



your PhD...
what next?

AGCAS PUBLICATIONS

SECTOR BRIEFINGS

Find these in Explore job sectors on
prospect.ac.uk/links/SectorBs

Advertising and PR
Broadcast, Film, Video and Interactive Media
City Markets
Construction
Cultural
Education
Engineering
Environmental, Food Chain and Rural
Fashion and Textile
Financial Services
Food and Drink
Health
Hospitality
Information Technology
Legal
Local, Regional and National Government
Manufacturing
Oil, Gas and Petroleum
Professional, Financial and Accounting Services
Publishing
Retail
Science
Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)
Social Care
Sport and Leisure
Tourism
Transport
Voluntary

SPECIAL INTEREST SERIES

Also available on
prospect.ac.uk

Beyond Nine to Five - Flexible Working
Careers and Further Study for International Students
Going for Interviews
Job Seeking Strategies
Making Applications
Mature Students - The Way Forward
New Directions - Changing or Leaving Your Course
Postgraduate Study & Research
Self-employment
Using Languages
Working Abroad
Working in Europe - First Steps
Your Degree... What Next?
Your Foundation Degree... What Next?
Your HND... What Next?
Your Masters... What Next?
Your PhD... What Next?

OCCUPATIONAL PROFILES

Details for over 400 types of jobs

Also available on
prospect.ac.uk/links/Occupations

OPTIONS

Ideas of what you can do with your subject of study

Also available on
prospect.ac.uk/links/Options

Available in your HE Careers Service or order online at
www.prospect.ac.uk/links/OrderPublics

Contents

Your PhD

- 1 Introduction 3
- 2 The job market for PhDs 3
 - What's the career market like? 3
 - A career in academia 4
 - A career outside academia 6
 - What are employers looking for? 6
 - What vacancies are there for PhDs? 7
- 3 Making the most of your PhD 8
 - A PhD alone isn't enough 8
 - How to develop your skills 8
- 4 Finding a job with your PhD 10
 - When should I start looking? 10
 - Finding employers 11
 - Devising your job search strategy 12
 - The open job market 12
 - The hidden job market 13
 - Networking - using your contacts 14
- 5 Applying for a job 16
 - Getting started 16
 - CVs 17
 - Covering letters 20
 - Application forms 20
 - Interviews 21
 - Psychometric tests 21
 - Assessment centres 22
 - Presentations and lectures 22
- 6 Information sources 23
 - Bibliography 23

Writers: **June Kay** (University of Stirling) **Hilary Whorral** (University of Sheffield)
Julie Blant (University of Nottingham) **Josie Grindulis** (Cardiff University)
Karen McNab (Glasgow Caledonian University)

Editor: **Gemma Green** (AGCAS)

Published autumn 2005
To be revised autumn 2007

The writers of the *Special Interest Series* are members of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). These *Special Interest Series* are edited by the Information Development Department (IDD) of Graduate Prospects and distributed by Graduate Prospects. Full editorial control is exercised by AGCAS.

Although every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this booklet is accurate and is as up-to-date as possible, readers should check with the appropriate organisation for the latest information. AGCAS can accept no responsibility for ensuring that the accuracy is absolute.

©Copyright of or licensed to AGCAS

No part of this publication may be copied or reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.



Millennium House
30 Junction Road
Sheffield S11 8XB
www.agcas.org.uk

Graduate Prospects

Prospects House, Booth Street East,
Manchester M13 9EP
Tel: 0161 277 5200
www.prospects.ac.uk

1 Introduction

So, you've picked up this booklet because it has 'PhD' in the title but what exactly is it and how can it help you?

The aim of this publication is to help you look to the future and take action to get the best from your time as a research student before embarking on your future career. You should not use this booklet in isolation but as a starting and reference point during your career-planning journey.

Parts of this publication will be useful at different stages of your studies: chapter 3 'Making the most of your PhD' is best read quite early on to help you use your time wisely so that your prospects are excellent upon completing your PhD; advice on CVs and applications might become relevant much later and this is covered in chapter 5 'Applying for a job'.

In putting this publication together, no assumptions have been made about what you might want to go on and do. However, whatever the future holds,

there is an art to making your PhD work for you. If it's an academic career you want, you will know only too well by now how competitive this field can be. You should certainly also research and consider jobs outside higher education, where the skills and abilities you have gained will be valued, even in areas that on the face of it are nothing to do with your research. It might not be immediately obvious what or where these options are: chapter 2 'The job market for PhDs' will help you identify your options; chapter 4 'Finding a job with your PhD' will show you where to look for suitable opportunities.

A web version of this publication is available on Prospects.ac.uk, where you will also find a skills checklist, sample CVs and a range of case studies that show how other PhD students and graduates from a wide range of disciplines have approached their career planning.

Remember, a PhD alone isn't enough. It's up to you to prepare, plan and market yourself well.

2 The job market for PhDs

WHAT'S THE CAREER MARKET LIKE?

Research suggests that a postgraduate qualification may increase your chances of employment but not guarantee it. A report published by the Institute for Employment Studies in 2004 tracks labour market experiences of postgraduates. The report suggests that postgraduate study is considered to have a positive impact on future career and salary.

PhD graduates can offer a great deal in today's knowledge-based economy where highly skilled people are in demand. However, a PhD in itself is no guarantee of higher-level entry into employment, nor a higher salary. Whether recruiting within academia, research or industry, employers will seek personal skills, qualities and work experience, in addition to academic achievement. Chapter 3 'Making the most of your PhD' considers why a PhD alone is not enough.

In 2004, the first national report of destinations for PhD graduates was published by The UK Grad Programme. Using data collected by the Higher

Education Statistical Agency (HESA), *What Do PhDs Do?* reports some key findings for the 2003 cohort:

- 73% of UK-domiciled PhD graduates entered the workplace (12% more than undergraduates);
- few (about 1%) were in 'stopgap' jobs;
- 3.2% were unemployed (less than half that of first degree graduates);
- less than half (48%) were employed in the education sector, fairly equally divided between teaching and postdoctoral research.

The report demonstrates that a PhD can take graduates beyond academia and research, with PhD holders transferring their high-level skills into a wide range of sectors. For example, PhDs in physical sciences and engineering have been recruited into project management roles across various sectors or into analytical roles within business and finance.

The following sections will help you decide whether your own career path will begin within academia or in a different sector.

A CAREER IN ACADEMIA

Academia: a competitive career

If postgraduate study has whetted your appetite for an academic career, you may be considering lecturing or research posts.

Before deciding, it is helpful to bear in mind the following points.

- Academia is a very competitive market where motivation and commitment are essential.
- There are very few permanent research posts because of the way research is funded. Many are offered as fixed-term contracts.
- Lecturing not only involves teaching but also carries research and administrative responsibilities.
- Earning prospects are not what attract academics. Research suggests that the starting pay for temporary researchers is under £20,000 and around £23,000 for lecturers. Professorial pay starts at £43,500 but it is rare to reach this level before the age of 40. These figures compare favourably with graduate earnings in some professions but fall well short of salaries in medicine, law, business and consultancy.

Do you have the motivation and commitment for a career in academia? Ask yourself the following questions (and give honest answers):

- Do you want an academic career because you have a continuing fascination with your discipline?
- Do you want to pass on your knowledge of that subject to other learners and do you have the patience and communication skills to do that well?
- Are you only staying in academia because it is a familiar environment?
- Are you sufficiently dedicated to expend the amount of effort that is necessary to progress in an academic career?

The academic lifestyle

Here are some comments from academics to give a flavour of the academic lifestyle:

Working hours:

'My success to date can be attributed to a willingness to work a seventy-hour week. I spend two to three hours, four nights a week, on research and all day Sunday.' (Lecturer, geography)

'Contract research is highly stimulating but it is often frantically busy, balancing several projects at

a time. There is never enough time to scan and reflect.' (Professor, sociology)

Competition and pressure:

'Bidding for research grants and ensuring the delivery of high quality research within tight deadlines are a constant feature of the job.' (Senior lecturer, pharmacology)

'Academics are expected to produce international-class research, to teach ever larger classes, to assume highly responsible administration roles and to do all of this within very tight time constraints.' (Lecturer, geography)

Job satisfaction:

'There is still some degree of academic freedom in higher education. I find my work extremely stimulating and highly rewarding, especially research collaborations. I enjoy all the aspects of my work that involve people. I try to be an innovative teacher. My favourite part is meeting mums and dads on graduation day.' (Senior lecturer, pharmacology)

'Turning out a large volume of high quality academic writing is the main part of the job and I have always enjoyed that.' (Professor, sociology)

Increasing your chances of having an academic career

Are you still keen to proceed? Taking the following steps will enhance your prospects.

Step 1: Secure your first post

This is likely to be as a tutorial assistant or research assistant on a temporary contract.

These posts are sometimes advertised in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement (THES)* and local press. More commonly, they are filled by networking and through internal advertisements within individual institutions. A speculative approach to academic departments may be worthwhile (ensure your academic-style CV emphasises all the right points – see chapter 5 'Applying for a job' for tips).

Step 2: Publications

Producing publications is essential for career progression. Ideally, aim for journals with recognised national or international status in your field.

- Take advantage of staff development courses in your institution on writing for publication.

- Seek advice from a mentor or other experienced researcher before sending off a submission.
- Initially, you are more likely to succeed if you are co-author with a person or team with an established reputation.

Step 3: Research and project funding

Attracting funding is a high priority for departments. A successful track record in securing awards can help your career.

- Source funding opportunities. The *THES* and individual research councils (see chapter 6 'Information sources') are a good place to start.
- Your institution may run courses in writing successful bids.
- Start by assisting in background preparation for a bid by a researcher with a successful track record.
- Submit draft bids for internal scrutiny by an experienced researcher before sending to a funding body.

Step 4: Teaching experience

Unless you are firmly against lecturing, teaching experience can be useful as most long-term contracts are in lecturing rather than research.

- Some departments require research assistants to do a minimum amount of teaching.
- If this is not required, perhaps you could volunteer for evening classes or tutor support for distance learners.
- Explore options outside your department. You may find opportunities in The Open University (OU) or a nearby university, college or adult education centre.
- The Higher Education Academy provides a database of resources, which includes teaching resources and advice.

Remember that teaching involves preparation as well as delivery time but is often paid only for contact time. Don't overcommit yourself!

Step 5: Project management

Meeting project deadlines on time and within budget is just as important in higher education as it is in industry. Experience of project management can enhance your promotion prospects.

- Develop your project management skills by keeping progress logs and budget accounts for your work.
- If difficulties arise, tackle them at an early stage to demonstrate your problem-solving abilities.
- Gain extra experience of project management by supervising undergraduate projects.

Step 6: Quality assessment

Higher education is accountable for public expenditure through quality audits of teaching and research. Involvement in an audit can be a useful experience.

- Audits are cyclical but it is likely that you may have been in a department that was audited when you were a student or staff member. Reflect on that experience and learn from it for future audits.
- Visit websites of auditing bodies, such as The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, to become familiar with their measures.
- Volunteer to help towards an audit by compiling the data required and attending preparatory briefing sessions.
- After an audit, ask someone involved in it to talk you through the process and outcomes.

Step 7: Understanding higher education issues

Take an interest in the wider higher education community.

- Attend staff meetings and briefing sessions within the university.
- Read departmental, university and funding bodies' newsletters.
- Try to look at committee, faculty and management meeting minutes, which may be available in the university library or accessible via the university intranet.
- Keep track of recent developments by reading the *THES* and professional journals in your field.
- Universities UK issues occasional papers on higher education issues and posts consultations and news on its website.
- The Higher Education Academy is a new initiative to enhance practice and policy relating to the student experience.
- Circulars, newsletters and websites of unions add a different perspective, eg National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) and The Association of University Teachers (AUT).

Step 8: Networking

Develop a network of contacts. It is essential to be known and respected in the academic circles of your discipline. Some posts are never advertised and the only way to learn about them is by being connected to the academic grapevine.

- Participate in conferences. Use this opportunity to comment, question and meet people. Progress to offering papers and reporting on sessions for conference publications.
- Join academic societies and professional bodies and attend their events.

- Volunteer for tasks by taking on roles such as membership secretary or publicity officer. These are routine but essential tasks delegated by conference organisers.
- Cross-disciplinary contacts can also be useful, so network within the staff club and other organisations in the university.
- Volunteer for user groups and university-wide working parties open to new staff.
- Use your network of contacts to keep up to date on trends in higher education and to find out about vacancies and collaborative research projects.

A CAREER OUTSIDE ACADEMIA

If a career in academia does not appeal, then skills and knowledge gained through a PhD are equally valuable and transferable to areas outside the academic environment. If you are thinking along these lines, you will need to focus on what areas of your knowledge and skills you want to use in your job (see chapter 3 'Making the most of your PhD - How to develop your skills') and which kinds of organisations might be of most interest and relevance to you.

Perhaps you want to do something that is not related to your PhD subject at all? As competition in academia increases, many more PhD students are thinking about this option. This requires careful consideration and research. What are your key skills and interests? What kind of organisation would you like to work for? Do you want to set up your own business or work in a freelance capacity? What really motivates you and captures your interest?

Here are three alternative strategies for deciding what to do with your life:

'I know what I'm good at. What jobs could I do?'

If you prefer the analytical approach and are looking for inspiration, try Prospects Planner (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/ppanner). This computer guidance package is aimed at people with higher education qualifications and may throw up some options you hadn't considered. At the very least, completing the questionnaire will make you think about the skills you want to use in a job and what motivates and interests you.

'What types of jobs are out there?'

In addition to browsing vacancy information, have

a look at occupational careers literature to find out what different types of jobs involve, what qualifications and other experience are required, salary levels, career development opportunities and more. This can be a great way of conducting a feasibility check. How realistic is a move to a particular area of work given your background and constraints? Good starting points are the AGCAS Occupational Profiles (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Occupations). Your university careers service may also have relevant reference books and other occupational literature.

'I know what I'm interested in. What jobs could I do in this field?'

If you want to work in a specialist field, using contacts (networking) to explore the job market is often the most productive route. Not only is this likely to give you a real insight into careers areas for which there may be less information available but it may also uncover job opportunities that are never advertised. The key to doing this effectively is never to use contacts to ask directly for a job but to ask for information. For further details, see chapter 4 'Finding a job with your PhD'. You should also look at the AGCAS Sector Briefings (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/SectorBs) in your careers service for an overview of job sectors and an idea of the occupations available within these fields.

To help you through this maze of options, consider talking to a careers adviser. They won't tell you what you should do but will help you think through your options. Other useful resources are *Moving on in your Career - a Guide for Academics and Postgraduates* and *What Do PhDs Do?*, which may be available in your university careers service.

WHAT ARE EMPLOYERS LOOKING FOR?

One of the best ways to find out what employers are looking for is to read their recruitment literature, visit their websites and find out what vacancies they are advertising. This gives you a good starting point in understanding what they expect from potential candidates. Making personal contact is likely to be more beneficial, either through talking to someone from the organisation, gaining some work experience or work shadowing. This will reveal the things they don't tell you in the brochure: the pace at which people work; the way in which people communicate within the organisation; and the overall ethos of the organisation.

The findings of a survey in 2000 examining *University Researchers: Employers' Attitudes and Recruitment Practices* indicated that employers considered specialist knowledge and maturity to be the major benefits of recruiting postgraduates. However, it is important to remember that your academic achievements will be considered alongside your skills and qualities and, for some posts, a PhD will not specifically be required. Here are some quotes from the survey:

'Personal qualities are the yardstick on which we judge our candidates for selection. Academic prowess is important but without the necessary leadership and management potential they would be found wanting.'

'We recruit a significant number of postgraduates on to the graduate development programme who (like our first degree graduates) possess the necessary competencies and skills.'

'We only recruit postgraduates and academic researchers within the company if the specific role requires it. Those we have recruited have a high level of specialist knowledge and generally tend to have strong levels of commitment, ability and enthusiasm for their chosen role.'

Many of the employers who were contacted for *What Do PhDs Do?* recognised the particular qualities that a PhD offers, including problem-solving skills and a determination to find new and better ways to tackle difficulties.

In order to effectively market yourself to employers, you need to be clear about their requirements before applying. Chapter 5 'Applying for a job' provides tips and guidance for making effective applications. See also the AGCAS information booklet *Making Applications*.

WHAT VACANCIES ARE THERE FOR PhDs?

When looking for vacancies, treat it as an information-gathering exercise as well as an opportunity to apply for a job. Unless a PhD is a prerequisite for the job, employers won't

necessarily mention it specifically in the advert – many jobs will just state 'graduate'. Obviously, you can still apply, providing you meet the criteria. In a survey of 80 major graduate employers in 2001, over 95% were happy to receive applications from postgraduates, though more than 90% did not advertise specifically for postgraduates. Most assumed that postgraduates would realise they were included in any 'graduate' vacancies.

Here are a few examples of vacancies where employers specifically sought PhD holders:

- PhD, from any science discipline, for a post as conference researcher. The job involves investigating technical and strategic developments and trends in the broadcast technology sectors and developing them into full conference programmes for an international company. Salary £25,000.
- A PhD physicist required to review the marketing strategy of a Midlands-based glass company. Salary £20,000.
- PhD-level graduates required as senior research and analysis consultants for a global research company. The role encompasses consultancy, marketing and development, with exposure to local and global markets. Salary £35,000.
- PhD in maths, finance or physics with programming experience in C/C++ and/or Java to join a multinational finance company as a junior maths developer to support and expand their existing products. Salary negotiable.
- PhD in a biomedical science to train as a medical writer. In addition to excellent technical qualifications, candidates should demonstrate a high level of energy and enthusiasm and an interest in drug development. No salary quoted.

Whilst many employers specify a PhD, some pay a premium in recognition of the qualification. The 2004 survey *Pay and Progression for Graduates* shows that, in 2003, around a quarter of organisations surveyed paid a premium to graduates with higher degrees. Manufacturing firms were the most likely to pay extra for postgraduate recruits. The average premium for a PhD qualification was £2,134 across all sectors. However, not all employers will do this and many starting salaries are the same as those for regular graduate entry.

3 Making the most of your PhD

A PhD ALONE ISN'T ENOUGH

Are you, or will you soon be, a research student applying for a job? Or are you a postgraduate with a high level of intellectual skills and a portmanteau of key transferable skills that you have developed as part of your life and work experience?

The choice is yours. Which one do you think the employer will choose?

Of course, it is not that simple. There are jobs where research skills are paramount in the academic community (and elsewhere), as well as jobs where a PhD is not a necessary qualification. If you want to maximise your chances and choices, you need to make the most of the opportunities presented to you during your PhD studies to develop yourself as a whole person.

Look at these comments from recent PhD students about the skills gained during their study period and how they use them in their work:

'My job in the students' union was a new position. My PhD experience turned out to be surprisingly relevant: I drew on teaching experience to design and deliver new training materials; being a recent graduate helped me communicate and build trust with the students and officers I was supporting; and independent learning was a great preparation for independent working. My experience as a student rep during my PhD taught me that there is more to higher education admin than filing.' (PhD Music)

'A key aspect of research, which I employ daily, is the ability to express key arguments clearly and concisely, both orally and in writing.' (PhD Education)

'Analytical and problem-solving skills that I picked up in my degree and developed through my PhD, often help apply the unique client situations back to the technical requirements to ensure the appropriate treatment is presented to the Board of Directors.' (PhD Chemistry)

HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR SKILLS

The best place to start is to take an honest look at your skills. What are they? How strong are they? How have you developed them? Can you identify

any gaps? You can then examine how to make the most of those you already have and develop those you need. A skills checklist will help with this exercise.

There are many opportunities available, through your own department and more widely, to supplement your experience of being a postgraduate. You should play an active role rather than focus on the single-minded pursuit of your research alone.

Demonstrating/teaching

In teaching departments, research students are essential in supporting undergraduates. In addition to the obvious benefit of payment, demonstrating and teaching will develop your people management skills, particularly through assessing learning and giving effective feedback. Teaching also develops your ability to talk about your subject area to a different group, which will improve your communication skills and prepare you well for discussing your research with a range of people at interviews.

Committees

Virtually all academic departments and institutions involve committees with student representation to address issues such as teaching, research and student welfare. In addition to developing your communication and negotiation skills, participation will give you a broader view of the way in which your department is managed (a useful insight if you intend to stay in academia). It can also be a good way to learn about the structure and nature of formal meetings and may even serve as a mechanism for changing the way research students are treated or perceived.

Supervising research

Increasing pressure on academics and more senior researchers has given many research students responsibility for the day-to-day supervision of students (at undergraduate and Masters level) on research projects. This presents an opportunity to learn how to manage research effectively, to develop effective research skills in others and to develop your own skills in providing advice and encouragement.

Conferences

Research conferences are not just a series of lectures and a chance to browse the work of other

researchers. They are the primary mechanism for the research community to meet, make new contacts, develop potential collaborations and improve understanding of the context of research. If you are planning a career relating to the research you have done for your PhD, conferences are an opportunity to meet your next employer or at least talk to people who are working in different research environments. Don't waste the opportunity to impress them, learn more about their work and take away valuable networking contacts.

At your university

It is not just your department that can offer development opportunities. Increasingly, since the Roberts Report, individual research councils and other main funding bodies are insisting that all research students receive formal training. Many institutions now offer extensive programmes to students, with workshops ranging from research methods and techniques and writing skills through to time management, professional development and presentation skills. If the training programme in your institution doesn't cover your needs, discuss this with your internal graduate school or the academic with responsibility for research training.

At a graduate school

The UK GRAD Programme operates nationally and through a growing network of six regional hubs, offering a wide range of interactive events designed specifically for research students to support personal development and teamwork skills. Activities include national and local GRAD schools lasting between one and five days focusing on case studies, skills development and career management sessions, plus shorter GRAD courses from one hour to two days, often designed to meet the needs of the institution. 2004/05 has seen new 'Careers in Focus' events covering specific employment sectors and workshops where you can join in online, ideal for students out on field work or based in small departments. Check the website for current events and eligibility.

At the students' union

As an undergraduate, you may have been involved with student societies or voluntary work. There is no reason why this shouldn't continue. PhD

students are often able to make a far greater contribution because they can offer continuity from one year to the next. Depending on the nature of the society you are involved in, you will develop many skills – organisational, communication, marketing, financial management – and will be able to contribute to something that interests you. Your involvement may even help you make a transition into a career. Effective time management may be needed to fit in these activities but most employers look for 'well rounded' applicants who have interests beyond their research.

In the profession

Whatever the nature of your research, there is likely to be a relevant professional body or learned society offering support and information to researchers in the field. It is worth investigating the professional body most relevant to your studies if you intend to build your career in research or a related area. In addition to your PhD, you may be able to begin assessment towards professional membership, which will require you to demonstrate your professional skills as well as knowledge. Many professional bodies offer assistance to young researchers, either through financial support for travelling to special events or conferences, or through bursaries for relevant events, such as attendance at graduate schools.

In the workplace

The only way to gain genuine insight into a career or particular employer is to spend some time in the working environment. Your research may involve spending time (often months) in a different setting related to your funding. You can use this opportunity to investigate the career paths of other researchers or to gain insight into other opportunities. If your studies do not include a placement and you do not have time for other part-time work, you can still talk to potential employers or visit them to get more information about specific careers of interest to you. Many university careers services (or alumni offices) have databases of alumni or local contacts who are willing to talk to students. Some may even be willing to offer work shadowing for a half or full day.

4 Finding a job with your PhD

WHEN SHOULD I START LOOKING?

How long does it take to find a job?

The key to effective job seeking is to be clearly focused; you need to know exactly what sort of post you are looking for and be able to directly relate your knowledge, skills and experience to the employer's needs. Finding the right opportunity and going through the application and selection process can take anything from a few weeks to a few months.

The approach you will need to take will vary greatly depending on the environment you want to work in. Using your contacts and networking can unearth hard-to-find jobs but this can take a long time (you should start this process up to a year before you intend to secure a job). Continue to look for ways to develop your skills base, even if this is through undertaking voluntary work or social activities, so that you can provide evidence of the competencies needed in your chosen field.

When are jobs available?

Unfortunately, it is often not possible to predict when employers will be recruiting, as many recruit on a 'just-in-time' basis, as and when they need people. For some major employers, there is still a recognisable graduate recruitment cycle, which they may use for recruiting graduates and postgraduates alike (miss their closing dates and you drastically reduce your chances of being recruited for at least another year). However, many major companies seem to be moving to ad-hoc recruitment for many posts.

There are some periods when recruitment may be slower, such as just before Christmas, over the summer holiday period or approaching the end of a company's financial year. You can sometimes use detective work to second guess when organisations will be recruiting - any news items about increased profits, new products or new markets being tackled or major new projects being awarded could be interpreted as a sign. Conversely, if you read of redundancy programmes, mergers or acquisitions, or profit downturns, this may not be a good time to start applying.

The graduate recruitment cycle

Many graduate recruiters do not have a separate recruitment process for PhD students. Their standard recruitment cycle will commonly be:

- September to November - advertise jobs in graduate directories, magazines and bulletins, such as *Prospects Directory* and *Prospects Finalist*; and hold promotional events at universities through presentations, fairs and workshops;
- November/December and January/February - first interviews;
- Easter - second interviews and job offers;
- September - start date.

Certain sectors have tighter deadlines, such as financial institutions or the Diplomatic Service.

Even if you don't want a typical graduate job, you should use the graduate recruitment cycle to gain direct access to employers (they tend to do the rounds of presentations and recruitment fairs to coincide with the cycle outlined above). Your university careers service or your department will be able to tell you what's coming up.

What if I need a job quickly?

If you are about to graduate and need to find a job very soon, draw up a job seeking strategy. Focus on the quick hits first but lay the foundations for a longer search, in case none of your first approaches work. All of the following suggestions rely on getting a lucky break:

- Keep scanning relevant journals, bulletins and websites for adverts.
- If you have specialist skills to sell that are in short supply, try a relevant agency.
- Talk to all of your most obvious contacts – tell everyone you know so they are aware of what you are looking for and keep in touch with other postgraduates and academics from your department.
- Try well-targeted speculative letters (but be realistic - don't be too hopeful).

If none of these work in the timescale needed, you may have to consider taking a stepping stone or temporary job whilst you still search. If you need to take a job just to keep solvent, consider part-time or shift work so you have time available during the day to look for jobs and attend interviews. Also consult the AGCAS information booklet *Job Seeking Strategies*, available from your university careers service.

FINDING EMPLOYERS

There are plenty of resources available to help you identify suitable employers. However, it is unlikely that there will be a convenient single list of employers for your research area so you may have to use your research skills to unearth suitable targets.

Who employs PhDs?

Don't just think of major household names and multinationals - the majority of people in the UK are employed in small or medium-sized businesses (SMEs). In the past, this may not have been applicable to those employed as technical specialists. However, with many large employers now rationalising their businesses, they are increasingly contracting out specialist functions to smaller consultancies or service providers. Therefore, you may find that some PhD holders who would previously have been recruited to work for a large employer are still needed to do broadly the same work but will now be employed by smaller, less well-known organisations.

According to the analysis of first destinations for PhD graduates in *What Do PhDs Do?:*

'PhD graduates are more geographically mobile and more fully employed than less highly qualified graduates. Not only is their unemployment rate at just 3.2%, less than half that of first degree graduates, but only 1% are in 'stopgap' jobs which bear no relation to the level of their qualifications. The data also challenges the view that a PhD leads only to a career in academia or research. In fact, less than half of this cohort are employed in the education sector.... Significant numbers are found in all sectors of the economy.'

General sources of employers

- Your contacts are a key resource for finding out about suitable employers. This is particularly relevant for research specialists or those wishing to change career.
- Most careers services are sent recruitment and promotional information from major and local employers. This information will usually be displayed in careers libraries and on their websites.
- Don't forget that graduate recruitment literature can be relevant to PhD students too. Postgraduates are often not mentioned explicitly but many employers will welcome applications from postgraduates for their graduate jobs.

- Careers fairs and other events may be organised by the careers service, your department, a professional association or a commercial organisation. Fairs, presentations, workshops and courses are a great chance to talk to employers directly. Do your preparation and ask pertinent questions, rather than just listening, to make a stronger impression. It is also a chance to test their attitude towards PhD holders and to challenge any preconceptions they may have. For a comprehensive list of which careers fairs are coming up in your region or specialist area, refer to the *Prospects.ac.uk* website (www.prospects.ac.uk/fairs). One word of warning - most fairs advertised as 'postgraduate fairs' are designed for students wanting information about doing postgraduate study and not for postgraduates wanting jobs. You should attend normal graduate fairs for undergraduate and postgraduate job vacancies.
- Business directories. Turn detective and think of which types of products or services may utilise your area of knowledge, then refer to business directories such as Kompass Directories. Try your local reference library for hard copy or online databases for details of which organisations provide the products or services you are interested in. These directories are also organised by location, which can be useful if you are restricted to a particular geographical area. They won't tell you whether an employer is recruiting but may alert you to possible organisations of which you were not aware.

Employers in your research field or a specific location

- Use contacts made through people in your department and conferences to look for appropriate employers in your research field.
- Many professional bodies and trade associations hold membership lists, sometimes available to the public on their websites. In addition, they may offer local networks, regional meetings and events, which can be an excellent way of making good contacts in your field. Investigate whether they operate a low cost 'student member' option and get networking!
- Find any Internet news groups or mailing lists for your subject. These often have links to pages of jobs and employers in your subject, lovingly tended to by an enthusiastic academic somewhere in the world.
- Use the resources available to you at your university library for researching employers. There are many directories and databases of who is researching, publishing, patenting or

doing anything newsworthy in your subject area. In addition, many of them will allow searches by postcode or location, again useful if you are restricted to a particular geographical area. Reference libraries may also hold business directories.

- If you are considering a specific location, public libraries in that area may hold local employer information, such as members of chambers of commerce or other local business directories.
- Some careers services, in the UK or internationally, publish directories of local employers or may hold local information.
- If you are looking for a job using your specialism in a fast-moving commercial environment with a small or growing organisation, consider looking at any local science or business parks. These are often located close to a university and may include businesses that have developed from university research departments. Your PhD may be ideal technically but you will also need to demonstrate that you can get up to speed quickly with the commercial and operational aspects of the business.

DEVISING YOUR JOB SEARCH STRATEGY

Using a variety of job search strategies will greatly increase your chances of success. Firstly, don't ignore the hundreds of advertised vacancies out there, whether in *New Scientist*, *The Guardian* or online (see 'The open job market' below for more information). Sometimes speculative applications can work but they need to be targeted and require a certain amount of luck.

Another approach is to post your CV on one of the many Internet job websites and wait for employers to contact you. This can work if your skills are in short supply, though employers generally prefer you to do the hard work and contact them. If you are looking for a job directly related to your studies, want a place on a recognised scheme with a major employer and have some impressive qualifications, skills and experience, there's every chance that these approaches will pay off.

If the right adverts fail to materialise and employers completely ignore your carefully crafted CV sitting in cyberspace, all is not lost. You just need to find the jobs that don't get advertised.

- Recruitment myth - by law, all jobs have to be advertised.
- Recruitment fact - although some organisations (particularly in the public sector) follow their own

guidelines and do advertise all their jobs, there is no general legal requirement for employers to do so.

When an employer has a vacancy, it is often easier for them to first consider someone they have met recently who could possibly do the job or someone who is already working within their organisation who could be moved into the role. Personal contacts account for a large proportion of the jobs that are filled without an advert ever being drawn up and are commonly used if:

- an employer is recruiting into a niche area, eg a very specific research topic;
- they are a smaller organisation, eg a biotechnology start-up company;
- the ability to communicate well or build a network of contacts is important within the job, eg consultancy;
- the type of job is very popular and highly competitive, eg media or arts-based jobs.

For help on how to access the jobs that are never advertised, including tips on making speculative approaches, making contacts and getting your foot in the door, see 'The hidden job market' below.

THE OPEN JOB MARKET

Your university careers service

If employers are looking for a new graduate or postgraduate, they can generally advertise (for free) through university careers services, most of whom post vacancies on their websites or through regular paper bulletins.

Your department

If your research is in a sought-after specialism, employers may target your department specifically. Keep an eye on both undergraduate and postgraduate noticeboards for adverts or invitations to employer presentations.

Specialist journals, magazines and professional associations

If you are looking for a job in your specialist subject, you probably know which journals or professional association magazines to look in. However, if you want to change fields, you should ask someone already in that field for tips on where to look for a job. Professional bodies and trade associations sometimes have vacancy pages or careers information on their websites.

National press

Be aware that national newspapers advertise

different job sectors on specific days of the week, eg *The Guardian* advertises media-related opportunities on Mondays. Make sure you know which newspapers advertise jobs in your chosen field and when. The Guide to Jobsearch on the Internet: Academic and Non-academic Resources website has details of the most commonly used publications.

Local press

This is generally used by local employers to advertise for more junior or temporary staff. It is less likely to be used for senior or specialist staff, unless:

- knowledge of the local area, population or services is important, such as for local or regional public sector jobs or local specialist support services, eg community organisations or local or regional government;
- the local press covers a major population centre - smaller specialist or professional employers may advertise locally for popular jobs, knowing they are likely to find suitable candidates, to avoid being flooded with applicants from a national advert.

To identify the relevant newspaper for a particular area, refer to The Paperboy website. For a summary of many of the vacancies advertised in the local press, look at fish4jobs.

Internet

The wide range of web-based job sites includes sites such as Prospects.ac.uk (for graduate and postgraduate jobs) and PhDJobs (specifically for PhDs). Subject-specific jobs pages are often found on sites based around a specialism or the websites of professional associations.

The Guide to Jobsearch on the Internet can be searched by geographical area and subject and it also provides links to a range of newspapers.

Agencies

Generally, agencies are asked by employers to find the right candidate for a job, either by advertising or from a database of candidates they already hold. Agencies try to find candidates who match employer's requirements exactly, which frequently includes the skills, knowledge and experience to enable someone to be effective in the job from day one. If an agency tells an employer about a candidate who is subsequently recruited, the employer generally pays the agency a percentage

of the salary of the successful candidate (over and above what the employer pays the person they recruit).

- Any Yellow Pages (Yell.com) or business directory can give you the names of local agencies who deal with general or temporary vacancies. Many also have a strong web presence.
- For specialist agencies, the website of the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) has an option to search by type of agency and location. In addition, keep an eye on agency adverts in your research specialism, even if the job is not quite what you want – the agency may have other jobs in your field if they have a good reputation with employers in that sector.

Agencies normally accept speculative CVs, particularly if you have the skills they require for the area in which they specialise. Telephone first to see if they deal with people of your background and also to ensure you know how they will deal with your CV.

Head-hunters

Head-hunters work at the top end of the job market. If you have had little work experience outside your PhD study, you are unlikely to be of much interest to them at this stage in your career (unless you have sought-after technical skills). However, if you have relevant industrial or commercial experience along with your PhD or have proven expertise in a shortage technical subject, head-hunters may be interested in you.

Reputable head-hunters work by receiving a fee from an employer to find the right candidate for a specific job. This can either involve contacting potential candidates known to the head-hunter or advertising for candidates (often without revealing the employer). The best way to get on their list is to develop a good reputation in your field and a good range of contacts that would be happy to recommend you (unless they have advertised, they often find you through personal recommendation from someone else in the relevant job area). It's a great confidence booster when you get your first call from a head-hunter, even if you don't want the job!

Some head-hunters also accept speculative CVs, particularly if you have the skills they require for the area in which they specialise. For further information, see the *Kennedy's International Directory of Executive Recruiters*.

THE HIDDEN JOB MARKET

Speculative approaches

There are many different ways to make contact with a potential employer, from sending a purely speculative application to working in close partnership on your research topic. Your chances of being considered for your ideal job improve with the number of hot contacts you make, though with a lucky break even cold contacts are worth trying.

Speculative applications - worth a try?

If you receive an unsolicited product mailing through the post, how much attention do you pay to it? If you are not interested in the product, have just bought one or it is addressed to 'The Occupier', you are likely to put it in the nearest bin, unread. If you just happen to be considering buying such a product, they have addressed it personally to you and seem to understand just what you're after, you might give it a second glance. Employers are only human and will respond in the same way to your unsolicited CV.

To improve your chances of getting considered:

- find out which companies might be recruiting or expanding their business in the near future - use your contacts, check news items in the press and other adverts that may indicate expansion;
- address your letter to the named manager of the area in which you would like to work - they are more likely to understand the value of your research subject (if it is relevant) than a personnel manager and may know more about possible future openings in their own department;
- point out your key selling points;
- tell them why you are interested both in this type of work and in them as an employer - make sure you show you understand their business and focus on what you can do for them, not what they can do for you.

This approach still relies on getting a lucky break but even if the employer is not recruiting at that time, they may 'keep your details on file'. This isn't normally just a line to keep you happy – many employers really do keep a file of interesting applicants, which they keep for future reference. If they have no interest in you, you will probably get a straight rejection letter or no response at all.

CVs in cyberspace

You may be tempted to post a copy of your CV on one of the many CV databases that have sprung

up. This is an even colder way of making contact, as it is not even addressed to a particular employer. See if the website states how many candidates receive job offers (or even employer contacts) this way and talk to colleagues to find out if anyone has heard of someone who has got their job through this route. There may be some specialist sites appropriate to your subject that are trawled by prospective employers. If you are planning to try this approach or put your CV on your personal web page, be aware of security. Inviting contact by e-mail is relatively safe but home addresses or phone numbers could invite the wrong sort of attention.

Making speculative applications and marketing your CV on the web are certainly worth considering. However, to really improve your chances of opening up the hidden job market, networking is important.

NETWORKING - USING YOUR CONTACTS

Talking to people can be one of the most effective ways of investigating different types of work and uncovering jobs that never get advertised, particularly in specialist fields. There are various ways of networking, so make sure that you use the right approach.

Option 1 - Phone someone you've never met before and ask them directly if you can come and talk to them about whether they have any jobs available.

Result - Likely to be an embarrassed and defensive 'sorry, no' as they back off quickly.

Option 2 - Write to or telephone someone mentioning a mutual contact, asking for the chance to come and talk to them to get advice and information about the type of career they have chosen (making it clear you're not asking for a job).

Result - This more neutral approach is likely to get a cautious 'yes' if you can be flexible and fit round their commitments.

Admitting you need some help and acknowledging that your contacts have some valuable expertise is often an irresistible approach. For example, if your neighbour's daughter was considering doing a postgraduate degree in your subject, would you refuse to talk to her about your experience? This is

also a much better way of developing hot contacts than sending off speculative applications, though it takes some time for the results to come through.

Networking - putting it into practice

Who are your current contacts? Think about whom you know and whom they might know. As you are initially just looking for information, your lead into an organisation doesn't have to be the managing director, though generally the more senior they are, the better. However, secretaries, receptionists and others often have the ear of senior managers and can give you an excellent introduction. Some sources of contacts you might start with are:

- supervisors and lecturers - someone in your department should have external contacts;
- any industrial or commercial contacts, or partners from your research;
- conferences and seminars - don't just listen – mingle! Even if they are all academics, some will have external contacts;
- professional associations - if you are a student member, go to meetings or events and talk to those already in the field;
- careers events - this is your chance to come face to face with employers at recruitment fairs, presentations and training events, such as graduate schools;
- university alumni associations - they may run schemes to put current students in touch with former students;
- friends - those with whom you did your first degree, those who play in the same hockey league or who you meet through the pub quiz;
- family - what does your uncle do? Who are your cousins married to now?

Build up a list of possible contacts for future reference. If you manage to talk to someone in the field in which you are interested, always try and get the names of two more contacts to extend your network. Tell everyone what you are looking for and enlist their support. Useful contacts come from the most unexpected sources so don't dismiss casual or social contacts as avenues to explore.

What do you want to know?

You need to be prepared before any meeting or initial contact. Think of the questions you would need to ask to determine whether this was the right career for you. If you are already convinced about the area of work, you can still ask about your contact's employer or other similar employers – finding the right fit with an employer is often as important as finding the right occupation.

Some questions to consider asking are:

- How did you get into your job?
- What are the most (and least) satisfying things about the job?
- What are the key skills/knowledge/experience needed in this post?
- What do employers look for when they are recruiting into these types of roles?
- Would you be prepared to give me comments/feedback on my CV for this type of work?
- How do employers in this industry recruit?
- Are there any other people you can think of who I could contact?

Things to avoid:

- Asking if you can have a job.
- Asking personal questions, such as how much they earn.
- Highlighting your own shortcomings or lack of confidence - this is your chance to make a positive impression.
- Showing you have no idea what you want to do. Even if you have little idea of the actual job you want, give an idea of the skills you want to use and the type of responsibility you want to take on.

Making your initial approach

Think about how well you know the person you want to contact and tailor your approach. If they are well known to you personally, a phone call will probably be best. If they are known to a mutual contact, a more formal first approach is probably better, either:

- by letter, introducing yourself and who gave you their name, what you are looking for and what you hope to happen next (if you tell them you will follow up with a phone call the following week to arrange a time to talk, this leaves you in control but makes the first phone call less awkward);
- by e-mail, if you feel you can be less formal or if the contact is an academic.

In each case, make it clear what you are asking for, be positive and assertive without appearing too pushy. Try and aim for a face-to-face meeting at their workplace. A 20-minute meeting is a good time to try for initially. However, if you find you cannot get all you require from your contact, be prepared to compromise and be flexible in your arrangements.

Following up

It is good business etiquette to follow up with a thank-you letter. This is also an opportunity to reinforce your interest in the employer, send a copy of your CV (targeted to the job that interests you) and to ask them to keep you in mind if they hear of any other suitable jobs or contacts. Also, if someone has made an effort to give you a good contact, it is polite to let them know how the meeting went.

Getting your foot in the door

Getting that first break can be hard work. You may need to think about getting work experience (often unpaid) or joining an organisation in a different role, which may not be your ideal choice. However, these approaches are often the only way into many sought after jobs, such as the media, advertising and PR or social, caring or charity work.

Getting work experience

Although undertaking a PhD is normally a full-time job, try to find time to get some work experience before you graduate. Many universities run work experience schemes or publicise voluntary opportunities, which you may not be able to access once you are no longer a student. Talk to your students' union or careers service to find out more. If you make some successful contacts in the area in which you are interested, you could ask for the opportunity either to do some work shadowing or some unpaid work experience.

Become an internal candidate

Many employers give some form of preferential treatment to internal candidates when thinking of recruiting. Therefore, it may be worth considering taking a stepping stone job as a first move. If you have a technical background but want to move into a business job in the same sector, you may find it much easier to start out in research or development for a couple of years, then try to move into a different role with the same employer.

If you do use this route into your chosen field, you will need to use every opportunity to impress your organisation with your potential.

- Develop contacts across the organisation - volunteer for cross-functional projects, teams looking at improving the way you all work or social events.
- Make sure you excel at your job but not at the expense of exposing the shortcomings of your colleagues.
- Be friendly and forthcoming to everyone you meet - enthusiasm and a good reputation may uncover an excellent opportunity in the most unexpected places.

However, give yourself a realistic time limit. It is too easy to convince yourself that you are still getting good experience and the lucky break is just around the corner, long after you should have decided to either change employer or change your ambitions.

5 Applying for a job

GETTING STARTED

Applications for jobs are usually made using a CV and covering letter or an application form. An effective job application provides clear evidence of how you meet the employer's selection criteria. To do this you need to:

- know your skills;
- know what the employer is looking for.

Know your skills

Give some thought as to what you have to offer an employer. If you are seeking work in an area relevant to your research, you will obviously have subject-specific knowledge, such as scientific or technical skills. Identify additional transferable skills gained directly as a result of your research, such as communication, project planning,

organisational skills and IT. For details of the skills that doctoral research students are expected to develop during their research training and to consider your own skills, see the skills statement on the UK GRAD website. You may also find it helpful to draw on other aspects of your life, for example, your first degree, employment, social activities and family responsibilities, as these also develop skills.

Know what the employer is looking for

Use your research skills to find out what you can about the employer (especially if you are making a speculative application). If it is an advertised vacancy, analyse the advert, job description and person specification to identify the knowledge, skills and experience the employer is seeking.

CVs

CVs can be used to apply for an advertised position or to make a speculative approach to an employer. The average length of time an employer spends initially reading a CV is about 30 seconds. Your aim in that time is to persuade them that it is worth reading the document in detail. Create a poor first impression and it may not get read at all!

CV structure

It is important to understand some guiding principles when writing CVs in order to structure your own CV for maximum effect. Academic CVs require a different format to CVs intended for graduate vacancies. While there is no one perfect structure, you should keep the following principles in mind:

- Make it easy to read and be aware of the design format.
- Check that the overall layout isn't too cluttered or that you have used too much white space and your CV looks sparse.
- Use a logical structure with clear headings so the reader is easily guided through the CV.
- Use reverse chronological order for education and employment experience.
- Allocate space in accordance to the importance of the information.
- Be prepared to edit your information. Ask yourself: How is this relevant to the post/does it add value?
- Use positive and dynamic language, which the employer will understand. Avoid (most) abbreviations unless you are absolutely sure they will be understood.
- Don't have any unexplained chronological gaps.
- Proofread your final version – there should be no spelling mistakes or grammatical errors.
- Use good quality paper and a laser printer – never photocopy your CV.

Once you understand the underlying principles, you are ready to write your own CV.

This section focuses on academic CVs. More detailed information on other types of graduate CVs can be found in the AGCAS information booklet *Making Applications* and on the Prospects.ac.uk website

Academic CVs are used primarily for academic lecturing or research posts within the higher education sector. Always do a radical rewrite for non-academic posts, even if for commercially based research.

If you are applying for a job in an unrelated area then it is important to focus on relevant skills and qualities developed throughout your PhD and to adapt your PhD experience to best emphasise the skills gained in higher-level research within the format of a typical graduate CV. The AGCAS information booklet *Making Applications* provides a useful example of how to do so.

Additional examples of PhD student CVs (both academic and non-academic) can be found on Prospects.ac.uk.

Electronic CVs

It is now possible to place your CV on a number of websites for potential employers to read. Some sites, such as Prospects.ac.uk, require you to type your details into their CV template; others host your CV in its original format. Before posting your CV, check that the website is reputable and relevant to your professional area. You should also consider the level of personal detail you give. Seek the permission of your referees before putting their details on the web or state that references are available on request.

For further information, look at the Guide to Jobsearch on the Internet: Academic and Non-academic Resources website.

Name

Date of birth (optional)

Nationality (optional – relevant if work permit required)

Address (home)

Phone number (normally a landline)

E-mail address (make sure this is still in use after PhD completion)

Address (university)

Phone number (normally a landline)

Research interests

Include a brief summary of your interests. Cover past, current and future research plans. Ideally, this should be targeted to the institution - consider whether they are looking to broaden departmental research experience or build a specialist reputation.

Education

PhD

Thesis title.

A brief summary of your thesis, lasting one or two sentences.

Name of institution and dates.

Name of PhD supervisor.

Masters degree (if applicable) and/or first degree

Dates, name of institution, degree title and classification.

Brief details of subjects (optional).

A brief summary of your dissertation.

School (Optional – can be omitted if space is limited.)

Dates, name of school.

Brief details of A-levels/Highers.

Conference papers

Titles and dates. Try to include details of highly regarded events. Include and highlight presentations delivered or involvement in organising conferences.

Publications

The format can be organised in a variety of ways, for example, by research area – a useful way to highlight interests and publications in major journals – or chronologically.

For details of all publications, research and articles, normal bibliographic rules apply.

Publications involving collaboration with influential academics and/or published in major peer review journals are very useful to the application process. Distinguish between work published, submitted/accepted or under review.

Teaching

(Optional – relevant only to those seeking lecturing positions or applying to teaching-led institutions.)

It can be useful to subdivide teaching into seminar and lecture experience and provide brief details. Other subheadings, such as tutorial and supervisory experience, can also be included.

Additional relevant (research) experience

Present relevant research projects, industrial experience or related practical experience coherently for maximum impact (for example, workshop chair/plenary experience).

Work experience

Dates, job title, name of organisation.

Briefly describe duties, skills gained and, if appropriate, achievements (bullet points work well). Information contained here could alternatively be covered in the administrative section. Academics are normally more interested in your relevant academic experience, as opposed to student jobs.

Professional membership

Details of body, dates and responsibilities.

Prizes and awards

A good indicator of your potential. Keep relevant and current.

Other relevant qualifications

Normally certificated skills, for example, IT competency, languages, etc.

Personal interests/hobbies

(Optional – views differ. Some academic departments like to see it included, others have no preference.)

Referees

Provide the name, academic relationship and contact details of three referees. It is usual for your dissertation or PhD supervisor to be included. Carefully consider the others - can they comment on a particular aspect of your research interests or your teaching experience (for example, PhD external examiner or a co-author)? It is often useful to have referees from different institutions. Keep your referees informed about what you are applying for and give them a copy of your CV.

COVERING LETTERS

A covering letter always accompanies your CV. It introduces you to the employer, demonstrates your interest in the position applied for and highlights what you have to offer. Many employers briefly scan a covering letter to decide if it is worthwhile reading the accompanying CV so it plays an essential part in ensuring that your CV actually gets read!

An effective covering letter should complement your CV. It is a bridging document (no more than one side of A4) between your experience and what the selector is seeking. Its key purpose is to draw attention to and emphasise the skills and experience detailed in your CV (without repeating whole sections) that match the profile of the job for which you are applying.

For further advice and information on covering letters, see the AGCAS information booklet *Making Applications*.

APPLICATION FORMS

Online applications are now the norm for most large graduate recruiters but many other organisations still follow the paper-based approach. While there are some practical differences between completing an online or paper application, the principles of writing an effective application (ie one that gets you to interview) are the same. You need to know your skills and what the employer is looking for (usually detailed in the company website/brochure or via a job description and person specification) and then take every opportunity in your application to provide evidence of how your skills and experience meet the post's requirements.

Where is your evidence?

Supplying evidence of your suitability for the post usually takes one of two forms: a blank page in the application form; or (competency-based) questions asking you to describe situations in which you have had to demonstrate specific skills, eg teamwork, initiative, analytical skills. Your PhD is a strong source of evidence for the skills and personal qualities most employers are seeking.

If faced with a blank page on which you have been asked to provide 'additional information in support of your application', here are some suggestions:

- Structure your answer by using subheadings. Short paragraphs or bullet points make it easier for the employer to read.
- Ensure you have included evidence that demonstrates you meet key competencies. If you have a person specification to refer to, you should address all the 'essential' and as many of the 'desirable' criteria as possible.
- Keep it relevant by relating your experience to the skills and personal qualities required.
- Word process your 'additional information in support of your application' section on a separate piece of paper and attach it to the form.

Competency-based questions enable recruiters to focus in on key areas. Answers are then used to decide whether to shortlist a candidate or not. Typically, questions will ask you to describe a situation where you have demonstrated a specific skill. When answering questions:

- make sure you answer all parts of the question;
- keep to any word limits imposed;
- briefly describe the situation but focus on providing evidence of your skills;
- avoid long rambling sentences and use action verbs.

Whether you are completing an application online or on paper, a common difficulty for postgraduate students is how to present qualifications, knowledge, skills and research experience on a form that is intended for general use; forms often don't even include a specific section where you can give details of your postgraduate qualification(s). Some creativity may be needed to ensure your application form does you justice. Fit your information as best you can to the form provided but consider including a covering letter to provide supplementary information relevant to your application that it is not possible to include on the application form. Check first that the employer has not explicitly forbidden the inclusion of additional information!

Tips

- Don't use a CV when an employer has asked you to complete their application form. Many employers prefer to use their own application forms because they want to ask particular questions and collect information in a standardised format. Candidates who ignore these guidelines are normally eliminated from the recruitment process.

- If applying online, download the application form so you can draft out your answers.
 - Complete a first draft as a Word document and then cut and paste your answers into your application. Remember to run a spelling and grammar check in Word – many online applications do not have this facility.
 - Mirror the style of language used by the company. Your application may be scanned for key words and, even if it isn't, mirrored language helps recruiters identify how you match their competencies.
 - Don't hit the submit button until you are satisfied with your answer – you may not be able to go back.
 - Keep a copy of all applications you make.
- how you will answer challenging questions, for example, lack of experience, a change in career direction, being too 'academic' or your biggest weakness;
 - what questions you want to ask the recruiters on the day.

For further advice and information on application forms, see the AGCAS information booklet *Making Applications* and the AGCAS videos *Looking Good on Paper* and *Your Job's Online*.

INTERVIEWS

If you have been invited to interview, you have (on paper at least) met the employer's selection criteria. The interview is a two-way process; it is an opportunity for a recruiter to speak with you in more detail, assess your ability to do the job and see how well you would fit into the organisation. It also gives you the chance to find out whether the employer and the job meet your expectations and decide whether you want to work for them.

Preparation

Whatever format the interview takes, the key to success is preparation. Preparation means you stand less chance of being surprised and put on the spot at interview.

First interviews tend to concentrate on the information you provided in your application. You should be prepared to talk about and expand on any information you have given. Re-visit your application and re-read the job advert, brochure, job description and person specification. Find out more about the organisation, its structure and culture and plans for future development. This will help you anticipate and prepare for questions you may be asked at the interview.

Think through the interview in advance. Consider:

- your relevant personal strengths and specific examples to illustrate these;
- how you will convey your enthusiasm for the job;

Interview tips

- Feeling a little nervous is okay – recruiters take account of this; it is normal for many candidates.
- Listen to the question.
- Ask for clarification if necessary.
- Don't be afraid to take a moment to think before responding to difficult questions.
- Be honest but don't undersell yourself.
- Speak clearly, answer the question asked and don't waffle.
- Be aware of your body language.
- Try to smile.

The interview may be the first stage in a series of recruitment activities. Other selection methods include psychometric tests, assessment centres and presentations and lectures.

PSYCHOMETRIC TESTS

Psychometric testing is now a common feature of graduate recruitment. The two main types of tests used are aptitude (also known as ability) and personality. These can be taken online or at an organised testing session. The earlier tests are used in the recruitment process, the more likely it is that the result alone will dictate progression to the next stage of the recruitment process. Tests administered later in the process (often as part of an assessment centre) are normally considered alongside other elements of the candidate's performance, such as group work, individual presentations and interview.

Employers use aptitude tests to measure a candidate's suitability for a particular type of job. Common tests include verbal, numerical and diagrammatic reasoning. Tests are administered under controlled conditions, are strictly timed and have definite right or wrong answers.

Personality tests are intended to gather information about how and why you do things in your own particular way. There are no right or wrong answers - they are designed to look at your style, not ability - and it is important to answer questions accurately and honestly.

Your university careers service may run practice tests (there may be a small charge).

ASSESSMENT CENTRES

Graduate recruiters and other large organisations often use assessment centres at the final stage of the selection process. Even in academic circles, you are increasingly likely to have to take part in such activities, in addition to more traditional interviews.

Typically, an assessment centre lasts one or two days. Candidates will be assessed against specific competences through a range of activities that include:

- practical tasks and exercises;
- group discussions or role plays;
- giving presentations;
- psychometric tests;
- personality questionnaires;
- interviews.

For further advice and information on interview techniques, psychometric tests and assessment centres, see the AGCAS information booklet *Going for Interviews* and the AGCAS videos *Why Ask Me That?* and *The Assessment Centre*.

PRESENTATIONS AND LECTURES

If you are applying for a position as a lecturer or for a postdoctoral research post where you will be expected to present the findings of your research to others, it is likely that the selection process will include delivering a lecture or presentation.

If you are applying for an academic post, the topic of your lecture is likely to be of your own choosing. If asked to give a presentation, the same topic may be given to all candidates. You should consider preparing supporting materials, such as relevant handouts, and be prepared to answer questions at the end.

Consider your audience. Will it consist of academic staff, students or a selection panel who may be unfamiliar with your subject? If you are not clear

who your audience will be, it is perfectly reasonable to contact the organisation in order to find out.

Whatever the subject, your presentation must be pitched at a level that is appropriate to the audience.

A good presentation pays equal attention to structure, content and delivery: it should have a clear introduction; the main body of the presentation should flow logically; and it should end with a summary or conclusion.

The following guidelines may help:

- Rehearse your presentation - familiarity with your material should contribute to a seamless delivery and make sure you keep within set time limits.
- Check what facilities are available for visual aids - take paper copies of your slides just in case.
- Demonstrate good technique in using visual aids - stand back from the screen and don't turn your back on the audience.
- No matter how interesting the content of your presentation, it will not make up for poor delivery.
- Avoid speaking too quickly, too quietly or in a monotone. Make eye contact with your audience and be aware of any distracting habits such as hair twiddling or overuse of certain words.

If possible, practise your presentation in a large room or lecture theatre and ask a friend to observe and give you feedback. Many universities will offer training in presentation skills to postgraduate students through either staff or student development programmes.

Throughout the process of considering your options beyond your PhD, you should visit your university careers service as often as you feel necessary for

information, specialist and professional advice, and guidance to help steer you through this very important decision in your life.

Whatever stage you are at, others will do all they can to encourage and help you move on to your next step but, ultimately, it is down to you.

6 Information sources

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

AGCAS

Information booklets:

Going for Interviews; Job Seeking Strategies; Making Applications.

Videos:

The Assessment Centre; Looking Good on Paper; Selection Success in One; Why Ask Me That?; Your Job's Online.

Other publications:

AGCAS Occupational Profiles

AGCAS Sector Briefings

Careers Resources for Academic Researchers

The Postgraduate Toolkit

University Researchers: Employers' Attitudes &

Recruitment Practices

University Researchers and the Job Market

Graduate Prospects

Prospects Directory

Prospects Planner,

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/pplanner

Prospects Postgraduate Directory

Prospects.ac.uk

What Do PhDs Do?

Other publications

The Academic's Survival Kit, Sage Publications Ltd, 2004

The Guardian, Guardian Newspapers Ltd, Daily
Kennedy's International Directory of Executive Recruiters, Kennedy Information, 2004

Kompass Directories, Reed Information Services, Annual

Moving On In Your Career: A Guide for Academics and Postgraduates, Routledge, 2000

New Scientist, Reed Business Information, Weekly
Pay and Progression for Graduates, Incomes Data Services (IDS), Annual

So What Are You Going To Do With That?: MAs and PhDs Seeking Careers Outside the Academy,

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001

Successful Research Careers: A Practical Guide, Open University Press, 2004

The Times Higher Educational Supplement, TSL Education, Weekly, Friday

Professional development websites

Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), www.acu.ac.uk

The Association of University Teachers (AUT), www.aut.org.uk

Career Development for Research Students, www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/class/cfe/postgrads

Find a PhD, www.findaphd.com

Higher Education Academy, www.heacademy.ac.uk

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), www.hesa.ac.uk

Institute for Employment Studies, www.employment-studies.co.uk

National Association of Teachers in Further and

Higher Education (NATFHE), www.natfhe.org.uk

National Postgraduate Committee, www.npc.org.uk

Open University (OU), www.open.ac.uk

PharmiWeb, www.pharmiweb.com

PhDs.org, www.phds.org

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), www.qaa.ac.uk

RD Info, www.rdinfo.org.uk

Resources for Postgraduate Researchers, www.careers.lon.ac.uk/output/page212.asp?node=345

Roberts Report, www.hmtreasury.gov.uk/documents/enterprise_and_productivity/research_and_enterprise/ent_res_roberts.cfm

Social Science Information Gateway: Social

Science Grapevine, www.sosig.ac.uk/gv

Supporting Research Staff,

www.shef.ac.uk/~gmpcrs

University Researchers: Employers' Attitudes & Recruitment Practices,

www.hesda.org.uk/subjects/rs/unires.html

The UK GRAD Programme, www.grad.ac.uk

Universities UK, www.universitiesuk.ac.uk

Research Council websites

Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), www.ahrc.ac.uk

Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), www.bbsrc.ac.uk

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), www.esrc.ac.uk

Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), www.epsrc.ac.uk

Medical Research Council (MRC), www.mrc.ac.uk

Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), www.nerc.ac.uk

Particle Physics & Astronomy Research Council (PPARC), www.pparc.ac.uk

Job search websites

Association Bernard Gregory, www.abg.asso.fr

Find a PostDoc, www.findapostdoc.com

fish4jobs, www.fish4.co.uk

Guide to Jobsearch on the Internet: Academic and Non-academic Resources,

www.careers.strath.ac.uk/jobsearchguide

Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO), www.hero.ac.uk

Jobs.ac.uk, www.jobs.ac.uk

The Paperboy, www.thepaperboy.com.au

PhD Jobs, www.phdjobs.com

Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC), www.rec.uk.com

Vacancies.ac.uk, www.vacancies.ac.uk

Yell.com, www.yell.com

Jobs on the net!

www.prospects.ac.uk

Job vacancies

Careers guidance

Work experience

**Find it all on the UK's official
graduate careers website**

visit www.prospects.ac.uk the UK's official graduate careers website

Checklist

What should you do next?

Check the websites, contacts and publications listed at the back of this booklet.

Look at the other AGCAS publications listed at the front of this booklet.

Speak to a careers adviser in your HE careers service for more help and information.

Browse the prospects.ac.uk website for graduate careers information.

Guide to AGCAS information on prospects.ac.uk

Options (A4 sheets)

Ideas of what you can do with your subject of study, with details of skills gained, jobs related to your degree, further study and other options.

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Options

Sector Briefings (A5 booklets)

Overviews of the key job sectors, providing an insight into the culture, tips for entry and progression, and examples of typical jobs and leading employers.

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/SectorBs

Occupational Profiles (A4 sheets)

Focusing on over 400 different types of jobs, with details of entry requirements, salary ranges, typical employers and vacancy sources.

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Occupations

Special Interest Series (A5 booklets)

Information on job hunting, applications and interviews, postgraduate study, changing your course, using your languages and what to do after your course.

www.prospects.ac.uk

Country Profiles (online only)

Details for working and studying in over 50 countries around the world, including the job market, visa requirements and vacancy sources.

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Countries