"If you know neither your enemy nor yourself you will succumb in every battle"
Sun Tzu

Chapter 7. Succeeding beyond your Doctorate: The importance of identity, industry awareness and decisive action

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Abstract

Students are drawn to doctorates for both the intellectual journey and the aspirational destination. However, many contemporary doctoral students and graduates are feeling like battlers, in that victory does not assure a career. In this context, the weapons of choice are a clear vision, identity and strategic choices. The aim of this chapter is to inform students, their supervisors and university executive leaders how to achieve heightened graduate employability. As such, it has been written for four audiences: (a) PhD students, who want academic careers, and (b) those who want careers beyond universities; (c) PhD supervisors; and (d) university executive leaders. The key takeaways are practical recommendations for each of these four groups. The content is informed by an Australian national research study into postgraduate student experience, which included 319 postgraduate students as research participants. The first chapter author was one of two principal researchers leading the study, and the second chapter author was the project manager and researcher. The authors have added their reflections and personal experiences as supervisor and PhD student respectively.

Introduction

This chapter starts with two true stories. First, we were talking to a PhD student who was very close to graduation. We asked him about his career goals and he replied that he wanted to become an academic. We asked him about his research and he enthusiastically told us about it. We asked him to send us a link to publications so that we could read more, and he looked at us blankly. He said that his supervisor advised him to wait until after graduation when he obtained an academic position, before publishing.

Second, one of the panellists at a higher education conference we attended was a student leader of a student association. She spoke passionately about postgraduate employability and career preparation gaps. We were working on a journal paper on that very topic. After the panel, we approached her, introduced ourselves, and told her about the paper. We invited her to join us as co-author. She said she would think about it. We followed-up with her via email. After a long delay, she said that she'd decide upon reading the full paper. We declined.

In an era of stark contrasts between challenges and opportunities in the labour market, employability has resurfaced as a key concept in the hearts, minds, and sometimes strategies, of both postgraduate students and university leaders (Berg, Bowen, Smith, & Smith, 2017; Kinash et al., 2016; Kinash, Crane, Capper, Young,

& Stark, 2017; Kozar, & Lum, 2017; Walker, & Yoon, 2017; Willison, Sabir, & Thomas, 2017). Labour market challenges stem from government funding cuts, the Global Financial Crisis, economic downturns, digital disruptions and changing sector identities (Berg, Bowen, Smith, & Smith; Gore, et al., 2017; van Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset, & Beishuizen, 2017; Walker, & Yoon). Both of the PhD students described in the stories above viewed a PhD as an opportunity. The first student seemed unaware of the challenges, and his supervisor's apparent naivety would not have helped. While the second student was aware of the career challenges, she did not reach out and grasp the opportunity that was offered to her, to build her own employability and be the voice for others. We worry for both of these students, and others like them, that they will 'succumb in the battle' of the PhD, as they seem to know-not themselves, nor the career marketplace expectations, that can make the future feel like the 'enemy.'

These two postgraduate students, and all others, must be made aware that the higher education sector, like most other industries, has been affected by the changing labour market. People who seek PhDs as gateways to academic careers, face the casualization, and sometimes demoralisation, of the university workforce (Kinash, Crane, Capper, Young, & Stark, 2017; Lipton, 2017; McAlpine, & Åkerlind, 2010; McCarthy, Song, & Jayasuriya, 2017; Walker, & Yoon, 2017). Similar problems greet PhD graduates seeking to establish themselves and contribute leadership within other industries (Kearns, & Finn, 2017). It is a misnomer that postgraduate students are immune to labour force stressors and have their career paths all figured out; in the vast majority of instances, PhD students and graduates require coaching, mentoring, facilitated networks and supports (Kearns, & Finn; Kinash et al., 2016). In many cases, the career support strategies applied by their universities are inadequate (Kinash et al.). Furthermore, PhD students require employability and career perspectives and approaches to be embedded within curriculum, assessment and supervisory structures. In other words, in order to work, careers coaching and employability support needs to be present at the coalface of interactions between students, educators and supervisors (Jorre de St Jorre, & Oliver, 2018). Unfortunately, conversations with postgraduate students from across Australia indicate that this is not often the case (Crane et al., 2016).

While contemporary workforce conditions are challenging, they also provide the opportunity for innovation, co-creation and further collaboration among and between educators, students, employers and leaders across industries, including in higher education (Kunttu, 2017; Samuel, Donovan, & Lee, 2018; Schech, Kelton, Carati, & Kingsmill, 2017; Schilling, & Klamma, 2010). Overall career identity, knowing ourselves, and locating where we currently are in the process of becoming, are of utmost importance in the contemporary context (McCarthy, Song, & Jayasuriya, 2017). To navigate the workforce and lead future innovation and contribution - post PhD - it is imperative that graduates recognise the challenges that face them, whilst also having a clear understanding of their goals, knowledge, skills and attributes. PhD students require coaching and practice to articulate the strengths and limitations that shape their unique value propositions,

as graduates, so that they can take-on the challenges of building and leading the workforce and society more broadly.

The remainder of this chapter will provide practical recommendations on how to nurture postgraduate employability for the following audiences: (a) PhD students, who want academic careers, and (b) those who want careers beyond universities; (c) PhD supervisors; and (d) university executive leaders.

PhD students who want academic careers

"I would go anywhere where there's a permanent position. However, I've been told by the workforce that I'm unemployable. So I've spent 10 years perfecting a CV that's suited to academia, which essentially, I'm told that I can't even get a job answering phones with."

This is an illustrative quote from an interview with one of the postgraduate students in our national study. Hers was not an isolated perspective; it was articulated in different words by many students from many different universities. Their stories revealed two main scenarios, or pathways, of those doctoral students who were aspiring academics. Either they were working in industry with either a bachelor or master's degree and decided to return to university for a PhD, aiming to become an academic upon graduation, or they had worked as a casual or on short fixed-term contracts for many years, and thought that the PhD was the collateral they needed to achieve a continuing academic contract as a lecturer, and on a promotions pathway. There were many doctoral students who were becoming increasingly pessimistic about ever actualising that dream.

On the other hand, we also met doctoral graduates who had achieved their dream of becoming academics with continuing positions. There were three common denominators that appeared to sort who made it and who did not. First, the successful graduates had formed strong identities over the course of their degrees. They were able to articulate their distinctive value proposition and align them to the goals, aims and strategic priorities of the university. Second, they cracked-the-code on the higher education sector, and were thereby able to, third, take decisive and strategic action. They honed the skills that were required, formed the connections and networks they needed, and demonstrated their fit for higher education academe.

While there are nuanced differences between disciplines and universities, the key practical recommendations we gleaned for doctoral students, whose goal it is to become academics, are as follows.

1. If you can see it, you can be it. Identify an academic you look up to, and emulate their best qualities. Develop rapport with your mentors and actively seek their feedback and advice on how you can further develop in your chosen field.
2. Work hard. Be productive. Fulfil your promises. Avoid extensions and late reminders. *Show* your mentors and colleagues that you are dependable and committed to the sector and your role.

3. Write every piece of assessment, every document and every email as if it was being sent to the Vice Chancellor. Have a keen eye for attention to detail, be specific, clear and concise, and provide an evidence-base for your recommendations or hypothesis. By practicing from the outset, you can hone these skills for your future career as an academic.

4. Monitor what is happening on Twitter and LinkedIn. Like and write short, clear, supportive comments on inspirational and/or posts written by higher education leaders across the sector. This shows that your finger is on the pulse, that you support your higher education sector colleagues, and once again, your commitment to the sector.

5. Say 'Yes' to offers to collaborate with influential others and/or to take-on leadership positions, including as an authentic student partner. This will expand your networks and experience.

6. Co-author first-quartile journal papers with established and experienced academics, such as your supervisor. We have often heard the phrase, 'publish or perish.' The same phrase still rings true for those seeking to break-into, or remain, within academe.

This final recommendation requires further elaboration. First, what are *first quartile journals?* These are the journals that are assessed as being the most prestigious and influential in their fields and disciplines. The papers in these journals are frequently cited in subsequently published research. Submissions are rigorously peer-reviewed and many are rejected. This means that the papers (and therefore the research) must be of high quality to be accepted. To increase your chances of success, ensure that you are designing and reporting ethically-approved rigorous empirical research, where your propositions are well-supported with evidence. Seek to make a notable new contribution to the literature. The calibre of this research explains why it is recommended that you begin this journey by co-authoring with an experienced mentor.

The second question is why this recommendation is so specific, such that it advocates first quartile journal papers, as opposed to other types of publications such as conference papers and book chapters. While these other types of publications are important, and you should author them (in the future), it is first quartile journal publications that will help you break-into academia. While all universities rank research publications, some make this tiering more formal and transparent than others (such as by awarding authors of these publications with funding to attend conferences or hire research assistants). An influential criterion for international university rankings is the number of first quartile journal papers, and universities therefore reward this output from academics. Therefore, having already published these journal papers, in your discipline area, will make you a desirable (and safe-bet) asset to the sector.

PhD students who want careers beyond the university

"You start to panic a little bit. I am starting to get to that stage now when even a few classmates are getting job offers already and you are - 'I don't even know anyone yet."

While the ultimate career dream of many of the doctoral students we met was to become academics, others had entirely different goals. For those postgraduate students who have aspirations beyond the higher education sector, we offer five key recommendations to consider.

1. Go beyond the specificity of your thesis topic, to achieve depth of knowledge across a broad scope of your discipline. You should be able to talk about (in an informed manner) your discipline, to the extent that you would be a welcome participant on an industry panel or Q&A-type newscast.
2. Develop the skills that come into play in your chosen industry. While writing journal papers is a necessary skill for future academics, writing short succinct reports may be a wiser skill to develop for your future career. You may choose to write a public blog (or other such social media establishing your public profile and footprint) throughout your postgraduate studies, and/or undertake internships or placements in which you are developing and enhancing these skills.
3. Take up every opportunity to expand your network. Attend networking and alumni events, and connect with industry professionals on LinkedIn. Use your postgraduate studies as a key opportunity to expand your professional network by arranging information and/or research interviews.
4. Identify the companies that you want to work with. What is it about that company that makes you want to work for them? Do your research, and start making connections with those companies.
5. Refine your 'elevator pitch' or, in other words, your distinctive value proposition. Personal merchandising, including descriptive professional business cards are key tools for promoting yourself. They will come in handy for when you attend networking events or when you are being interviewed for that coveted position.

PhD academic supervisors

"You look at them and they've all got bags under their eyes and they all look as if they are on the verge of a nervous breakdown at any time. This is hideous. I don't want to live like that."

The role of academic supervisors in shaping and informing the journey for PhD students, cannot be underestimated. When conducting interviews and focus groups with 319 postgraduate students across Australia, time and time again their depictions regarding the quality of the student experience focussed on their engagement, or lack thereof, with their supervisors. Whilst the discipline

knowledge and expertise of academic supervisors is of extreme importance, equally too is their ability to mentor, coach and inspire their PhD students. Postgraduate students discussed instances of being disillusioned with the higher education sector, as an employer, due to the depictions offered by their supervisors. Supervisors stand at the coalface of the postgraduate student experience, and are responsible for equipping postgraduate students – our future leaders – with the requisite skills and dispositions required to positively contribute to our society. Given this immense responsibility, we offer four key recommendations for PhD academic supervisors.

1. Take the time to support and mentor aspiring postgraduate students. Identify the value that they bring to enhancing your own practice and celebrate their accomplishments. Avoid complaining about university management and your workload. Not only have your postgraduate students chosen you as a supervisor because of your depth of discipline knowledge and expertise, but also because they look up to you. Share your keys to success with your postgraduate students and support them in their career journey through guiding them through the process of developing their distinct value propositions.
2. Connect your PhD students. Empower them, and introduce them to influential thought leaders and/or prospective employers in their field, discipline and/or industry. Most students still need to 'break into' academe and/or industries beyond the university, and you can help them to take the first steps and develop the networks that will be vital for their successes beyond the program.
3. Encourage PhD students, with aspirations to become future academics, to co-design rigorous ethically-approved research with you, and co-author the papers with them. Design these papers to be accepted by first quartile journals.
4. Provide personalised coaching and advice to your PhD students. For example, students may be encouraged, by others, to accept casual or contracted tutoring and other teaching assignments. They will need your advice as to whether this is likely to pigeon-hole them as forever-casuals, and therefore, that they are better to wait for a post-doctorate after their studies, or whether this experience will set them on the desired path.

University executive leaders

"I've had to make my own opportunities. There essentially was no career development that takes you from your degree into academia."

University executive leaders have the ability to effect change. However, this can at times by stymied by institutional constraints, ranging from: lack of budget for staffing outside of typical business hours; the time taken to effect change through Committees; or constraints with technology, to name but a few. Based upon the recommendations proposed by postgraduate students in our national

study, we offer eight key practical recommendations for university executive leaders to consider in order to enhance postgraduate student employability.

1. Lead the future of the higher education sector by designing a formal initiative to mentor future academics and to bridge the transition from postgraduate to academic.
2. Create an Employability and Transitions Policy that includes distinct and targeted postgraduate enactment strategies.
3. Design and enact a postgraduate student/graduate digital identity initiative, enabling future leaders to establish an online profile and digital footprint.
4. Set PhD students up for success. Provide the infrastructure to allow postgraduate students to thrive in a challenging environment. This may include providing career supports and mentoring that are specifically contextualised for postgraduate students.
5. Implement a Students as Partners initiative, which is particularly focused on catalysing work experiences for international postgraduates.
6. Seek funding for post-doctorates for aspiring academics.
7. Extend access to University Career Centre personnel and resources to a life-time membership for postgraduates.
8. Provide flexible offerings and services for postgraduate students. The postgraduate student cohort is diverse, with a range of commitments (family, work, the list goes on). In our study, postgraduate students made recommendations for library, career or support services to be open in the early evenings so that they could access these vital resources after work. Other postgraduate students requested that curricular content and assessment be made readily available online, or classes scheduled at night time, to fit in with their busy lives.

Conclusion

This chapter was contextualised through a range of illustrative quotes by postgraduate students from our national study. Key recommendations were proposed to (a) PhD students, who want academic careers, and (b) those who want careers beyond universities; (c) PhD supervisors; and (d) university executive leaders. In this chapter, we propose that identity, industry awareness and strategic action are the 'weapons of choice' for postgraduate students. These 'weapons' will enable postgraduate students to succeed within their postgraduate studies and beyond. If you look at any industry list of transferable skills, you will note that career identity holds a key place. The same holds true for postgraduate students. One cannot underestimate the value of developing a clear sense of one's self, one's impact to the chosen workforce and to society more generally (i.e. one's unique value proposition). Thus, without a clear sense of self, "you will succumb" in the face of battle. Instead, lead the troops forward towards success.

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