



The Geographical Society of NSW

An overview of the Postgraduate Networking Event 2016

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On Monday 11th April, the Geographical Society of New South Wales hosted an Academic Q&A for Postgraduate geography students and ECRs. The panel consisted of Professor Noel Castree, Professor Pauline McGuirk, Professor Phil McManus and Dr Danielle Drozdowski.

Over 40 students from various NSW universities attended. As well as a great turn out on the day, the event also sparked the interest of several other academics who joined in the conversation via twitter. **The discussion was focused on three main topics: publishing, life after the PhD and the future of geography in academia.**

We jotted down some notes during the Q&A and have compiled these thematically into our **top tips for postgrad students**. Hope you enjoy! If you'd like to share any thoughts and continue this PhD chat, tweet us using the hashtag #postgradQ&A16 @GeogSocNSW

1. Publishing

Negotiating co-authorship:

- Have the conversation about co-authorship before you start the writing process. It is important to be open and honest and to make expectations clear.
- It is also important to think about the practice of co-authorship that will work best for you and your colleagues/supervisors. Given we all have different writing styles, there are different ways to work collaboratively i.e. full draft by one person etc.
- As a student, don't assume that co-authorship is the norm – it depends on where the ideas come from and how involved your supervisor has been.
- Co-author or not, it is always important to acknowledge those who have helped you. More than just contributing to writing the paper, our supervisors often provide education about how to write and where to submit etc.
- If you are doing your thesis by publication, find out early the requirements as to which papers will count for your thesis.

Developing a publication strategy:

- It is a competitive game and it takes time to write, so each publication is important. Therefore you want to receive the maximum value from each publication – think about the most visible, established and well-recognised place to publish your work and aim for this.



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- Think early about what kind of publications you want to write and which you should submit first and which you should hold back on.
- When thinking about a publication plan, think about what you want to do after your PhD and which audience you want to engage with. This will guide where you publish and this is part of the conversation you should have with your supervisor early on.
- Early in your candidature think about how your publications can work for you in terms of networking with the right kind of contacts and which conferences you might like to go to.
- Have a realistic plan and adjust accordingly as good opportunities come up.

Publishing a book vs. papers from your thesis:

- You are going to need publications to get a job, if all your eggs are in the book basket, this can take time. You may need to have a couple of other publications to get the job before working on the book.
- Publishing a couple of papers from your thesis doesn't rule out the potential to publish a book.
- Be careful with book chapters/theme issues from conferences as the slowest person holds you up.

Differences between thesis chapters and publications:

- Your thesis is a starting point for information and there are very different writing strategies when writing papers/books.
- It is difficult to take a section out of the story. You need to think about what parts are most important and relevant to making the point you want to make in the paper. Choose this wisely and you can utilise your PhD for publications for years down the line.

2. Life after the PhD

The thesis whisperer has described the “new normal academic” as someone who “has done a decade or so of adjunct teaching work, and/or a rag tag bunch of jobs that last anywhere from a week to three years...what we are starting to call the ‘post-post-post doc’ or the ‘portfolio career track’”. With this becoming more and more common, many attendees of our postgrad Q&A expressed feeling uncomfortable with this uncertainty and in particular, worried that if they left academia that they wouldn't be able to get back in.

We asked our panel to provide some survival advice for early career academics that are entering (or trying to enter) a system that offers little in the way of job security.

Firstly, the hard truth:

- There are a limited number of jobs and not enough academic positions for all graduates.
- Women's careers are impacted more than men's.
- Funding is very difficult and very competitive.



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Our panel's tips for negotiating this:

- You need to be available and highly mobile. In Australia we are centred on a few cities so you need to be open to looking internationally too.
- Where possible, go to conferences and events so people recognise who you are. You need to be out there and to be seen (Extra tip: The Geographical Society of NSW offers a scholarship for people post-PhD to go to conferences! For more information, go to our website www.geogsoc.org.au).
- Start thinking about your options early (within the first 18 months of your PhD) and think about whether you wish to stay in academia. It is good to discuss this possibility with your supervisor(s) or mentor(s).
- Some positions will require both teaching and research. There is only so much tutoring you need to do in order to show you can teach, but other opportunities such as lecturing or co-coordination will look great on your CV (however likely you will need to have done a sufficient amount of tutoring to be offered these opportunities). It is also important to be conscious of managing the amount of teaching and RA work you do. It is fine to work whilst doing your PhD, but you need to get the balance right to get your own research moving.
- You may need to spend a year doing RA work and getting more out of your PhD. It is possible to do RA work from a distance these days so this may open up extra avenues for you. Be careful with RA work post-PhD though, if you get stuck in this position long term it becomes a question as to whether you can stand on your own two feet and if you have your own agenda.
- If you want to be in academia – stick with it, you need to build up a track record and will be in a stronger position than most rather than leaving. As soon as you step out of academia, someone else will step in. As frustrating as contracts are, you show people you've done the hard yards and this work will help provide visibility.
- If you or your supervisor has an idea for a project, a supervisor with a good reputation for funding may be able to work with you on an application.
- Carve out time to write. One of the biggest difficulties with working across multiple contracts, places and even institutions is that whilst you may get lots of exposure, you have no time to write for yourself (even though you may be writing new material for other people all the time!). It is important to be conscious of this and to make time to write. At the end of the day, in order to get an interview it will come down to publications.
- Have your CV up to date and remember it is important to have a balanced CV (including PhD, RA, teaching etc.)
- If a good job opportunity comes up while you are in the final writing stages, don't feel bad about taking a couple of weeks off to apply for something – you may even find you enjoy the break to work on something else and stay fresher during the write up.
- If you have an idea for a project and are yet to land a post-doc or secure funding through a supervisor to employ you, think about what things you can start doing without funding. Can you scaffold out an idea and show you have already been working towards making it happen? e.g. There are publications



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you can get which don't involve going out into the field, such as a theoretical paper or a review paper.

- If the topic/idea doesn't need to be addressed now then maybe sit on the idea. If you do need to strike while a topic is hot, have a conversation with someone in the department so it appeals to them in terms of publications/funding opportunities.
- Get yourself a research mentor! Contact someone and realise you may need someone to help you make decisions relating to publication strategies, career steps, PhD student issues, good opportunities and how much work to do etc. It is good to sometimes step out from your supervisor and ask someone you admire the work of, or have seen at conferences to be your research mentor.

3. The future of Geography in Academia

Following on from our conversations about life after the PhD, it's clear that if you want to stay in academia you need to put in a lot of hard work. This doesn't stop and many of us see our supervisors working really really hard and wonder if we want to live like that. While our panellists acknowledged that it can be very difficult at times (particularly at the start and also when having children, for example), they also provided positivity in response to this and reminded us all why it is we do what we do:

- We are all here because we love what we do and are passionate about the topics and contributions we make.
- To stick in academia, you have to be passionate about it and enjoy turning up to the workplace. The perks are that it does provide enough to live a comfortable life and there is a high degree of autonomy (you still get to choose what research you do) which you don't see in other fields. This also provides options to not work on weekends and to have boundaries and manage your work around your life and family in a way which works for you.
- You get to be inspired by other people and you get to help and inspire others and share your opinion.
- It is important not to create the impression that the sector needs repair – different institutions have different practices about how they manage this.

The panellists also discussed 'work-life balance' and reminded us that working 7 days a week isn't necessarily working smarter. Their tips:

- If you do work weekends make sure it is something you really want to do, not just the backlog of what you didn't finish the week before.
- Enjoy time with friends and family outside of academia – and make sure you do an activity that doesn't revolve around your workplace.
- Use the benefits such as holidays and long service leave – it is there for a reason.



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This conversation connects to the idea of positive trends in academia. And panellists shared insights into the day-to-day practises we can engage in as academics which work against the university – talking about strategies for reshaping academic from the ground up and promoting slow scholarship:

- Work collaboratively in ways that aren't going to be counted but matter in a way which matters as beings. Get together with colleagues and talk about what worked for you and what didn't.
- For senior academics in a position of leadership – practice and model work-life balance in your own small way. E.g. don't send an email on a Saturday night if it doesn't need to be sent until Monday morning. Practice 'in here' activism – there needs to be good leadership in the school.
- It can be difficult to let go of the fact that someone is always going to be working harder than you (or appear to be working harder...) – create a space for yourself where you say I am not going to do that now.
- Good learning, teaching and research take time. A paper recently published on slow scholarship contributes to making a voice for the fact that good things come when you actually take the time to do them. Find examples of activism in here and agitate it when you can.

We concluded our discussion on the topic of impact. Who defines this? And how do we compare impact in terms of academic outputs (i.e. publications) and doing something which helps someone (e.g. meaningful impact of the work done in a village)? Will our systems move beyond publications to give credentials to people who are influencing society in diverse ways?

- The UK context provides a positive example of the government recognising the impact of research outside of the university. Researchers are encouraged to create impact and conduct research which is having a tangible impact on the world and this change is likely to be captured wider in time.
- The educational role of what we do is also important and impactful. For some of us the biggest impact we have is through the way we teach and what we share.
- You may never know your impact on others. By being a role model, being consistent and working with integrity you will make an impact.