised journals with collaborators who are frequently cited.
- Gaining experience of applying for and securing research funding.
- Demonstrating efficient project management that consistently delivers stated outcomes on time and within budget.
- Gaining experience of designing, delivering and evaluating degree level courses.
- Understanding the process of quality assessment in teaching and research.
- Being conversant with current issues in higher education.
- Networking with people who are aware of your ambitions and can advise on your job search strategy.
- Using conferences as a way of raising your profile within your discipline and as a possible springboard for publications.
- Analysing the selection criteria of academic selectors and providing convincing evidence that you meet their standards.

Current doctoral student advice

The above considerations appear rather challenging; so to establish how they play out in what is achievable we also asked a group of current PhD students to list their thoughts. Here are some of their comments:

- work at the university part-time / do teaching assistantships
- plan to or apply for post-doc / do a post-doctoral fellowship
- search for jobs on the internet
- publish papers
- ask professors questions about their career paths
- go to workshops like 'Planning for your Career' or the 'Academic Careers Day'
- think about priorities / talk to partner
- think about where to go / who to work with
- talk to people / let people know when you are finishing soon / network
- organise interactive events such as discussion groups.

The literature agrees with the above suggestions. Collins, Rendle-Short, Curnow and Liddicoat (2001) for example, suggest that while doing the doctorate, or after submission, candidates should work on:

- Developing a profile in research publishing
- Gaining teaching experience
- Developing contacts within the discipline (or in related disciplines).

Finally, develop your networks

With you, your supervisors form the 'hub' of your network and are able to connect you to other researchers in your field. Ask them to provide connections. Other connections are forged at conferences and seminars within the university and elsewhere, through belonging to research teams or consortia (with others who work in a similar field), through seminar series or writing groups, and through teaching.

Reference

Collins, B., Rendle-Short, J., Curnow, T. J., & Liddicoat, A. J. (2001). Not just a thesis: PhD study as a first step toward an academic career. In A. Bartlett & G. Mercer (Eds.), *Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transforming (r)elations* (pp. 123-132). New York: Peter Lang.

Author Notes

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