



'Brain glue?', Christopher Ugboke,
Graduate School Research Images Competition 2012

The Graduate School guide to...

Becoming a university
academic

Many doctoral students start their PhDs with the aim of becoming an academic, and many achieve their ambition. In Reading, around 40% of our PhD students gain a ‘permanent’ academic position, many after working as a postdoctoral researcher or teaching fellow for a few years. However, before becoming too fixed in your ideas, it is important to make sure that you understand what being a university academic actually entails, whether you would be suited to the role, and what you would need to achieve to gain a position. You also need to be aware of the wider higher education context and how this impacts on academic careers and working lives.

If you are studying for a PhD with the aim of becoming a university academic, this guide will help you to decide whether this is really the career for you, what your chances of success are, and how to go about getting that all important job.

This guide is part of a series produced by the Graduate School, which address in an informal way a number of the areas and processes central to your doctoral research studies. These guides are complementary to - and should be read in conjunction with - the University’s formal policies and procedures, as listed on the Graduate School website.¹

Contents

1. Perceived advantages of being an academic
2. The transition period
3. Your first lectureship
4. Progression beyond lecturer
5. Salaries
6. Understanding the broader Higher Education context
7. What are universities looking for when they are appointing new lecturers?
8. How can you improve your chances of being successful in the selection process?
9. Frequently asked interview questions
10. Hearing the outcome

¹ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/currentstudents/gs-policies-and-procedures.aspx>

1. Perceived advantages of being an academic

Many PhD students say they are attracted to academia because they want to be able to carry on pursuing research in an area of their own choosing. Many also want to teach and help others to develop. Other often cited attractions include having more freedom and flexibility, greater job security, a clear career progression track, and a decent salary. Although there is some truth in all of these, the life of a university academic is very different today from what it was 10, 20, or more years ago. As you will see in section five of this guide, many academics now work under, and feel, much more pressure than was once the case, often finding that the boundary between work and home life becomes increasingly blurred.

2. The transition period

Ten or more years ago, many doctoral students used to walk straight into a permanent academic position on completion of their PhD. Unfortunately, this is much less common today. Most PhD students now take up one or more short-term posts, working as either a postdoctoral researcher or a teaching fellow before moving on to a lectureship. The length of these contracts can vary from a few months to three or more years.

Postdoctoral research positions often involve working on a set project which is led by a more senior academic (known as Principal Investigator - PI). The position is usually funded by a research grant which has been won by the PI. Another (although less common) postdoctoral research position is a personal fellowship, which has been won by the postdoctoral researcher and allows them to pursue their own research agenda. Many of the UK Research Councils and large charities (such as the Wellcome Trust) fund such posts. However, they are highly competitive. Teaching Fellows may be employed to fill in for a permanent lecturer who is on leave of absence (e.g. on research or maternity leave) or because there is some other need for increased teaching capacity for a particular period of time.

This 'postdoctoral period' can be a difficult time for would-be academics, as they often experience a lot of uncertainty and lack job security. Some may move from one short-term contract to another, possibly at different universities, in different parts of the country (or even world). It can be a particularly difficult time for those who are also trying to start and support a family. You need to ask yourself whether you would be willing, and able, to live with this sort of uncertainty, and also whether you are likely to have fixed views about the type of university you would like to work in and whether geographical location is an important factor.

3. Your first lectureship

If you are successful in becoming an academic, your first permanent (or, now, more often called 'open contract') position is likely to be a lectureship. In other countries, a different title, such as Assistant Professor, might be used (and a few UK universities have recently adopted this nomenclature). Whatever the title, your duties are likely to involve some combination of research, teaching and administration, with the particular balance

depending on discipline area and type of university. Lecturers in post-1992 universities in the UK are likely to have higher teaching loads than those in more established research-intensive institutions. Some universities are now offering 'permanent' teaching-only positions, and are putting in place an appropriate career progression track for staff on such contracts. You might want to consider whether you would be happy with such a position or whether conducting research is important to you. There are very few 'permanent' research-only positions for academics who are still in an early stage of career. Most research-only positions are held by established senior academics who can often bring in large sums of research grant income to their Schools and Departments.

The majority of new lecturers are required to serve a probationary period (typically three years in the UK) before their position is confirmed as 'permanent'. During this period, many are also required to take some form of 'new lecturers' programme', that helps new academics to develop their teaching, learning, and related skills. Successful completion of probation is often dependent on successfully passing such a programme. Another key criterion is a capacity for independent research, which is typically demonstrated by publishing a number of outputs and/or gaining research grant income.

4. Progression beyond lecturer

Once you have gained your first lectureship and completed probation, you will probably start thinking about how to move up to the next level; what do you need to do in order to get promoted? Universities differ in their hierarchy of job titles and how progression through these works. In some universities in the UK, there is a clear path from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer, to Reader and then Professor. In other universities, Senior Lecturer and Reader are parallel positions, with staff gaining promotion to one or the other, depending on their particular strengths. By and large, those with stronger teaching and learning backgrounds go via the Senior Lecturer route, whereas those with stronger research track records progress via a Readership. The picture is even more confusing than this as some post-1992 universities in the UK use the title 'Senior Lecturer' for posts equivalent to what other universities called 'lectureships', and use the term 'Principal Lecturer' for posts which other universities call 'senior lectureships'. In Reading, we have recently reviewed our progression routes and have replaced the Senior Lecturer/Reader level with Associate Professor positions. When you are considering an advertised position, you will need to look carefully at the nomenclature used by the university in question.

If you are wondering what you have to do to gain promotion and how long it might take, it mostly depends on you. Promotion panels will want to see evidence of significant progression since you obtained your lectureship, in terms of research publications, winning research grants, and (particularly for senior lectureships) strong contributions to teaching, learning and administration. In Reading, although there is a fair degree of variability, many lecturers are successfully promoted after four or five years.

If you intend to work in a university outside of the UK, then you will need to find out about career structures and criteria for promotion that apply in the particular country and institution in question.

Finally, most universities have Centres for Staff Development, which offer much broader personal and professional development programmes for their staff, as they progress in their careers and as different needs arise. For example, in the early stages of their career, academics might want to know about things like time management, using social media effectively, or having difficult conversations, whereas later in their career they might be more interested in undertaking some form of management or leadership training. It is important to keep reflecting on your personal and professional development as you progress in your career.

5. Salaries

Interestingly, some people cite academic salaries as one of the attractions of becoming an academic, whereas others cite salary levels as one of the potential disadvantages. In the UK, the salary scale for lecturers starts at around £37,000 and increases to around £46,000 per year. In most universities, staff automatically progress each year to the next point on the scale, until they reach the top of the scale or until they are promoted to the next level. Salaries for Senior Lecturers/Readers/Associate Professors start at around £47,000 and increase to around £53,000. Finally, most full professorial salaries range from around £54,000 to £80,000, although some can be substantially higher.

6. Understanding the broader Higher Education context

If you want to be successful in gaining an academic position and then progressing in academia, it is important that you gain an understanding of the broader academic context in which you will be working. The following section provides some information about the UK Higher Education context. If you intend to work in another country then you need to find out about the broader context that applies there.

In the UK, universities get funding from Government, via the relevant national Funding Council. In England, this is HEFCE - the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The Funding Council provides some money for teaching (with the amount depending on the mix of subject areas and number of students in each area) and some money for research (with the amount depending on the quality and intensity of their research, as assessed in exercises such as the Research Excellent Framework (REF), which was previously known as the RAE). Such exercises occur around every five years and it is essential that universities do well as this affects their level of funding for the next five years and also their reputation. Universities also gain additional funding for research from external grants and contracts that they win. However, virtually all universities in the UK gain more funding for their teaching activities than for their research. The majority of their teaching income comes not from Government, but from student fees. This balance of teaching and research funding can lead to some tensions in that,

although most staff have to be successful researchers in order to progress in their career, it is actually the teaching that pays for most of their salaries.

The Government places a limit on the number of UK undergraduate and postgraduate taught students that universities can recruit each year (although they do allow them to recruit additional very high quality students outside of this cap, where they are able to attract these). This limit, and the desire to make Universities global institutions, has driven many universities to take on increasing numbers of overseas students. Overseas students pay higher fee levels and so are seen as being 'financially attractive'. Over the past five years or so, there has been increasing competition for overseas students, not only from other universities in the UK but also from universities all over the world, many of which are now providing teaching in English. There has also been an increase in the number of UK universities developing partnerships with overseas universities and/or establishing their own campuses overseas, in an attempt to recruit locally there.

So what does all this mean for you? The first thing is that Universities are now operating in a much more competitive environment. It is important that they perform really well in research assessment exercises such as REF, and that they are successful in attracting large amounts of external grant income. They also need to recruit the highest quality students from the UK, and from overseas. This means that Universities have to be very careful when taking on new academic staff. They want to be as sure as they can be that, once recruited, new staff will become successful academics (and, in most cases, strong independent researchers). It means that the working life of a university academic, although still very rewarding, is increasingly challenging. There is more 'top down management', particularly of research, than before. Staff now get given, and have to meet, clear performance targets, and many feel they have to work long hours in order to progress, sometimes working into the evening and at weekends. Research is also becoming increasingly inter- and multi-disciplinary and you may well be expected to collaborate with researchers from other disciplines. You may also be required to travel to overseas countries, either on recruitment initiatives or delivering teaching at partner institutions.

7. What are universities looking for when they are appointing new lecturers?

Clearly, there will be some variation in the essential and desired characteristics that new appointees will be required to demonstrate depending on the specific nature of the advertised position. However, when selecting prospective staff for most standard lectureships that include research and teaching, there will usually be an emphasis on the need for candidates to demonstrate that they can work, and be successful, as an independent researcher. This usually means having a number of high quality publications and some experience of applying for and gaining external funding. The latter is particularly the case in science related disciplines. This does not mean that you have to have won large grants in your own name. You may be a co-applicant on a grant held by your ex-supervisor or another academic, or you may have won one or more smaller grants in your own name. The number and nature of publications will also vary

(partly depending on discipline) but many new academics may have two or three journal articles and/or conference papers and book chapters. These days, most candidates will also have successfully completed their PhD, although in a few disciplines where it is more difficult to attract academic staff, some research students gain their first lectureship whilst still writing up their PhD.

To be successful, you would also need a clear strategy in terms of developing your future research, together with some ideas for how it might be funded. You would need to show that you are able and willing to collaborate with staff, both from within your discipline and more broadly. You would also need some teaching experience and some ideas about how to make your teaching engaging to different audiences.

As a research student, there are ways you can increase your chances of success. For example, at Reading, we run courses on understanding the UK Higher Education context, applying for research grant funding, how to get published, and preparing to teach.² Many Schools and Departments offer research students the opportunity to contribute towards undergraduate teaching (for example, acting as a demonstrator in a laboratory class or as a seminar leader).

The appointments process for lectureships will vary from university to university but, in most cases, there will be a formal interview process, with a panel of around four to six members chaired by a senior member of university staff, sometimes the Vice-Chancellor. In contrast, interviews for postdoctoral research positions are often run at School or Department level and typically involve a less formal interview with fewer staff involved. For many lectureship positions, candidates are also expected to give an oral presentation on their research to School/Department staff, in addition to the attending the formal interview.

8. How you can improve your chances of being successful in the selection process?

Whether the advertised position is in your current institution or a different one, it is essential that you prepare well when making an application and, particularly, before being interviewed. You need to do some homework on the institution, and not just on the School or Department in which you would be based. You need to look at what other discipline areas are covered and think about potential collaborations. You also need to look at teaching programmes and how you might contribute to these, or offer something new and complementary. Most universities now have very good websites and you need to spend time searching through these.

In making an application, it is important to show that you have thought about why you want this particular job; what is it about the institution and School/Department in question that makes the position attractive for you? What can you offer in terms of complementary knowledge and skills? Many advertised positions attract large numbers

² See <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/skillstrainingprogramme/gst-timetable.aspx> for the full range of training sessions run by the Graduate School and other University units.

of applicants so you need to show what makes you special and worth interviewing. It is worth including a covering letter with your application, that is tailored to the particular job in question and that shows how you meet (or hopefully exceed) the job description. In preparing for an interview, you need to think about your plans for research over the next few years and potential sources of external funding. You also need to think about your vision for the future. In terms of teaching, you need to think about areas where you could teach, how you would make your teaching engaging and what innovative methods you might use.

9. Frequently asked interview questions

It is not possible to predict in advance exactly what you will be asked in an interview but the following questions are often frequently asked. It might be useful to think about these in advance and how you would go about answering them, clearly and succinctly.

- Why do you want this position? Why is it the right job for you at this stage in your career?
- What makes you feel you are ready to move on to a lectureship?
- What is your most important research contribution to date?
- What was the main contribution of your PhD thesis?
- You have a number of joint publications with your Supervisor/Principal Investigator – what was your contribution to these?
- What are your plans for research over the next three years and how might these be funded?
- What other people in the School/wider University might you collaborate with?
- How would you contribute to the current teaching programme?
- Are there any new courses you could offer?
- What experience of teaching have you had to date?
- Can you give me an example of some way in which your teaching has been innovative or, if not, how you might go about using innovative methods?
- How would you go about making sure your teaching is sufficiently engaging to large student classes?
- Does your research depend on the use of particular facilities which we would need to have in place for you to carry out your research here?
- Is there anything else you need to get your research going here?
- Where do you see yourself in three or five years' time? If you are successful here, what will you have achieved by then?
- Have you any questions that you would like to ask us?

This last one is nearly always asked and you need to be prepared for it. Unless you have been given an opportunity to ask all your questions when visiting the School/Department in advance of the interview, it is useful to have one or two questions you would want to ask the panel. These might cover potential workload and balance between research and teaching. Alternatively you might want to ask about the University's support for, and commitment to, the particular School/Department or

discipline area. You need to remember, however, that most interview panels will be seeing several candidates and working to a tight time schedule, so do not go in with a long list of questions to ask.

10. Hearing the outcome

In the UK, decisions are usually made very soon after interviews are held, and successful candidates are often contacted within a day or two of the interview being held. What do you need to think about if you are offered the job? Key considerations might be when would you be required to start and is this negotiable if you are trying to complete a particular project first? How long would the probationary period be? What salary is being offered and is this negotiable? What other support is on offer in terms of start-up funding and support from more senior staff? What facilities would you have access to? It is not essential to make a decision on the spot. It is quite reasonable to ask for a few days, or up to a week, to think it through and to think about what you might want to negotiate before giving your answer. Remember, you have a stronger negotiating hand before you accept the position than once you have started.

Clearly, most selection processes are highly competitive and you might not be the successful candidate. If this happens, it is important to ask for some feedback. Are there aspects of your CV or your interview performance that you could work on before making your next application? The main thing is to get over your initial disappointment and think about how to be more successful next time you apply.

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