Enhancing the Employability of Humanities Postgraduates:
a Students as Academic Partners Project Report

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Abstract

In an increasingly competitive employment market, postgraduates need to demonstrate more than the 'skills, knowledge, attitudes and experiences that are closely associated with the research process' (Golovushkina & Milligan, 2013: 199). Yet results indicate that Worcester postgraduate students remain unaware of the full range of opportunities that exist alongside postgraduate study, and how this affects their subsequent employability. This research, undertaken with humanities post-graduate students at University of Worcester, aims to contribute to discussions about how to enhance the employability of humanities postgraduates through extra-curricular activities.

The project was implemented as a Students-As-Partners-in-Learning-Project, using action research; the issue was identified, base-line data collected and this resulted in the creation of a postgraduate blog incorporating suggestions of possible opportunities and links to relevant websites for further information. Informed by this research, the student partners then took active roles in the organization of the Women's History Network National Conference, *'Home Fronts: Gender, War and Conflict'*, hosted at the University of Worcester in September 2014, to broaden their existing skills base and then to connect this involvement to their professional development through a group CV review. The participants' own experiences of wider engagement can therefore illuminate new ways for understanding employability in relation to humanities postgraduate students.

Introduction: Identifying an Issue

HEFCE estimates the number of UK humanities PhD graduates at around 1,250 students per year (HEFCE, 2011). British humanities doctoral graduates therefore face an increasingly competitive job market, and hence their employability has become an increasingly debated topic (Mowbray & Halse, 2010; Schwabe, 2011; Harvey, 2001). While higher education institutions (HEIs) responded to this by increasingly building programmes for the support of transferable skills into higher education curricula, evidence suggests that engagement of doctoral candidates in extra-curricular activities – such as organising research conferences, attending networking events or engaging with professional associations – can be just as valuable for employability development

(Harvey, 2001; Leonard et al., 2004). Golovushkina and Milligan argue that participation in the wider 'intellectual disciplinary community' (2013: 198) can simultaneously develop doctoral candidate's professional identity and expertise. In addition, Savage (2013) calls for greater public engagement from early-career researchers to demonstrate 'impact' and to equip them with the skills necessarily to communicate with non-academic groups in their future careers.

However, despite recognition within existing research of the value of wider participation, the importance of individual student agency in engaging with the employability development opportunities available – whether provided by HEIs or as part of the wider community – has been largely overlooked. Yet Yorke (2006) contends that it is actually the participation of individual students in the activities *they* choose which derives the learning that contributes to each student's employability, rather than the mere *provision* of the extra-curricular activities. Following his argument, this paper therefore recognises the central role of doctoral candidates in connecting with their own employability and development. Consequently, the project initially explored the perceptions of University of Worcester's current doctoral candidates through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework in which postgraduate students themselves participate as co-researchers to help develop their own understanding of their own employability and help enhance their future career prospects (Hall, 1975).

Methods: Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The study was designed to address the development of postgraduate employability through extra-curricular activities within the University of Worcester, specifically utilising a student perspective. The project was carried out jointly between four current postgraduate students and one member of academic staff from the Institute of Humanities & Creative Arts (IHCA), drawing on data from the 17 current IHCA postgraduate students.

In order to enhance employability amongst this community a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach was used to focus on action and change. PAR is a research method which uses the idea that research must

be done 'with' people, not 'on' or 'for' people (e.g. Lewin, 1946, Brock & Pettit, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). During the process, researchers therefore needed to develop and use a range of skills to achieve their aims, such as careful planning, sharpened observation and listening, evaluation, and critical reflection (Koshy et al., 2011). Consequently, the action research process democratises the knowledge-making process and this was particularly useful when considering *enhancing* University of Worcester humanities doctoral students' employability because it allows for an approach which combines participation, action and research to *improve* existing conditions (Brown, 1993; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Figure 1 illustrates the key points of intersection.
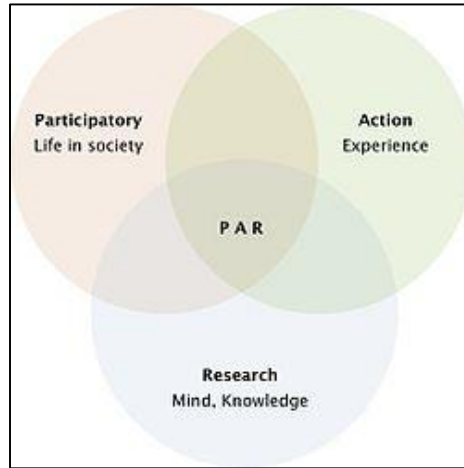

Figure 1: Participatory Action Research Model (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013: 10)

Collecting Base-line Measures: Worcester's Humanities Postgraduates

The project began with a consideration of the existing situation of employability development among Worcester humanities doctoral students. The entire population of 17 current students, both full-time and part-time, from the IHCA were therefore sent a survey designed to gauge their current awareness of, and engagement in, the wider opportunities available to them alongside their research degree, and also to gather their perceptions of their own employability. Select results from the nine final respondents are shown below in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Select results from the survey question '*Please rank your awareness of the following opportunities for postgraduates ...*' from 2014 cohort of humanities postgraduates respondents.

	Aware & Participating in this Opportunity	Aware	Neither Aware or Unaware	Unaware	Never Heard of this Opportunity
HPL & Other Teaching Opportunities	2	3	0	1	3
	22.22%	**33.33%**	**0.00%**	**11.11%**	**33.33%**
HEA & the PG Cert in Higher Education	1	2	1	1	4
	11.11%	**22.22%**	**11.11%**	**11.11%**	**44.44%**
Mentoring	0	2	2	4	1
	0.00%	**22.22%**	**22.22%**	**44.44%**	**11.11%**
Dyslexia/Disability Support	1	6	0	1	1
	11.11%	**66.67%**	**0.00%**	**11.11%**	**11.11%**
Writing papers for seminars, conferences or lectures	5	3	0	1	0
	55.56%	**33.33%**	**0.00%**	**11.11%**	**0.00%**
Book Reviews in Peer-Reviewed Journals	2	5	1	1	0
	22.22%	**55.56%**	**11.11%**	**11.11%**	**0.00%**

Conference Presentations	5	4	0	0	0
	55.56%	**44.44%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**
Conference Organisation	4	3	1	1	0
	44.44%	**33.33%**	**11.11%**	**11.11%**	**0.00%**
Organising and Delivering Public Events	1	3	1	2	2
	11.11%	**33.33%**	**11.11%**	**22.22%**	**22.22%**
Guest Lectures or Seminar/Lecture Series	1	3	2	2	1
	11.11%	**33.33%**	**22.22%**	**22.22%**	**11.11%**
Voluntary Work or Community Projects	2	4	1	0	2
	22.22%	**44.44%**	**11.11%**	**0.00%**	**22.22%**
University Committee Participation	4	4	0	0	1
	44.44%	**44.44%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**	**11.11%**
Participation in Academic Research Groups	3	1	3	0	2
	33.33%	**11.11%**	**33.33%**	**0.00%**	**22.22%**
Interview Panel Participation	4	2	1	1	1
	44.44%	**22.22%**	**11.11%**	**11.11%**	**11.11%**
Research Collection or Archive Support	2	2	3	0	2
	22.22%	**22.22%**	**33.33%**	**0.00%**	**22.22%**
University Staff Professional Development Courses	1	2	2	1	3
	11.11%	**22.22%**	**22.22%**	**11.11%**	**33.33%**
External Development Courses and Seminars	1	3	2	0	3
	11.11%	**33.33%**	**22.22%**	**0.00%**	**33.33%**

Table 2: Results from *'Please now reflect on your view of your own employability. How employable, within your chosen field, would you currently rate yourself? Please pick one of the following options...'* from 2014 cohort of humanities postgraduates' respondents.

Answer Choices–	Responses–
Extremely employable	2
	22.22%
Fairly employable	5
	55.56%
Slightly employable	1
	11.11%
Neither employable nor unemployable	0
	0.00%
Slightly unemployable	0
	0.00%
Fairly unemployable	1
	11.11%
Extremely unemployable	0
	0.00%
Total	**9**

These results show that there is significant disconnection between the literature connecting wider postgraduate opportunities and employability, and the perceptions of employability demonstrated among Worcester doctoral students (see, for example, Hager, 2011). Even after being presented with a list of activities where overall awareness and participation levels were confessed to be relatively low, Worcester postgraduates still tended to rank themselves 'Fairly' to 'Extremely' employable. This mismatch is intriguing and a potential subject for future research. One possible explanation is that Humanities post-graduates most frequently encountered – for example in their supervisory teams – individuals who had successfully made the transition from post-graduate student to an academic career. Participation in extra-curricular opportunities offered was highest when these activities were either those in which the University had stimulated interest or encouraged participation, such as in interview panels, University committees or academic research groups, or where activities were more traditionally viewed as an intrinsic part of the doctoral 'apprenticeship', such as teaching or giving conference papers. These results, indicating a lack of awareness and engagement, therefore suggest a general need for more action to be taken in disseminating the many opportunities available to Worcester students to help enhance their employability

Action: Enhancing Employability at Worcester through Dissemination

As a result of these findings, an audit of opportunities available to Worcester postgraduates was undertaken. A blog was created drawing on available information together with links to additional content to allow accessible dissemination to the Worcester humanities postgraduate community. A sample from the site uwhumspostgradcv.wordpress.com/ is included alongside:

Being involved in the creation of the blog allowed the postgraduate co-researchers to proactively think about their own employability and reflect on the work-related skills which being involved in the project had developed for them. The PAR framework necessitated some flexibility, as it is a style or 'orientation of inquiry' (Reason & Bradbury, 2008: 1) which involves the participants in knowledge production. The student partners reflected on their mid-way experiences to inform the next iteration of the project and their delivery of an enhancement, thus highlighting the importance of postgraduate engagement to their own employability development (Koshy et al., 2011). Informed by these findings, the students then decided to participate in one of the lesser-known opportunities available to postgraduates – conference organisation.

Participation: Organising the
Women's History Network Conference

The four IHCA students all took active roles in the organisation of the 23rd Women's History Network (WHN) Annual Conference *'Home Fronts: Gender, War and Conflict'* held at the University of Worcester, 5-7th September 2014. The conference was international in scope with well over 100 delegates from countries including New Zealand, Slovenia, Turkey and the USA. It involved organising discussion panels, presentations, entertainment and meals over three days, as well as accommodation for attendees. Each of the four students was responsible for a group of between 20 and 30 delegates, operating as the first point of call for these delegates in the run up to the conference: answering emails, assisting them with any difficulties and negotiating between their requirements and the opportunities offered by the conference.

By being involved in the conference organisation process from the outset the postgraduates had opportunities to acquire a range of both transferable and specific skills, which include, but are not limited to: general administration, such as attending and taking notes in meetings; technical/I.T. abilities including managing data, creating email contact lists and using software like Excel, Word, PowerPoint and Outlook; and, networking and communication skills to identify and communicate with a wide range of potential delegates, publishers and community groups, both in emails and face to face, including those that do not speak English as a first language. Contingency planning and crisis management was also developed through dealing with accommodation, excursions and transport; alongside organisational abilities learnt through conference programme development; and problem solving to cope with the inevitable changes to that programme. Finally, interpersonal and team-working skills were enhanced by working with the organisational group and managing a large group of volunteers who helped with the day-to-day running of the conference itself.

At the culmination of this process, the students were then involved in a CV review workshop led by Professor Maggie Andrews. All participants contributed a recent CV and these were then shared in a 'round robin' format around the group to allow the postgraduates to appreciate the differences between each example and to reflect on the most useful practises exhibited in the group. In addition, this session was used to explicitly link participation within the organisation of the WHN Ann reflements.

Figure 2: Sample Pages from 'Enhancing the Employability of Humanities Postgraduates' Blog, uwhumspostgradcv.wordpress.com/, downloaded June 2014

Critical reflection: Worcester Postgraduates & Employability Development

Critical reflection took place through a group discussion around three semi-structured questions: What do you think you gained from your involvement with the conference organisation process? How, if at all, would you reflect this experience in a CV for a prospective employer? How has the research process which you have been a part of helped you to enhance your own employability?

In discussing these questions, the students drew out a number of key themes. Firstly, all four students emphasised the improvement of work-based skills and employability through their involvement with the conference organisation process, as was found by Harvey (2001). For example one student emphasised how they 'honed transferable skills, such as communication skills' in writing emails to delegates, while another stressed how they 'developed skills learned in other contexts' in managing queries and crises that occurred throughout the conference, for example with delegates' accommodation. Yet the co-researchers also emphasised how involvement also cultivated a 'confidence in our own abilities', an appreciation of our own 'strengths and weaknesses' and a 'better sense of self'. This was a theme also found in Golovushkina and Milligan's (2013) study where the wider participation of doctoral students was aligned with a greater development of professional identity. The postgraduate researchers highlighted the CV review in particular as playing a crucial role in this recognition and improved self-awareness.

In discussing the reflection of these 'transferable skills' within CVs, the postgraduates pinpointed the use of this 'real life experience' in *improving* their ability to narrativise their employment history and demonstrate key competencies. One participant even suggested that extra-curricular participation was most useful as 'evidence to enhance and draw on in a personal statement'. The inclination of these students to variously add these experiences, whether explicitly or implicitly, into their existing CVs builds on evidence that suggests that the activities which research students are encouraged to undertake are those that will form the foundation of their future CV (Savage, 2013).

Finally, the doctoral candidates contemplated how being actively involved in the research process into employability development affected their own employability. Alongside the obvious additional work-related skills developed – such as report-writing, conducting online research and working as part of a team to identify and answer a research question – the co-

researchers also drew out another interesting concept (Koshy et al., 2011). When asked about their participation in the research process two students explicitly mentioned the benefits of mandatory reflective practice: 'actually going through the practice – reflective practice - means you learn as you go along'. When further questioned about the benefit of this, one student answered that the process allowed them to 'scrutinise our own skills and made us more aware of our transferable skills' with the 'support of academics and professionals'. This therefore seems to suggest that enforced engagement with a transparent process of employment development *actively* seems to enhance humanities' postgraduate's engagement with the process of their own employability and professional development. However we would argue that the enhancement of this mandatory reflective practice rested upon the agency of the students in participating in extra-curricular activities, and the relationships and agency developed through the PAR approach to research; the effectiveness would have been compromised had this reflection been merely another part of core, compulsory post-graduate provision.

Conclusions & Recommendations

This project has therefore built on previous research which has shown that humanities postgraduate employability development can be aided through extra-curricular opportunities (Hager, 2011). By employing postgraduates themselves *within* the research, it has, however, drawn attention to the role of explicitly engaging postgraduates in their own employability development (Yorke, 2006) and supported the key role of critical reflection in enhancing employability. While this is already recognised, to an extent, by the Research Development Framework (Vitae, 2011), which provides a way of capturing and storing examples to demonstrate key skills, it still remains a passive tool with which doctoral researchers have to engage with but which does not prioritise wider participation.

Instead there is a need for greater and more transparent engagement of Worcester humanities doctoral students in extra-curricular activities to enhance their employability in ways similar to those identified above by the four humanities students who engaged in the WHN conference organisation. It is also recommended that a mandatory employability development review process with an academic member of staff, but not necessarily the student's supervisor, should accompany that commitment. Additional places for enforced reflection on extra-curricular participation in existing monitoring and annual review processes could also be beneficial. Furthermore the 'apprenticeship' model of postgraduate training also suggests it might also be useful to have the supervisors or the Graduate Research School (GRS) alerted to the need to highlight the range of opportunities available to Worcester doctoral students which could help develop workplace skills. Finally, further research into the format of critical reflection, the frequency, the engagement of supervisors within the process and its relationship to the year of doctoral study would be welcomed. This research could also be extended to additional postgraduate communities within other disciplines and institutions

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Biographies:

Professor Maggie Andrews is a cultural historian whose work covers the social and cultural history of twentieth century Britain and the representation of that history within popular culture. A key focus of her research is domesticity and femininity. She is the author of a range of publications including a feminist history of the Women's Institute movement and an exploration of the history of the inter-relationship of broadcasting, femininity and domesticity in twentieth century Britain. Her current work relates to domesticity and the Home Front in World War One and Two; she is currently writing a monograph on Women and Evacuation in the Second World War to be published by Bloomsbury Academic.

Jody Crutchley is in her third year of a history PhD studentship at the University of Worcester. Her doctoral research addresses the place of the British Empire in British elementary school curricula in the early twentieth century and therefore contributes to the recent scholarship that has tended to challenge and extend traditional views of Britons' experience of empire.

Laura Jones is a first year tutor in the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts and also works in the Disability & Dyslexia Service. Her research interests include children's and young adult literature and British historical fiction. She also writes as a reflective practitioner of women's bodybuilding and fitness. Previous publications include an article for the Higher Education Academy Compendium of Effective Practice and a book chapter in The Nation in Children's Literature.

Elspeth King completed her undergraduate degree in History and Politics at the University of Worcester in 2012. She is currently engaged in research around the area of consumption and identity on the Home Front in World War Two through the lens of rationing but has an overall interest in twentieth century history. She is also an hourly-paid lecturer and leads the History work experience module.

Rosemarie Miller gained a BA (Hons) degree in English Language and Literature and Communication Studies at the University of Liverpool. She then enjoyed a career in teaching, training and student guidance in Kent, London and Worcestershire. Rosemarie joined the University of Worcester as a part-time student and achieved her MA in Literature, Politics and Identity in 2012 and is currently a part-time PhD student working with Professor Jean Webb in the International

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