

I love Higher Education. The first time I learned about the university, in elementary school, I wanted to go there; by the second year of my undergraduate degree, I knew I wanted to pursue a Ph.D., and as a doctoral student, I became convinced that my life's path must be an academic one. I was committed to shaping young minds, passing on my passion for languages and literature, and forming the next generation of well-informed critical thinkers. Yet despite my best efforts, I never made it onto the tenure track. I don't want to belittle this experience; coming to terms with the fact that I would not become a professor was traumatic and I mourned for a time. Nevertheless, I discovered that the skills that I had developed as a graduate student and beyond are valuable within Higher Education. In this post I want to show that the experience and the knowledge gained in graduate school can be excellent preparation for a variety of occupations in the university sector. Unlike tenure-track paths, perhaps, all alt-ac paths are unique, and yet there are common threads among them. I share here some aspects of mine to pass on what worked for me, and hopefully to spark some thinking about strategies that might work for others.

Many young scholars who don't secure – or choose not to pursue – tenure-track jobs see their career options reduced to two: work precariously as adjuncts, or leave academia entirely. This binary view is reflected in “quit lit,” a blog genre in which disillusioned academics publicly announce their departure from the cold, cruel profession. While there are many Ph.D.s using their skills in fabulous and rewarding careers outside the academy, it is this in-or-out binary that I would like to challenge. There is a whole array of alternative academic positions in Higher Education, known sometimes as “alt-academic” or “para-academic” careers. Groups such as Alt-Academix and Altac Working Group advocate for this third option: “Altacs disrupt the belief that if you don't get a full-time faculty position, your only choices are to adjunct for poverty wages or leave academe” (Bickford & Whisnant).[1]

When I embarked on my Ph.D., my chosen field – German Studies – was already shrinking. Furthermore, the academic profession in general was suffering job cuts and serious underfunding: tenure track positions were becoming ever scarcer, and, while I hoped I would be one of the lucky few, I knew it would be wise to keep my options open. Two strategies in particular turned out to be really useful:

- 1) When I was talking about applying for grad school, a faculty member recommended that I also “get some professional skills” as something to fall back on. So I learned how to teach English as a Foreign Language, and gained some experience teaching it. This proved invaluable both for the German language teaching I later did during my doctoral studies, and for my later career(s);
- 2) During my Ph.D., I joined a discussion forum called WRK4US (now The Versatile PhD), and heard about people who were productively using their PhD skills in a whole variety of interesting careers. Some were working inside the Higher Education sector: these included researchers, administrators, librarians, senior managers, learning technologists, policy-makers, grant-writers, grant-administrators, fundraisers, and others. I also learned that each person's career path was unique, and that all kinds of work experience – no matter how boring or seemingly irrelevant – comes in handy sooner or later.

My own Ph.D. was followed by four exhilarating if exhausting years as an Assistant Professor. But the opportunities dried up and I needed an alternative. When it came time for me to leave the profession, I knew I didn't want to leave the academy for good. Through my teaching and lecturing experiences, I had developed an interest in helping students gain the skills they need to thrive at the university. I used my language teaching experience and my knowledge of teaching to find work teaching academic skills to international students. In this position, I became increasingly interested in curriculum development, and in using assessment to support learning. Four years later, these interests helped me get the job I have now. I'm an Academic Developer, also called Educational Developer. I work in a team of seven people, of whom five have Ph.D.s in a variety of subject areas. We work on strategic projects to enhance learning and teaching across the university. Over the past year, for example, I've been supporting staff with the implementation of a group tutorial system, promoting integrated approaches to assessment, and co-creating teaching materials to foster graduate attributes such as Global Citizenship and Sustainability.

The Ph.D. itself was an incomparable, mind-expanding, challenging and stimulating experience that taught me resilience above all, and I don't regret a minute of it. And while I'm not applying my in-depth knowledge of contemporary feminist German literature in my everyday life, three things from my Ph.D. have proved invaluable in my current work:

- Firstly, the teaching experience I gained as a Teaching Assistant and an Assistant Professor led to an abiding interest in learning and teaching, which informs my daily work;
- Secondly, my job requires academic research skills such as finding and synthesising relevant secondary literature, analysing narratives and presenting the results in oral and written form. I've even had the opportunity to develop new research skills not involved in my literature Ph.D. work: I really enjoy interviewing staff and students to collect qualitative data about our learning and teaching projects;
- Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, my insider knowledge of Higher Education helped me to get my job and makes me better at it: I think like an academic, and this helps me communicate with academic staff across the university.

Some people in alt-ac careers stay research active and/or teach a course or two on the side. I still write and publish scholarly articles in my spare time, but now I write what I want—if I want. Recent publications include a re-worked chapter on Austrian literature from my thesis, a co-authored article on student engagement at my institution, and some teaching materials for a textbook on sustainability in Business Management degrees. I don't miss the pressure to “publish or perish.” And I don't miss the grading! Although I'm not lecturing on my first love – German Studies – I'm working in a university environment, which feels like my natural home, and I'm helping ensure the quality of education delivered across the institution. Rather than working in a single discipline I get to work with intelligent and enthusiastic colleagues across the spectrum of subjects. Since leaving lecturing I've got my weekends back, yet I still get to work in Higher Education and make my own contribution towards igniting that creative and critical spark in young minds.

I'm not suggesting for a minute that alt-ac is a solution to the academic job crisis. Nor am I recommending that anyone thoroughly disillusioned with the higher education sector should seek alternative occupation within it. Rather, I am suggesting that for some, alt-ac careers can be as rewarding as traditional academic careers. Graduate programs, professional societies, career counsellors, and anyone who works with graduate students can help by raising awareness of the whole spectrum of options available, inside and outside the university sector.

If you'd like to find out about career options after grad school, here are some places I've found useful:

Specifically about Alt-Academic careers:

- Alt-Academix: www.alt-academix.com/
- I've been collecting articles about Altac on my Scoopit site: www.scoop.it/t/alt-academic
- Public lists on Twitter: alt-Academic by @DrEllieKennedy and AltAc by @Doc_Lunchbox
- Bickford, Donna M. & Whisnant, Anne Mitchell. The Altac Track: Carving Out a New Professional Space for PhDs in Academe. 8 April 2014. www.ethosreview.org/intellectual-spaces/the-altac-track/
- The non-academic career resources section of the job wiki: http://academicjobs.wikia.com/wiki/Academic_Jobs_Wiki.

Concerning both Altac and Postac careers:

- Versatile PhD <http://versatilephd.com> A great online community that anyone can join to learn more about alternative careers both in and outside the academy
- A new group for Altac and Postac: <https://chroniclevitae.com/groups/flexible-academics>
- From PhD to Life: <http://fromphdtolife.com/>

[1] <http://www.ethosreview.org/intellectual-spaces/the-altac-track/>

Ellie Kennedy is enjoying a diverse career in Higher Education. After working as an Assistant Professor in German Studies in Canada, she returned to her native UK to teach English for Academic Purposes to international students. She now works in Academic Development at Nottingham Trent University. She is also an editor of the *International Student Experience Journal*.