

***Thinking Beyond the Thesis: Planning your career in medieval studies***  
**ANZAMEMS, Dunedin, NZ. 2–5 February 2011**

***Participants:***

Dauvit Broun	Glasgow University
Elizabeth Freeman	University of Tasmania
Kim Phillips	University of Auckland
Alastair Minnis	Yale University

The Round Table took the form of a question and answer session in which each academic gave answers to the same question. The main questions, to which the answers are summarized below, diverged into many smaller questions (not separately outlined here).

***What does the ideal graduate CV look like?***

The panel interpreted this as a question about how to get oneself on the shortlist for academic jobs. There are variations in how to go about this depending on where you apply. UK – the focus is normally on research track record, even for teaching & research jobs.

- Publications: the key way to demonstrate research track record. The more substantial the better, i.e. ‘in print’ is preferable to ‘forthcoming’.
- Teaching: some teaching experience essential. Especially highlight any unique practice/approach.
- Respond directly to criteria within the job description, which will be extremely specific. Criteria will be split into essential/desirable. According to regulations, candidates will not be interviewed unless they fulfil *all* essential criteria.

USA – specific aspects of a successful CV vary depending on university/school. Job descriptions are likely to be more broad than in the UK. Generally:

- A good thesis/dissertation that is complete, or nearly complete.
- The number and clout of referees who write supporting letters.
- A couple of articles in print
- Note: the different length of USA (5–6 years) vs. UK/NZ/AUS (3–4 years) doctorates means that American students have longer to build CVs and acquire the necessary skills and publications, including plenty of teaching opportunities.

NZ – judgements will be based on:

- Where you did your PhD, your supervisors and their status/clout
- Note, if supervisor(s) are not your referees, this looks suspicious
- Have to match the job description, although there is more flexibility than in the UK.
- Job descriptions will tend to be shaped by the requirements of the department.
- Connection with the place/country is a positive and could work in your favour, for example in implying you see a job as more than a springboard for other positions.

AUS – preparation is the key.

- Students should work towards acquiring both teaching and research experience.
- A successful CV upon graduation will have strengths in both.
- Jobs in Australia tend to be few and very broad in nature. Hence, to obtain a lecturing position it is helpful to have a breadth of teaching experience which extends beyond one's own research topic.
- Note: CV on graduation is a work-in-progress. A graduating student will rarely be ready for their 'ideal job', and should continue to work on acquiring the skills and track record they need.

### ***What kinds of jobs are open to graduating students?***

There are two streams of academic work; lecturing (teaching & research) and postdoc research fellowships. It's not true to say that the former are not open to graduating students, but their scarcity might mean only exceptional students can obtain them. Equally, it is not obligatory to do a postdoc, although a postdoc period can be used to write up the thesis for publication and/or to develop whatever other skills or research strengths may be needed for the 'ideal job'. It was noted from the floor that in Canada postdocs often include a teaching component. There are government (Australian Research Council, ARC)-funded positions (known as Discovery Early Career Research Awards, or DECRA) which have recently been redesigned: they are open to applicants for 5 years after the completion of the thesis, or up to 8 years if the applicant has had significant career interruptions (See <http://www.arc.gov.au/ncgp/decra.htm>). This is useful since many graduates do not walk into an academic job immediately and have to find alternative work in the meantime. Among other criteria, all grant/fellowship awards are judged on the basis of research output in relation to opportunity: applicants can defend career interruptions such as illness, unemployment etc.

It was strongly emphasized that hopeful academics have to be deeply committed. No matter the kind of job within the academy, an international perspective is essential. It is rare to end up where you began your studies. Candidates have to be committed to go anywhere in the world in order to have a career. Become part of international networks. Joining professional associations & signing up for their mailing lists means you will know what's coming up; attending major conferences and meeting faculty members means you can find out what jobs are likely to arise at their institutions, and how their processes work.

### ***Is it true that a book or book contract is essential to secure one's first academic position?***

In Australasia this is not a hard and fast requirement: there are other ways of demonstrating your 'research excellence'. However, some members of job selection committees may consider 'the book' as the only true measure of research excellence. It was noted from the floor that Australian students are increasingly under pressure to put their completed theses

online via institutional repositories, and that the degree to which this might impact on the publishability of theses had not been entirely thought through. Students can normally place embargos on their theses online for a certain period to protect the originality of the material in advance of publication. In the UK, if the job specification states that you must have a published book, then you must have one in order to apply. On the other hand, if a book/contract is required, then this must be stated in the 'essential criteria'. If not, it cannot be used to exclude you from consideration.

In general, it is actually rare that a thesis is given a contract to become a book, especially without substantial re-writing. Books take time and so you need to have other things going on, i.e. a quick article from something that did not make it into your thesis. Having some demonstrable 'outcomes' is better than having all your eggs in one basket.

***Is teaching experience absolutely necessary, and what qualifies as experience?***

In general, applications do not hinge on the teaching part: you are often thrown in at the deep-end anyway as a new lecturer. Successful job applications are unlikely to come down to teaching experience, with greater emphasis on the research profile. However, if the position calls for teaching, it is vital that you display at interview the type of personality that suggests you can teach and perform. If you do have any experience in lecturing or tutoring, student appraisals are useful to include with your application, but this would normally be more important at a more advanced level, for example, when seeking tenure in the American system. It is actually rare in Australasia and the UK for students to have had the opportunity to lecture or run their own programs. Normally, tutoring/teaching assistant work is adequate. Teaching work outside the academy might look like a lack of commitment in an American context. In Australia, do not automatically assume that teaching outside a tertiary context is not useful on your CV, however, it may be up to you to show its relevance. Impact is the new buzz-word of academic administration: if extra-mural teaching can be used to demonstrate 'outreach' it can be turned to your advantage. It was noted from the floor that language departments are likely to require language teaching experience specifically.

***What does a good reference letter look like, and how important are references?***

There are extremely large differences according to context. In the USA the reference letter is extremely important. The number and clout of referees impacts on candidate success (see above). There is also a sort of 'hyperinflation' in length and rhetoric of American reference letters; four pages is not unusual. In the UK the job selection panel may not even see letters of reference until the day of interview, so they are seen as less crucial. The discussion emphasized the importance of having referees familiar with the system within which you are applying. For example, applicants for American jobs might be well advised not to ask for reference letters from UK academics who are unfamiliar with American requirements since UK references tend to be expressed in much more reserved terms. Conversely, American-

style letters of reference will read as hopelessly overblown in the UK, where panels might suspect that the glowing praise implies the writer is trying to get rid of a problem person. Familiarity with the relevant system is essential.

***What can you expect from the interview process?***

Interview processes between countries and institutions vary widely. In the USA, the ‘interview’ is actually a multi-stage process. You would normally go for a series of interviews at a major meeting, such as the MLA; then, if successful, be asked to come for an individual campus visit, comprising several days. Campus visits normally include interviews/meetings with various faculty and administrators; a lecture on your research; and teaching an example class. Aspects of this process are appearing in the Australasian system, where you might be asked to give a research presentation, or to teach a class (e.g. in language departments). However, normally in the UK/NZ/AUS systems, candidates respond to a particular job advertisement and are invited to interview on the basis of their CV and response to job criteria. All applicants for a given job will likely be interviewed in a single day; further interview cycles are unlikely. The discussion again emphasized the need for those applying for jobs to familiarize themselves with the requirements of specific systems in advance.

***How long is too long to be working outside academia?***

In Australia the government research funding body recognizes you as an ‘early career researcher’ for 5 (or up to 8; see above) years after thesis completion. However, you need to keep your toe in the water actively. You can do this by attending conferences, publishing, and maintaining an affiliation with a university, such as an Honorary Research Associate, or by taking a university job such as in administration. This gives you a tertiary email address and access to important scholarly resources like seminars, libraries and mailing lists; and helps you stay ‘research active’. Staying within the University sector also enables you to take advantage of the local ‘research office/r’ who can help you identify and apply for relevant research grants. It was noted from the floor that since academic jobs are increasingly rare, especially in humanities, applicants shouldn’t scorn accessory positions such as within academic publishing as ways to work within and remain in touch with the field.

***Is part-time study an impediment to launching a successful career?***

Part-time study is probably no drawback in most systems, although it is relatively rare at PhD level internationally. It may even be advisable, especially at MA level, to enable the student to take on teaching and other CV-building activities.

***What advice can you give women planning a career as well as a family?***

Motherhood brings the gender differences between male and female colleagues into sharp relief when they are otherwise not marked. There is no optimal time to think about a family during a career (irrespective of the type of career), but there are some worse times than

others. The first couple of years as a practicing academic for example, need to be used to develop an image (for yourself and others) of your academic authority and competence. You should try to get publication underway first, because a family will inevitably slow you down. Lack of publication or slow publication rate can be to your detriment if it comes down to redundancy panels, etc. However, delays due to child-rearing are meant to be taken into account (see above). The advisability of starting a family before or after thesis completion comes down to the individual, and can't really be generalized.

Discrimination is against the law in all countries under discussion, which means that HR in reputable universities will make efforts to make staff aware of this and how serious it is. For example, panels cannot raise the issue of childcare or potential pregnancy in an interview. Institutions normally require interviewers to have been trained in appropriate interviewing methods. It is also often a requirement that there be at least one woman on a panel. However, informally, some female applicants report being advised to reduce the potential assumption of interview panels (etc.) that they might be likely to take time out to have a family.

***Do academic positions discriminate against disability?***

Legally all the countries represented in this discussion are obliged not to discriminate on the basis of disability, sex, age, etc. It is extremely unlikely that an applicant in the USA, UK, NZ or Australia would be unsuccessful because of a disability. Some application forms, for example in the UK, include questions relating to disability and ethnic origin because institutions are required to document their efforts as equal opportunity employers, rather than because this information will be used in the candidates disfavour.

*At this point the session ran out of time, and discussion was continued informally over drinks.*

*These notes were produced by Kathleen Neal (Monash Univ.) with kind contributions from Michelle Smith (Univ. Auckland), February 2011.*