



Cumberland Lodge
The Great Park
Windsor, SL4 2HP
T: 01784 497794
Company No. 5383055
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A Cumberland Lodge residential postgraduate research conference

Is There Life After a PhD?

Monday 10th – Thursday 13th August 2009

SUMMARY REPORT

“This conference completely changed the way I think about my future. I’ve discovered I’ve got skills I’d never even thought of, and can now see the opportunities available for a future in which I can make a valuable contribution”

“The best experience of my PhD to date!”

Speakers

Dr Lauren Arrington, Adrian Research Fellow, Darwin College, University of Cambridge

Dr Jutta Davis, Barrister-at-Law, Legal Assistant, Slaughter and May

Dr Owen Gower, Senior Fellow, Cumberland Lodge

Mr Tim Hardy, Actor and Director

Dr Marc Jones, Research Fellow, University College, London

Professor Alan Michette, Professor of Physics, King’s College, London

Dr Alastair Niven, Principal, Cumberland Lodge

Ms Shahida Osman, Careers Adviser, Imperial College, London

Dr Rachel Parker, Senior Consultant, IBM Global Business Services

Mr Alastair Rolfe, Head of Marketing, EMEA/India, Spencer Stuart, Executive Search

Professor Graham Smith, Professor of Politics, University of Southampton

Dr Ruth Smith, Careers Adviser, Cambridge University Careers Service

Dr Danny Sriskandarajah, Director, The Royal Commonwealth Society

Mr Dan Washburn, Job Seeker, having submitted his PhD

Cumberland Lodge brought 60 PhD students together to discuss the value of PhDs. Above all, the conference was a celebration of the postgraduate research culture in the UK. It was an opportunity to express the value of research no matter what the future holds. The speakers offered the following advice to the students themselves, and to anyone in the position of advising PhD students about their future:

- The most important decision facing you is whether you stay in academia or not. Get advice on this from as many sources as you can. Go to the careers advisory service. Ask your supervisor for their honest appraisal of your prospects in the field. Research the academic job market: will you have to look abroad? Focus on your priorities and consider what sort of career best suits your aspirations. Look at what you have done in your life so far that has given you most satisfaction: is that something only an academic life can offer?
- Don't think that ending up outside of Academia makes you a 'failed academic'. Getting a PhD makes you better able to cope in the non-academic sectors than other graduates. You are:
 1. Motivated and self-directed
 2. Able to analyse large amounts of information
 3. Clear-headed and articulate
 4. Tenacious

There are, of course, caveats. Outside academia you are not required to operate at the level of detail required within: if an idea won't work in practice, there is no need to analyse it further. Outside academia you may be frustrated that you cannot pursue something for the sake of interest alone.
- Make sure that there is more in your life than your PhD. This isn't just a matter of keeping you sane, it also helps your career options: you will always have to demonstrate that you are motivated and enthusiastic and very often extracurricular activities say this better than anything else.
- Know Yourself. Getting a PhD should develop your personal understanding. Do you work best in a team or on your own? Do you prefer doing literature reviews or your own work? Are you a good communicator? Discover what sort of work suits you best and use this knowledge: don't just apply for everything. Apply for things that suit your character and temperament.
- Tailor your applications. There is no point applying for 100 jobs with the same generic covering letter and CV. Getting a PhD offers a myriad of different 'transferable' skills and you must research your potential employer to find out which of these they want – whether it's an academic employer or not. Use that research to tailor your application to their needs.
- Get experience. Volunteer on the board of Trustees for a charity, do internships, get teaching work at the University, travel overseas. The more experience you get during your PhD, the more you will stand out in the job market. Don't leave your PhD having done nothing other than your PhD.
- Publish, publish, publish. This is vitally important. Obviously academic employers will want you to have published at least 2 peer-reviewed articles for your appointment to help their R E F rating. But other employers will value this too. Be creative about the variety of your publications, though. Write opinion-pieces to newspapers and popular

magazines in your field. Try to co-author a paper with an established figure in your field (how about your supervisor?). Don't leave this until after your PhD – if it takes two or three months longer to submit because you're working on a publication, then take that time.

- Plan 18 months ahead. Look at your CV at least 18 months before your anticipated submission date. Sign up for all the job alerts that are relevant to you. Stay organised: keep a list of the jobs that have interested you even if you don't apply. Work out what it was about those jobs that interested you, and develop your CV to suit them.
- Network. Perhaps the most important relationship for you to develop is with your supervisor. They will be writing your references, so ensure that you keep them informed about your career aspirations. Cultivate other potential referees: do you need a secondary supervisor? Go to conferences: meet your peers and your potential employers. Get it known that you will be looking for work.
- The interview panel is not the enemy. They will want you to perform to the best of your ability. To do this you must prepare every last aspect of the interview: know your research, know the panel, know the organisation. Rehearse, but remain flexible about what you want to say. Above all, during the interview, listen. Respond to what is being asked of you there and then.
- Your PhD was worth doing. No matter what, remember that your PhD was worth doing. You will face disappointments: journal articles will be rejected, as will your job applications. There is nothing personal in this.
- Be passionate about your subject. Find out what it is in your subject that really drives you and hold onto it. You may face a tacit anti-intellectualism in the workplace and in social life, but stay focussed on the passion you have for your subject.

Dr Owen Gower

Senior Fellow

E: owengower@cumberlandlodge.ac.uk

14 August 2009