

## Is there anything I can do? How individual academics can make a difference

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Our PhD students are graduating into a world with no place for them. This is a problem for us all – as John Marincola rightly points out in choosing to devote his Presidential Panel to this topic, it is one of the most serious threats that we as a profession face. The latest figures suggest that only 20% of recent PhDs will *ever* secure tenure-track academic jobs.<sup>1</sup> That is, out of every five people who get a PhD this year, only one will end up in a tenure-track job; the other four will either leave academia or end up in insecure employment. And that insecure employment is pretty bad: over 33,000 PhDs in the US are on food stamps, and many of those have some sort of academic “job”.<sup>2</sup>

Competition in the academic job market is not always a bad thing, for there are people who despite earning a PhD are not really suited to an academic career. Some selectivity is good for the overall standard of the profession. But “some selectivity” is not what we have right now, when the majority of PhDs do not find tenure-track jobs. Our PhD students work hard to learn the profession, and we work hard to teach them. No doubt unsuitable people slip through occasionally – but *no way* is it the case that 80% of the people we give PhDs to are not good enough to be academics. So large numbers of perfectly good graduates, people who ought to get tenure-track jobs, people whose talent and dedication and extensive knowledge are sadly wasted if they cannot teach and do research, are not getting those jobs.

To make matters worse, the PhDs who do get the tenure-track jobs are not necessarily the best 20%. Of course, they are not the worst 20% either: merit plays a large part in the hiring process, and without question the average academic quality of the candidates who end up with jobs is higher than that of the candidates who end up without them. But there is also a significant luck factor involved, because most jobs ask for a fairly specific specialty. When students are choosing their dissertation topics there is no way they can know that five years or so down the line there will be a big demand for Greek history and none for Latin poetry, or vice versa. So sometimes people are lucky and land a job even though they are not one of the very best, and rather more often people are unlucky and do not land a job even though they are – and this is true regardless of exactly how you define “best.”

It is these unlucky people whose fate ought to worry us the most, the ones who are intelligent, hard working, and well trained and who deserve to be employed in the profession – people who would in fact be employed if the jobs on offer in a crucial year had happened to have slightly different specifications. For the effect of the situation on them is dreadful. These are people who have spent their entire lives in an education system that rewards merit, one in which, if you work hard and are good, you can count on moving up to the next level. That reliable progression has been their entire experience since they were five years old. But now, suddenly, they do not move up. So they assume they are not good enough or not working hard enough: they blame themselves, and they try to improve. But nothing they can do will fix the problem, because the odds against them are too great. So they just keep on

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<sup>1</sup> Sources: two separate calculations that give the same results, one at <http://www.economist.com/node/17723223> and one at <https://hortensii.wordpress.com/2015/01/01/some-hard-numbers/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://chronicle.com/article/From-Graduate-School-to/131795/>.

blaming themselves and trying to fix where they have gone wrong, a process that is completely soul-destroying.

When we look at these poor people, what strikes us first is their practical problems, above all their tiny incomes. But if you ask the job hunters themselves<sup>3</sup> what the worst aspect of their position is, money is not what they point to. Nor is any other practicality. What is worst, they say, is the psychological pressure: humiliation, despair, the sense of failure, the feeling that it is all their own fault. The scorn from their families when they cannot find work after all that expensive education, the feeling that they made a terrible mistake and the effort they put into the PhD has been wasted.

When we focus on the practical problems we may even make these psychological problems worse, by helping the victims of the job crisis blame themselves. Trying to be helpful, we suggest that if they could manage to get a few more publications, or more teaching experience, or if they were more willing to move their families to unattractive places, they would do better. But very often they will not do better no matter what sacrifices they make, because the odds against them are so enormous.

Is there anything we can do that would actually make a positive difference? The results of our study suggest that there is, but before discussing the genuinely positive steps that could be taken it is worth looking at a few ideas that look as if they would help but would not in fact do so.

1) Reducing the number of PhD places in particular departments, or even in a whole country, will not solve the problem – not even if all US PhD programs were to close down entirely. Universities now operate in a global market, both for jobs and for PhD study. So if there are good American students who want to do a PhD and are not offered places in the US, they will head over to Europe, where plenty of universities will be more than happy to accept them. Those European universities will train the students, give them PhDs, and send them back to the US job market – and there is *no limit* to the number of students they can take. Therefore any self-sacrifice here on the part of US departments is completely pointless.

2) Providing various kinds of training to make PhDs more desirable academic job candidates may help the particular people who receive that training, but it cannot change the overall problem: all it can do is change who is in the lucky 20%. Moreover, if anyone comes up with a particular kind of training that really does increase candidates' success rates significantly, within a few years everyone else will be doing it too; at that point the people with that training will outnumber the available jobs so much that their chances of success will plummet again. Therefore investments in academic training are useless as a way of solving the overall problem and largely useless even as a way of helping one's own students.

What would actually help? This is the main question that my study tried to answer. We started by asking academics – both those with permanent jobs and those without – to give us ideas, and then we asked academics to rate and comment on all the ideas received. Finally, those responses were analyzed by a high-powered team to produce a set of recommendations. There are actually rather a lot of things one could do, and the full set of recommendations is

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<sup>3</sup> The results reported here are based on a survey conducted in April 2014; there were 152 responses (not all of which addressed this particular question). For more detail on the respondents, the questions asked, and the answers, see <https://hortensii.wordpress.com/full-report/>, particularly section 2 (the last 25% of that document).

posted on our web site, at <https://hortensii.wordpress.com/what-to-do-and-why/>. Here are the highlights.<sup>4</sup>

Above all, it would help to give students better information about the high risk of unemployment associated with doing a PhD, and in particular to give undergraduates better information before they decide to do graduate work, since once people have invested a substantial amount of time and energy in a PhD it is a bit late to find out the facts. Most of the respondents to our survey told us that when they were graduate students, they were sure they would get a tenure-track job. This was particularly true of respondents in the US, where 94% of respondents had expected a tenure-track job, and especially at non-Ivy-League institutions in the US: 100% of the respondents who did their PhDs at non-Ivy-League US universities had assumed they would end up in a tenure-track job. This is really not right: our students deserve to know the truth about the risks they are taking if they go to graduate school. Of course it is hard to tell them that truth, because we hope our best students will go on and become Classicists, like us. It is a great feeling when people you taught pass on what you taught them to another generation, like having grandchildren. But just as you would not want to have grandchildren at the cost of extreme hardship for your own children, surely you would not want your best undergraduate students to end up agonizingly miserable because you did not warn them about the risks of doing a PhD?

Of course, many people *do* warn applicants, and they would no doubt say that the problem is mainly that students do not listen. There is some truth in that point – for example my supervisor warned me, and I did not listen. But one reason students do not listen is that we have mastered the art of delivering the warning in a way that encourages them not to listen. We tend to tell people that it is very difficult, that there are very few jobs, and that you have to be very good to get one. But we do not say that 80% of PhDs do not get tenure-track jobs, that the strict meritocracy of academia ends when one hits the job market, and that the market is so tight that *no matter how good you are* you may not find a job. If we did say that, more students would listen.

So the first thing we could do that would be genuinely helpful would be to tell undergraduates the truth about the risks of the PhD. This would reduce the number of PhDs produced far more effectively than cutting PhD places could do, but that consideration is not the only point in favor of telling students the truth. Our results suggest that providing information about the academic job situation would not reduce PhD numbers enough to solve the jobs problem by itself, and that is perhaps no bad thing, for the respondents to our survey agreed that doing the PhD had a considerable value of its own; most of them did not regret it despite their sufferings since. The main benefit of (successfully) informing students of the jobs situation an early stage will be that they approach PhD study without assuming that an academic job will necessarily follow. This will increase the chances that they have other plans for their futures and implement these soon after graduation, rather than spending years being demoralized by the brutal reality of the situation first.

Another helpful thing we could do is to make it easy for people to leave partway through a PhD course. Often it is not clear at the start of graduate work how good someone will be, but after a few years it may be painfully evident that certain individuals will stand virtually no chance of obtaining a job – because even if meritocracy does not fully apply in the job market, it applies enough to guarantee that people below a certain level will not get jobs. If those people wish to complete the PhD for its own sake, that is great; there is no reason to throw

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<sup>4</sup> This selection of highlights has an American perspective, in keeping with the original audience of this paper. The situation in Europe is somewhat different (see the full report for details).

them out as long as they can meet the requirements of the degree itself. But if they would rather quit, we should make that easy for them. Of course, we like to get our students through their degrees, and if someone who starts a PhD program does not stick it out to the end we tend to feel that both we and they have failed, but we could change the definition of failure there. We could simply give them a master's degree (a second master's degree if they already have one), wish them well in their new lives, and be pleased that the future pressure on the academic job market has been reduced by one person.

Our students crave our approval. Academia selects for that: the ones who do not care what their teachers think do not usually get into graduate school in the first place. So we need to be careful about the subtle ways we can influence their decision making about their own lives – and that means making it clear to students that they will not lose our approval by leaving academia. If they say they want to go teach in a school, or work for a publisher, or whatever, it is important that we not sound disappointed. When we are confronted with the departure of a carefully-nourished protégé it is almost instinctive to say, “But your work is so *good!* You have a real contribution to make – it will be such a pity if you don't share that with the world!” We mean it, and we mean it kindly. But it is not kind; it is cruel. Because what is academia going to give that poor student in exchange for the contribution that he or she will make to it? A life of humiliation on food stamps?

The same applies once students have actually got the PhD. If they decide to give up the job hunt and leave academia, let's be encouraging. Let us refrain from lamenting the fact that we personally are losing followers in our world – instead let us think about the way that we are gaining contacts in other worlds. There is no need for such a rigid barrier between academia and the outside world: let's keep in touch with the PhDs who leave the field, and make it clear that we value what they do. Let's invite them back to give talks to our current PhD students about what you can do with a PhD besides be a Classicist.

One thing that keeps PhDs on the job market, fruitless year after fruitless year, is fear of leaving their community, the only world they have ever known, and ignorance about what lies outside. Let's make the boundary between our community and the people outside more permeable, so people feel supported in exploring non-academic options, and so that they do not feel rejected if they leave.

Another factor chaining PhDs to the academic job market is inability to get a non-academic job.<sup>5</sup> In part this arises from the sad fact that a PhD is viewed unfavourably by many non-academic employers; indeed in many Arts subjects a PhD gives a ‘negative earnings premium’, meaning that on average, graduates with PhDs in those fields earn less than those with only BAs.<sup>6</sup> But in part the problem arises from the fact that many PhDs do not know how to market themselves to the non-academic world, and of course we academics are usually unable to help with such marketing. More and more universities are therefore offering their graduate students training in non-academic job search skills, and this initiative is a valuable one: unlike investment in academic job search skills, investment in this area *could* actually make a significant difference both to that university's own students and to the overall problem of unemployed PhDs.

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<sup>5</sup> This section was cut from the orally-delivered talk owing to time constraints, but I reinstate it here because it is important.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.economist.com/node/17723223>; unfortunately the study reported there does not break down results by discipline in a way that would make it possible to tell whether Classics is one of the fields with a negative earnings premium, but it does make clear that the Classics PhD earnings premium is not significantly positive.

But there is a catch, for many PhD students do not want to focus on learning such skills: they want an academic job, not a non-academic one, and quite reasonably insist on concentrating their energies on work could lead to their preferred goal. Diverting significant amounts of students' time and energy to improving their non-academic employability is not in a university's interests, either, as it inevitably reduces both the students' academic employability (or prolongs their PhDs) and the attractiveness of that PhD program to confident, optimistic applicants. These factors often prevent universities from offering very much in the way of non-academic employment preparation.

The solution, clearly, is to offer such help to PhDs *when they want it*, rather than as a hoop to be jumped through. Realistically, many PhDs only discover that they need help finding a non-academic job once they have finished the PhD and learned the hard way about the academic job market. Yet often the same universities that tried to force these PhDs to spend time training for non-academic employment at a point when they were uninterested in it will deny them the chance to participate in such training after they have graduated. This is wrong: the time to give a person information is when that person is receptive to that information. So it is important that programs aimed at enhancing non-academic employability be available, but optional, for alumni as well as current students. (And, of course, in order to be effective such programs need to be targeted specifically at PhDs, who have very different strengths and weaknesses compared to graduates with only a BA.)

Professional associations like the SCS have a special role to play here. We are uniquely qualified to understand what the strengths and skills of Classics PhDs are, and we have an interest in ensuring that the people with those strengths and skills are able to use them productively, whether within academia or outside it. For a relatively small cost we could offer all Classics PhDs professional help and support in entering the non-academic job market. Doing so would reduce the burden on small Classics programs, who cannot possibly offer support targeted to PhDs, and would increase the number of Classicists who move into happy, fulfilling non-academic careers rather than into deprivation and misery. This could be good for the SCS as well as for the Classicists concerned, for the Classicists with the happy non-academic careers might be well disposed to the profession that had helped them in this way, and might have the financial ability to act on those positive feelings in a way that, frankly, academics very rarely can.

To return to the problems within academia, the sheer number of desperate jobseekers causes problems not just for the jobseekers themselves, but for academia as a whole. There is no academic job so awful that no-one applies for it, because people are desperate for teaching experience for their CVs. And that drives down working conditions for everyone. This is the law of supply and demand: when supply exceeds demand, the product becomes cheaper. And cheaper and cheaper and cheaper, until supply and demand equalize: in the long run, the only solution to the erosion of academic working conditions is to reduce the supply of job applicants. That will happen naturally, I think, if we are honest with our students about that figure of 20% survival and make it easy for them to leave academia. But reduction of the oversupply is the long-term solution; in the short term we have to live with its consequences.

What that means, I think, is that it is vital to improve the way non-tenure-track faculty are treated. They do not deserve what has happened to them, and it is not their fault. We might have been in their position if we had had bad luck. Of course, we tell ourselves that we are usually better scholars than they are, and often that is true. For example, we usually publish more, and our publications are often better. But isn't that partly because we have lighter teaching loads, not to mention sabbaticals, and we do not have to move to new jobs every few years, or to work multiple jobs at once and spend hours per day commuting? The difference between a person with a full-time permanent academic job and one subsisting on

temporary posts is like the difference between a funded and an unfunded graduate student: at the start the funded student is a little bit better than the unfunded one, which is why he or she got the funding. But after five years of graduate work the funded student is often a great deal better, because he or she has not been obliged to hold down an outside job while studying. The difference is real, and it is permanent, but it is not simply the fault of the less successful person.

So let us make sure that we treat adjunct faculty like colleagues. Let's give them e-mail addresses, put their names on the departmental web site, give them office space, and put their names on the door of their offices. Let's take care not to undermine them with their students or otherwise make their lives harder than they already are. Let's invite the adjuncts to department parties, encourage them to give talks in the research seminar series, and make them feel genuinely valued and included – in fact, let's act on the suggestions produced by Toph Marshall and Stephanie Budin.<sup>7</sup> Maybe we cannot do anything about the fact that they have no job security and are paid significantly less than the minimum wage when preparation time is factored in. But that is no excuse for not changing the things that we as their colleagues can actually change.

Individuals often feel helpless when confronted with huge problems like the academic jobs crisis, a problem far larger than our subject, our university, or even our country. It makes us think there is nothing we can do and therefore no point in trying. But as they say in the environmental movement, “think globally, act locally”. If we have the will to change things, we can do it, purely as individuals. Let's do it!

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<http://www.reading.ac.uk/classics/about/staff/e-dickey.aspx>

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<sup>7</sup> Other papers in the same panel; Toph's can be read at [https://www.academia.edu/20197432/35\\_Things\\_-\\_improving\\_conditions\\_for\\_contingent\\_faculty](https://www.academia.edu/20197432/35_Things_-_improving_conditions_for_contingent_faculty), and both can be heard at <https://classicalstudies.org/annual-meeting/annual-meeting-sessions-professional-issues-field-Spring>.