

University Careers Beyond Research

While you would generally expect to find PhDs in research positions, a few minutes spent looking at the titles of staff working outside research-focused departments will illustrate the variety of roles in which PhDs are employed throughout higher education institutions. A university's primary objective may be the advancement of knowledge but to do this it needs a professional administration team taking responsibility for aspects such as academic planning, media communications, student support and guidance, corporate relationships, commercial ventures, learning support and IT.

Researchers sometimes choose to stay within the academic community but to move on from research. There are many reasons for this. Some find that their original interest in their subject area is lessening, while others wish to influence the work of higher education at a different level. In considering other career options, many find that the familiar university environment suits them in a way that the business world might not, and that the opportunity to provide support to students and academics and contribute to the development of higher education is very appealing.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

There are very good reasons for PhDs to want to stay in universities, and for institutions to want to retain them. A PhD buys important credibility within a university. This means that you can serve a very useful role as someone able to understand an academic's approach, while acting as a bridge between them, other support departments, and the outside world.

While your research background may not be directly relevant to an administrative or managerial position, the broader skills that you have developed will certainly be useful. You've developed the ability to analyse problems and to synthesise a large volume of information. Since research is often a fairly autonomous role you're also likely to be able to work independently with less management than others. Other transferable skills include:

- the ability to organise yourself and others, gained from keeping your own research on track and ensuring that others are informed of your progress
- experience of managing and motivating people, such as running a tutorial group or supervising an individual student
- teamwork, gained from organising department events and participating in departmental meetings
- leadership skills, gained from organising departmental events and making decisions on behalf of others.

For further help identifying your transferable skills, speak with a careers adviser at your university careers service.

WHAT DOES THE WORK INVOLVE?

While 'administration' is the term used to describe the work of most departments outside research, this word doesn't really do justice to the level and variety of the work and responsibility involved, including the potential participation in senior management and decision-making. As you progress you are likely to contribute increasingly to strategic planning, requiring an in-depth knowledge of the way universities work and the business aspects of higher education. This means understanding the clients that the university serves (students, parents, employers, and commercial partners), the ways in which it is funded, and how its resources are managed.

There are over a hundred higher education institutions in the UK, and no two have the same administrative structure. Roles vary considerably between one institution and another, but a selection of the areas in which administrators are likely to find themselves employed might include:

- **Academic Services:** this area involves extensive committee work, planning and interpreting course regulations, developing the curriculum, quality assurance and dealing with complex issues related to both undergraduates and postgraduates.
- **Admissions:** admissions includes student recruitment and planning admissions procedures.
- **PR and Marketing:** this area is concerned with the way the university is viewed by the outside world, and provides a point of liaison between academics and the media.
- **International Office:** this office supports the recruitment and induction of international students into the university.
- **Student Welfare:** the welfare office co-ordinates all aspects of welfare provision in the college, including development of the various support services such as the health service and counselling service.
- **Development and Alumni Relations:** this office develops relationships with the university's external partners, including alumni, and encourages financial giving.
- **Careers Service:** the careers service helps undergraduate and postgraduate students, researchers and staff to understand and develop their career opportunities.
- **Library Services:** libraries manage the many collections and information services, including electronic databases. They provide support to students, academics and other researchers and assistance with training in information-retrieval skills.
- **Information Systems:** this area provides support to all aspects of learning, research and teaching, including IT support and training and developing new information systems.

- **Estates and Facilities:** the estates division has responsibility for developing, maintaining and adapting the university's physical environment.
- **Registry:** registry staff are involved in liaison with schools and colleges, international marketing, recruitment, production of prospectuses and other publications, widening participation and disability support.
- **Finance Division:** finance takes responsibility for managing the university's accounts and financial systems, plans budgets and projections and monitors departmental resources. It also advises on all applications to research councils and other funding trusts.

The Association of University Administrators publishes a useful online factsheet about different roles within higher education (www.aua.ac.uk/publications/careersinhe/factsheet.aspx). They also offer a certificate in Higher Education Administration and Management (www.aua.ac.uk/pgcert). See also the educational administrator profile on the Prospects website (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/EduAdmin).

PERSPECTIVES OF PHDS WORKING OUTSIDE OF RESEARCH

'I certainly don't regret the move that I have made. My new career matches the key things I was looking for in a job; the ability to mentor and support others, constant learning and new challenges, achievable goals and long term stability. I also have a much clearer career path ahead of me, and regular training and appraisal means that I feel fully supported in my own personal development. If I had known such a job existed in the past I would have made the leap earlier!'

PhD, Careers Service

'My job as Outreach Officer involves designing and planning activities and resources to raise aspirations and attainment of pre-university students, particularly in relation to science subjects. As a result, I get to work with a variety of staff at all levels within both the university, and schools and colleges and need to keep up-to-date with new discoveries not only in science, but changes across the education sectors. I find my job both intellectually demanding and very rewarding and have received great support from staff here; I know I made the right decision.'

PhD, Educational Outreach

'My job involves bringing academics and journalists together. It helps to have been both an academic and a journalist, as it means I understand the concerns and needs of each. Contrary to what academics often think, my aim is not to 'spin' their work, but to protect them - and the primary aim is always for their research to be published and promoted in the best possible way. My job allows me to have a broader picture of research, rather than focusing simply on my own field, and because I'm comfortable reading scientific papers I can judge their potential interest to a journalist. There are useful details that as a PhD you're aware of too, but which a journalist wouldn't necessarily know - such as which name on a paper to contact. While I was a researcher I published two papers of my own, so I also know how the publication process works. The British Association runs Media Fellowships which offer placements for scientists to gain media skills and return with these to academia - this is how I started out.'

PhD, Press Office

'I haven't looked back. I love the academic environment and am lucky that my job involves interaction with a variety of staff at all levels - networking is a big part of my role. I am now responsible for supporting e-learning as well as IT training, and find that my previous experience in an academic role is a great help. I sometimes wonder what life working in the 'real world' would be like, but I hear enough from friends in the private and public sectors to be grateful for the stimulating, supportive, creative environment that the university provides. Of course there are some major challenges, but I wouldn't want a job that didn't challenge me.'

PhD, Information Systems

'Early on in my PhD at King's College London I was invited to undertake some undergraduate tutorials and realised how difficult it is to balance research with teaching and related administrative duties. I moved into academic librarianship and progressed to a management role, having undertaken a professional qualification at UCL. Now I know that academic library management presents its own abiding challenges and headaches but I am never tempted to work in the private sector. Working in a university where there is always a lively atmosphere and mix of enthusiastic teaching, learning and research, across such a broad spectrum of disciplines, is hugely interesting and rewarding. My PhD allows me to sympathise with and to understand the academic case for ideas, services and new approaches to the support and facilitation of advanced learning and research.'

PhD, Library Services

'I know and love the sector and the quest for knowledge and collegiate feel which characterise it. It's also meant I've been able to keep a foot in the research door as I'm still occasionally used as a consultant. People in higher education administration are good to work with and in my case I currently work with the most supportive, professional team I've ever seen. I also get much more of an overview of the work that goes on, interact with many more people than I did in research, and there are a wider range of opportunities than within my narrow research field. As an ex-academic/researcher I get satisfaction from knowing both sides of the academic/support boundary and trying to support each in understanding the other.'

PhD, Staff Development and Training

FURTHER INFORMATION

- www.aua.ac.uk The Association of University Administrators is the professional body for HE managers and administrators
- www.prospects.ac.uk/links/EduAdmin information on working as a university administrator
- www.jobs.ac.uk a website advertising all levels of university jobs

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