"No Fries with That: One Postgraduate Perspective"

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CONTEXT: *This paper was written while I was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland, Australia. It was presented at a postgraduate work-in-progress conference (convened by Robert Clarke and John Gunders) at the University of Queensland in 2002.*

ABSTRACT:
This presentation is focused on my own experiences of, and perspectives on, research postgraduate opportunities. I discuss strategies for staying sane and reality checks about the job market, 'networking', and other academic hobbies. How practical is it to expect an academic job these days?

I also want to examine the idea of non-academic work as a possibility, or probability, given the current employment climate in universities. In many ways, Arts & Humanities postgraduates are out in front of the general graduate workforce but postgraduate skills are often undervalued by graduates themselves, as well as prospective employers.

As my abstract indicates, this is not a stats-heavy presentation and I do not profess to be an expert on postgraduate trends. With these disclaimers in place, what I want to talk about today are some strategies, revelations, and short-cuts that I discovered during my time as a postgrad and multiply-employed student. My perspective is influenced, of course, by having worked in the UQ Graduate School for a couple of years after I finished my PhD, and also by the fact that I am ambivalent about whether I like what the academic job market has to offer these days.

On this note, let me start with the **academic job market**. Or lack thereof. When I say I'm ambivalent about the market, I am hardly spoilt for choice, and I am not referring to times when I've turned down a bevy of positions. Since I submitted my PhD in early 1999, there have been fewer than half a dozen lecturing jobs in Australia for which I would have applied with any confidence. There are a few other kinds of positions which I was offered, such as course-writing and preparing materials for on-line subjects, but they were either very short-term or too obliquely related to what I had researched, therefore requiring a lot more work on my part. My PhD research argues that the areas of Asian-Australian and Asian-Canadian literature fall between the cracks of established disciplines such as English literature and Asian Studies and I find myself doing the same when trying to align myself in the academic job market. I am in the position of being 'in demand' overseas as an expert on Asian-Australian and Asian-Canadian literary studies, particularly in Canada, and having very little hope of teaching in this area in an Australian university. At the moment, there is a bumper crop of jobs – all 3 or 4 of them – for which I could apply in Canada, one of them directly in my research and preferred teaching area of Asian diaspora and literary studies.

But I won't be applying.

I haven't mentioned another degree of difficulty when it comes to my gaining an academic teaching position: for the foreseeable future, I don't want to leave Brisbane.[1] As we all know, or have been told, it is an unimaginable vanity to decide where you want to work and on what terms. I get the impression from others that if I'm serious about my career, I'll take whatever comes along and just deal with the consequences of repeated dislocation and insecurity because it's all par for the course. For various personal reasons, I don't want to move. For

professional and sanity reasons, I decided not to take on shorter contract jobs which seemed too exploitative.

Some colleagues have offered me the well-intentioned encouragement that I will be able to find something because I've done well thus far *in spite of* the fact that I have studied for all of my degrees at the same institution. I would argue, usually politely and sometimes stridently, that I believe I have my current profile and set of opportunities *because of* my continued association with the same institution. Being at UQ all this time means that at every step – whether it be MA, PhD, or postdoc – I have been au fait with its processes and aware of its hierarchies and personalities. That's not to say that I wouldn't have gained the same information about other places but I do believe that, in saving myself this learning curve, the time was otherwise spent completing extra-curricular collaborative projects and gaining new academic networks through other channels. Given my non-academic trajectory post-PhD, having the same institutional affiliation also meant being able to maintain an academic persona while in a full-time policy and projects position.

In this day and age, with the communication tools we have at our disposal, the notion that one has to have a cosmopolitan pedigree to be a 'good' academic is an outdated one. And so is the idea that staying put should equal academic retardation. I would like to think that the quality and breadth of my professional work has not been compromised by the fact that I chose to remain in the same place.

Why am I telling you all this? Well, partially it's to give one of my hobby-horses an outing, but mostly it's to give validation to people who may be thinking that they would like to have a life as well as a career. Contrary to popular hand-wringing, you *can* choose where you want to be BUT it means making provision for being non-academic at various times and keeping a hand in conferences and publishing, and maintaining all your academic networks at these times. It's not the ideal choice because you are basically working two jobs – but then we don't live in a climate of ideal academic choices.

The next issue I want to talk about is **networking and other academic hobbies**.

I have always cringed at the thought of 'networking' because of the oily images it created. It seemed like a bunch of obligation and obsequiousness, self-promotion and being aggressively social. Most of my peers also cringed at the idea of networking though we were all told at various times by various people that it is important and necessary.

In the course of my postgraduate student-ship (all two degrees and 5 yrs of them) and the time since then, I have come around to the idea because I discovered several things:

1. Networking doesn't mean glad-handing big-wigs and 'selling yourself' while eating cocktail nibbles at various conferences.
2. It is done most effectively when you don't know you're doing it.
3. You don't even have to be on the same continent, AND
4. You don't have to be an insincere git.

A successful networker is responsive, active, dependable, and has initiative. Trying to get the thesis written as well as establish some sort of professional profile is demanding. Networking means building a web of research colleagues who may be in the next office, the campus across town, interstate, or overseas. It could be done at conferences, through electronic lists and email, in university

corridors, or on Hawaiian surfing beaches. The latter is not entirely frivolous – discussing possible projects with high profile academics in board-shorts was more effective than button-holing them after their panels and trying to get serious consideration in a crowd of thirty or more people. Timing is crucial.

I have never liked the preferential treatment given to "star" academics and, at conferences, I talk to whoever I want and not who I feel I should. Similarly, I never sat down and worked out how to build an academic profile – I just got involved with things that interested me. I couldn't imagine myself in a professional academic role until I was in one. In the past couple of years, it has become clear that the network operates on more levels than I would care to admit and it is embedded in the academic system whether I want to acknowledge it or not. Phil Agre, author of "Networking on the Network," has a phrase which resonated particularly for me: "cultivate a realistic awareness of power." This doesn't mean buying into power-plays or manipulation, but it does mean waking up to the prosaic processes of maintaining professional relationships and a key place in your field of study. It's not all about who you know, but if you don't know anyone and they don't know you then you're behind the 8-ball when it comes to applying for academic jobs, grants, getting published, and everything else that goes to make up a research career.

Given all that, I haven't changed the way I do things all that much, except to be more calculated about how much time I give to projects and weighing up whether the outcome will be worthwhile. It still has to be a project I believe in and must have people I want to work with, and I'm less likely to say yes to something just because someone asked me. If there is a particular institution or resource you want to get closer to, you'd be silly not to cultivate colleagues in those areas. Similarly, however, if you are not sure where you're headed or what you ultimately want to do, make sure you're building many bridges. Someone once said to me that you should never burn bridges in academia because it's such a small world. You never know when that person you've ostracised, criticised, or offended will end up in a position to make your life difficult. They may be one of your grant assessors, on an interview panel, a referee for one of your articles or book proposals, or even your next Head of Department.

The first lesson in building a profile is getting involved and participating in professional associations, conferences, and various groups (electronic and otherwise). That is, saying "yes" to a range of offers and opportunities. This includes applying for things like travel grants and essay competitions where, if you are successful, the material outcomes are funding for travel or a cash payment, and the professional outcomes are wider, stronger networks and a line in your CV that puts you a cut above others.

That said: the second lesson is knowing when your time is fully committed; that is, learning to say "No." It is much better to be known as someone who will deliver when they take something on, than to be involved in everything and then not following through. I have overcommitted myself on many occasions, then flogged myself to finish everything on time. This is not a recommended strategy if you want decent quality of life. Saying "No" to selected opportunities does not diminish the number of prospects you are offered. Others have said this before but I never believed them until years later. Once people get to know you and your work, it's surprising how long you stay on their radar.

To give you an example: recently, a prominent Asian-American academic invited me to a conference she was convening at the University of California (Berkeley). I've met this person only once and that was at a single panel of a huge sprawling conference (it happens to be the Hawaii's conference I mentioned earlier). She

had come up to me after my paper and asked for clarification about a reference and we chatted a bit about diasporic Asian studies. That was four years ago.

I'd like to share with you a few other examples from my academic life of how smaller events or encounters led to bigger opportunities:

1. In 1998, I was asked by the conveners to be a research assistant on one of the first ever Asian-Australian studies conferences. The outcomes were that I worked enough on the conference that they also made me a convener; I became co-editor of a subsequent published essay collection; and I initiated the creation of an academic e-list for Asian-Australian studies which has been running since 1999.

2. Also in 1998, I became the postgrad rep on a Canadian Studies Association committee. The opportunity arose because another postgrad wanted to hand on the position and we happened to have studied in the same department. Because I had scored a travel grant from this association the year before, I felt like I owed it something and joined up. I have been a committee member ever since and have also become the Association web and electronic list manager. For me, being in this association has opened up international networks of Canadianists and made me known to various staff at the Canadian High Commission in Canberra.

3. The third and last example I'll talk about occurred last year. I was invited to coffee by a senior colleague in my new School. It was a meet'n greet kind of situation, though I did kind of know this person through other channels. The chat laid the groundwork for the following: 2 book contracts, guest-editing a journal, and an invitation to be one of the editors for a series of publications on diasporic literary studies. It was certainly a case of being in the right place at the right time. This colleague wanted to be able to present Hong Kong UP with some book proposals and contacts as the commissioning editor was new and very enthusiastic about making her mark. Senior colleague was overcommitted, as is often the case, and I had the opportunity to put my own work forward.

Given this last instance, I would say 'never underestimate the power of a coffee chat.' Of course, the benefits from these initial encounters don't fall into your lap. It's not advisable to take up a position or role and then do nothing – the book contracts came about because I wrote proposals and revised the entire manuscript over the Xmas/NY break. Make sure you hold people to things they promise you (after making sure in your own mind that they had promised you something concrete), follow up on projects and deadlines, come up with new ideas and usher them through committees, and always be aware of labour exploitation. How you deal with this exploitation is up to you but know that it is prevalent and it's not just because you're a postgrad. For me, I balance what I gain with what I'm expected to do. For example, I've convened a few conferences now, and conference-ville is one zone where you know that new academics and postgrads will be exploited. I guess I've embraced the exploitation to a certain extent and made sure that my name was associated with key functions as opposed to spending heaps of time on things and then only being acknowledged as a 'committee'. There are perks to being the person who gets to associate directly with the delegates, or be in charge of the webpage or program scheduling:

- Keynoters and other delegates get to know you
- You gain excellent experience with planning, organisation, and negotiation, AND

- Because of time constraints and general apathy, committees will often be willing to rubber-stamp things that you've already worked out so you can let your autocratic side shine

Whatever you do, don't showboat or be too aggressive about getting your name on things. For academic earlybirds, getting your name out there usually means doing more work and taking over things that others don't want to do. Make sure you consider what the outcome of your labour is, and you're not just being a schmuck. In saying this, I don't mean that everything you do must have a direct impact on your professional profile. Sometimes, making yourself known to other conference committee members as a willing and savvy worker is all you need (or want) to do and this can pay off later on.

The skills and outcomes that you gain from the various activities associated with networking will be useful whether or not you continue in academia.

Which brings us to the last section of this presentation: the prospect of **non-academic work**. This is intended for those of you who may not be interested in an academic career path or who want to be prepared should an academic position not materialise in time to stave off an angry landlord.

I have worked in the private sector (for MIM Holdings), in government (for what was then the Commonwealth Dept of Employment, Education, and Training), and in a non-academic university position. I have been in a range of hiring situations (on both sides of the table) and these are a few bits of advice I've gathered.

During my time at the UQ Graduate School, through anecdotal evidence and in my own experience, it is obvious that Humanities graduates are usually streets ahead in terms of oral and written communication skills, analytical and information processing, critical thinking, and adaptability in the workplace. While they may not be 'work-ready' for certain positions, it doesn't take them long to absorb new information, work out the hierarchy and politics, learn new software if necessary, and become fully functional in the role.

I wish I could give you a breakdown of what companies or govt depts are hiring and what they are looking for but it's an open field. Finding non-academic work for humanities folks is usually easier if you've had previous work experience (including part-time or casual positions) or have occupied a particular kind of role in academia (eg. web work, editing, events organisation, etc). You never know when that bitsy job will turn into a key example of "demonstrated experience in X, Y, and Z" on a job application.

Here's an example of the knock-on effect from casual work, inadvertent networking, and a touch of luck: I was a graduate assistant at the UQ Library internet research training courses a few times and one of these times I worked with another PhD student who was about to submit his thesis. He went on to get a full-time contract job with the Dept of Public Works and Housing as an internet trainer. Then he scored a job as a researcher at the United Nations Climate Change Working Party in Bonn (as you do). He immediately recommended me as his replacement and, a short interview later, I had a two-month full-time position with a decent casual rate. This nest-egg saw me through the last part of my PhD when scholarship money had run out and I wasn't taking on any teaching so I could concentrate on writing up.

For many postgrads, the main problem with writing job applications is that humanities students don't recognise their marketable aspects and fail to package their skills properly. Also, employers often don't recognise what postgraduates do

in terms of skill bases. If you are going to write in a job application that you taught uni students for X number of semesters, spell out what this entails as most employers are going to be unaware of what actually goes into teaching a university class. Chances are tutoring involved organisation and planning skills, a high level of oral and written communication, an ability to work with standard protocols, and negotiation skills. This is not padding out what you have to offer – it IS what you offer.

The biggie is, of course, the fact that you have done or are doing a major piece of research and writing. Break this down into skill bases as well. Chances are, unless you luck onto a position that is asking for your expertise directly in the area of your research, what you are doing is promoting your range of skills and experience in a relatively generic way.

If you've joined a few associations and done a bit of extracurricular work or performed other academic duties, it is useful to pinpoint the skills associated with each of these roles. Below is a table with some examples of things you might have done and how you can quantify the experience.

EXAMPLES OF TRANSLATING ACTIVITIES INTO SKILLS

ROLE/TASK	SKILLS
Giving conference papers or seminars	• High level oral and written communication • Public speaking
Organise conferences	• Planning and organisation • Liaising with different client groups • Marketing and publicity • Budgeting (financial management) • Committee consultation
Doing web work at whatever level of expertise	• "Expertise with 4 types of web page software, including Dreamweaver and Flash…" • Liaising with client groups • Attention to detail • Editing • Creating content • Layout and design • Planning and organisation
Holding positions on committees/ associations	• Consultation and negotiation • Examples of initiative or new ideas – were they implemented? • Networking • Representing association • Preparing reports/minutes

Think laterally about your future and what you want to do.

If you think academic life is your calling, do everything you can to make sure you're well-positioned for jobs and well-embedded in collegial networks.

If you like the research, analysis, and writing process but don't want to be an academic, build a self-evident skill-base while getting your degree.

I want to finish by giving you a snapshot of where I'm going in my post-postgraduate Future:

I have just found out that I missed getting an Australian Research Council Postdoc Fellowship for 2003. Given the unlikelihood of teaching positions becoming available, I may well be out of academia once again early next year.

That said, I have been invited to present a paper in San Francisco at the next Asian American Association Studies conference in May, and also to Vancouver to work with some colleagues on a project about racialisation and community-building. I currently have two book contracts, am co-editor of an Asian-Australian literature anthology, and guest-editing a special issue of a national journal. What this means is that (aside from being kind of busy), though I may be technically non-academic for a while, the professional profile will keep on operating.

While the outlook for academic jobs is not the most promising, remember that you always have options. Everyone's experiences and backgrounds are different and their career trajectories will be similarly diverse.

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[1] **UPDATE:** This paper was written in October 2002 and, since then, circumstances changed and opportunities arose. I did end up moving from Brisbane. I am currently based in Melbourne as a Monash University Research Fellow (in the National Centre for Australian Studies; 2004-2009). It is a dream job: research only, generous funding and with a very supportive Centre behind me. The question remains: did I manage to work up the CV to get this position *in spite of* or *because of* my time at the one institution?