

The LSE PhD as an Asset in Today's Industry Job Market

How to Improve the Transition from Academia to Industry?

For many PhD graduates a career in research and higher education is the most obvious choice. After all, a PhD is supposed to provide one with the skills necessary to succeed in this industry. That being said, more and more PhD graduates opt for a career in either the private or public sector. Several different factors contribute to this trend.

Over the last few decades, the number of PhDs awarded by universities has increased significantly. In 2014, 25,020 PhDs were obtained in the UK. Nowadays, governments invest heavily in PhD education in an attempt to support the development of knowledge-based economies, which require a large number of highly skilled workers. However, this also means that the number of PhD graduates exceeds the number of jobs available in research and higher education. In other words, many PhD holders have to consider non-academic careers.

Furthermore, there is growing demand from industry for employees with a PhD qualification. While PhD holders may no longer work in their area of academic expertise, they are often valued for their transferable skills they have gained during their degree.

Finally, some evidence also points to a difficult job market for PhD graduates, with many struggling to secure academic posts after graduation. Precariousness and insecurity are also frequent. These issues are likely to grow in scale given the detrimental effects of COVID-19 on the higher education sector.

Despite an increasing number of PhD holders working in the private and public sector, many think that there are still some hurdles to be overcome for a better engagement between PhD graduates and industry. Some businesses hesitate to hire PhD graduates, thinking they may be overqualified and too independent. Graduates are often reluctant to consider non-academic posts, preferring employment in research and higher education. The existing division of the labour market between the academic sector on the one hand and the "world outside academia" on the other does not help in this regard. Furthermore, PhD students may not know how to market their skills in a non-academic work environment. Insufficient knowledge about further training or qualifications that would increase their employability in industry further compounds this problem.

In other words, a PhD can become a liability rather than an asset in today's industry job market. The question then is: what can one do to make the transition between PhD and industry as smooth as possible? How can one ensure that a PhD is an asset, and not a liability, in the non-academic labour market? What is the role of universities in preparing their PhD students for non-academic jobs? What are some best practices? Where is room for improvement? Where does the LSE stand in this debate?

Methodology

This study made use of three different data sources:

Firstly, I conducted a desk review – by collecting, organizing and synthesizing relevant secondary data, I gained an initial understanding of the potential obstacles PhD students can face when transitioning into industry. The data collected through the desk review informed the survey design and interview questions. Given that more and more PhD graduates work in either the public or

private sector, this is a dynamic research field with many recent contributions. That being said, a lot of the literature focuses on STEM subjects in particular as the number of PHD graduates from these subjects transitioning into industry is especially high. Because the LSE is a world-leading specialist social science university, it makes for an interesting case study. In shedding light on the obstacles PhD graduates in the social sciences face when transitioning into industry, this study can also make a contribution to the wider literature on alternative career pathways for PhD holders.

Secondly, I distributed a survey about non-academic career options among LSE PhD students. There were three sets of questions I was particularly interested in: firstly, what does the ideal workplace look like for an LSE PhD student? What kind of industry or economic sector would they like to work in? And how well do respondents feel supported in making the transition from university to their desired career option? Getting a better understanding of the various career ambitions of LSE PhD students is vital to the success of this project as each industry and/or workplace has different requirements, which should also be reflected in the career support available to PhD students at the LSE.

Thirdly, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with LSE PhD students from a variety of different departments. Interviews were anonymous but recorded. On average they lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. While most participants hoped to work in industry after graduation, this was not true of all interviewees. Some were ambivalent about their career options or expressed a preference for staying in academia. Issues we touched upon during the interviews included the following: reasons for wanting to work in industry, the respective roles of supervisors, departments and LSE Careers in non-academic career support and the perceived gap between industry and academia. It is worth mentioning that I had initially hoped to conduct focus groups rather than interviews. However, COVID-19 and the ensuing restrictions on in-person research made this impossible.

Furthermore, I also interviewed LSE Careers, 3 LSE PhD alumni now working in consulting, one LSE PhD supervisor and two civil servants in charge of external engagement. The data collected through these interviews provided additional perspectives on the perceived gap between academia and industry. These interviews, therefore, complemented some of the points that were raised during the conversations I had with current LSE PhD students.

In total, I interviewed 19 people between April and July 2020. As mentioned above, my interviewees came from a variety of different backgrounds, which ensured that I could look at the issue holistically.

Findings.....

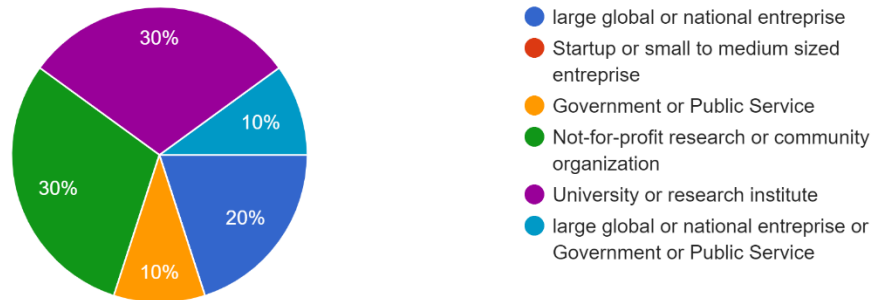
1.from the survey

The survey received 10 responses. Respondents came from a variety of different departments including Economics, Anthropology, Government, International Development, Geography and Environment, Social Policy, and Health Policy. The majority of respondents (70%) had at least some work experience before beginning their PhDs at the LSE. The remaining 30% had no or very limited work experience.

Career ambitions varied, which is reflected in the preferences PhD students expressed for their ideal workplaces and industries.

What does your ideal workplace look like?

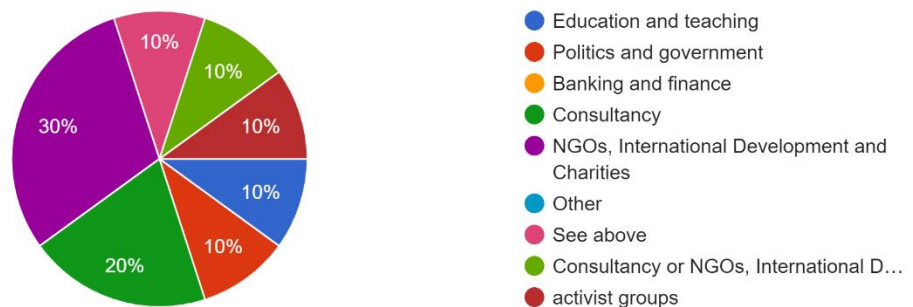
10 responses



While some hope to stay at university or at a research institute (30%), the majority expressed a preference for more alternative career pathways. Options listed included large global or national enterprises, government or public service and not-for-profit research or community organization. Interestingly, none of the respondents intends to work for a small-to medium-sized enterprise or start-up.

Which industry would you like to work in?

10 responses

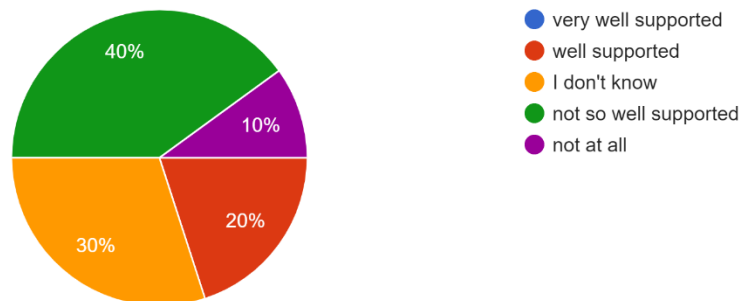


There is no single industry which LSE PhD students strongly favoured. Popular options included NGOs, International Development, and Consultancy. Only a minority of 10% wished to remain in education or teaching. None of the surveyed LSE PhD students indicated that they would like to work in banking or finance.

As part of the survey I also asked how well supported respondents feel in making the transition from university to their desired career option. While the number of responses I have received is low with 10, the answers to this survey seem to indicate that most LSE PhD students do not feel particularly well supported.

How well do you feel supported in making the university to labour market transition after graduation at the LSE?

10 responses



A majority of 50% said that they either felt *not at all* or *not so well supported*. Only a minority of 20% indicated that they are *well supported* or *very well supported*, with nobody ticking the latter option. 30% said they did not know.

2.from the interviews with current LSE PhD students

- Everyone stressed during the interview that each PhD student faces unique challenges in their professional development and hence, any effective approach must be personalized and tailored to the needs of the individual. Some common themes nonetheless emerged.
 - Some noted that in recent years the LSE has already made considerable investments in skills training to prepare PhD students for employment inside and to a certain extent outside of academia. This is especially true since the establishment of the PhD academy.
 - Despite this progress most students felt that more could be done to prepare PhD students for non-academic careers, especially in light of COVID-19 and its detrimental effects on the academic job market. That being said, some of those interviewed struggled to define what that could look like in practice, stating that the primary goal of a PhD is to train people to stay in academia after all.
 - Most wished for a more inclusive definition of success, with careers outside academia seen as a viable alternative. Many claimed that currently alternative careers are seen as a lesser option and often stigmatized. For some, there is the sense that academic career events are mandatory, while non-academic career events are not. In such an environment it is difficult to have an open conversation about career ambitions.
 - At a more practical level students encountered some of the following issues:
 - The role of supervisors in non-academic career preparation is unclear. While many wished to approach the topic with their supervisors, they did not do so – either because they feared negative consequences, with supervisors losing interest in them and their work or because they thought they would not be able to receive much advice anyways, with most academics having limited experience outside the academic world.
 - Many of those interviewed stated that departments could become more active in this area. There was a feeling that everything which relates to

non-academic careers is currently being “outsourced” to LSE Careers, with departments giving very little guidance in terms of non-traditional careers. Professional development days were often seen as a missed opportunity to engage more with those alumni now working in industry. Some also stated that much more could be done to facilitate collaboration between LSE PhD students and outside actors.

- Some students stated that they tend to forget about LSE Careers. The reasons for this remained somewhat unclear – a few students said that they do not find the events on offer personalized enough. One student thought that LSE alumni should be more involved in the programmes run by LSE Careers.
 - While the above concerns were frequently raised during the interviews, it also became clear that some supervisors and departments were much more involved than others. Therefore, no sweeping generalizations should be made.
- Overall students thought that their LSE PhD degree would be an asset rather than a liability in today’s industry job market. Only very few expressed pessimism in this regard. That being said, even those who see their PhD as an asset for their career development stated that they would like to receive more training in how to market their skills in a non-academic environment. Some also said that they would like to get guidance on what kind of extra skills or qualifications would make them more employable in the non-academic sector.

3.from additional interviews

- All of the interviewees agreed that an LSE PhD can be an asset in terms of non-academic career development. However, they also agreed that several hurdles still need to be overcome for a better engagement between PhD researchers and industry. Some of the obstacles mentioned included:
 - Disengaged supervisors and departments. If this is the case students should ask for them to become more engaged.
 - Career exploration during the PhD was seen as vital for making a successful transition into industry after graduation. However, some supervisors and departments are not supportive of this, or alternatively students fear they may not be if they told them about their plans. Rather than seeking approval, these students explore their options without letting their supervisors and departments know. Therefore, positive attitudes towards alternative career pathways should be encouraged so that students feel comfortable talking about their career aspirations.
- There is growing demand for employees with a PhD qualification in industry. An increasing number of employers offers PhD internships, which give participants the opportunity to gain insights into a potential career while also expanding their professional network. However, many employers still struggle to understand the full value of a PhD for their company.
 - Some LSE PhD alumni stated that they would like to be more involved in helping current students prepare for non-academic careers. This is because they found the transition challenging and not straightforward in some regards.

Recommendations

1. The LSE should provide institutional support for non-academic careers.
 - a. Positive attitudes towards alternative career pathways should be encouraged and promoted throughout the school.
 - b. Knowledge exchange with and involvement of outside actors and practitioners in research should actively be promoted.
 - i. Together these measures should lead to a shift in norms whereby non-academic careers are no longer seen as a lesser option and stigmatized
2. Non-academic career preparation should no longer be “outsourced” to LSE Careers. Supervisors and departments also have a role to play.
 - a. Supervisors should be supportive and encourage a certain level of career exploration. If possible, they can also facilitate contacts to people working in industry.
 - b. Departments should engage with LSE PhD alumni now working in industry as much as possible. Furthermore, they should encourage collaboration with outside actors. This can take a variety of different forms - making students aware of opportunities in industry, providing funding for collaborative projects or allowing for external PhD supervisors.
3. The School should continue to invest in the skills training of PhD students with a particular focus on non-academic career preparation.
 - a. More programmes should instruct PhD candidates on how to market their skills in a non-academic environment.
 - b. Students should also have ample opportunity to receive guidance on which additional skills and qualifications would make them more employable in industry.
 - c. LSE PhD alumni should be encouraged to be involved as much as possible in this process.
4. COVID-19 and its detrimental effects on the academic job market should be used as a window of opportunity to normalize the conversation around career options for PhD students.