

# Destinations® and Beyond the PhD

Jessica March, David Stanbury and Catherine Reynolds

*The Centre for Career Management Skills (CCMS) at the University of Reading  
a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL)*

The Centre for Career Management Skills (CCMS) at the University of Reading CETL has created two different web resources for two different audiences – taking two different approaches. *Destinations®* is a teaching and learning website addressing generic careers themes and is licensed to universities and colleges. *Beyond the PhD*, on the other hand, is a non-didactic resource tailored specifically for arts and humanities PhDs, and is open access.

Both sites illustrate the different advantages of using information communication technology in a careers context and apply broad principals of web design to different career learning tasks. Both approaches are alert to the distinct requirements of the autonomous and the guided user, and both resources have been developed to be used independently and in group work.

## Content *Beyond the PhD*

Arts and humanities PhDs do not have well trodden career paths, it may be argued, when compared to those in engineering and the sciences. Other than in academic related careers, where do people with arts and humanities PhDs tend to work? *Beyond the PhD* was conceived and developed to address this question. It brings together a desire to make visible what happens to postgraduate researchers after they graduate and an ambition to avoid easy prescriptions of 'getting your perfect job'.

*Beyond the PhD* offers a rare opportunity to listen in on the experiences of 28 people from HEIs across the UK, at different ages and stages of life, who have been through the PhD in an arts and humanities discipline and made the transition into a variety of work, both in and outside academia. Their candid personal reflections on facing challenges, responding to opportunities and reaching decisions are captured in almost 300 audio clips.

Audio was the chosen medium for these career stories for a variety of reasons. PhD researchers, the main target audience, spend most of their time reading and looking at computer screens, so we purposefully provided an alternative medium in *Beyond the PhD*. Additionally, by literally giving voice to the experience of the postgraduate researcher, the narratives we captured have the ring of authenticity. It is arguably more compelling to listen to someone describe the highs and lows of their career

development than to read a mediated and abridged account of them. For those who want to skim or read the interview clip instead of listening, or before listening, each clip is accompanied by a full transcript.

Each interview is segmented into clips which can be searched and organised in a variety of ways: by keyword search; by viewing each interviewee's clips on their profile page; or by browsing clips by theme. These options give the end user the option of following one career story or picking a topic and seeing how different people talk about it.

While the project team was alert to the importance of being representative, it would never have been possible to include a comprehensive spread of PhD disciplines and career paths – indeed the possible combinations are as multifarious as the people you could interview. We did achieve a good scatter of subjects, disciplines, ages, employment sectors, genders etc, but it was never our intention for users to find their exact fit among the profiles – even if the repository of interviews was inexhaustible, there would simply be too many variables and conditioning influences for this to be possible.

In addition to biographical interviews, this site also features articles by those with a personal or professional interest in the career development of PhD researchers. Addressing the postgraduate user, they tackle questions about, for example, how to interpret the statistical data about the career destinations of arts and humanities PhDs, and how employers outside academia perceive PhD researchers in the arts and humanities. There are also video clips of small groups in discussion about similar issues from a professional perspective. The purpose of these video discussions is to make the user privy to the types of discussions that tend to go on *about* them, rather than *with* them. In the first group, careers advisers focus on the nature of career guidance and what PhD researchers might expect to gain from it; the range of work that arts and humanities postgraduates are drawn into; and how the PhD thesis can be reframed, and the postgraduate experience translated, in applications for non-academic jobs.

In the second discussion group, academic skills trainers focus on the government agenda for skills training for postgraduates in the arts and humanities and how this is being realised in universities; the particular limits and challenges of skills training in arts and humanities disciplines; the role of supervisors in equipping postgraduates for academic careers, and the growing professionalisation of academia.

*Beyond the PhD* aims to complement rather than replace the existing support for PhD researchers, and a select list of online and print resources covering a range of postgraduate career related issues is available via our 'Links' page.

## Voice

Site-text is solely (and economically) employed to guide the user around the site and to enable them to find and access relevant material as easily as possible. There is no 'voice of authority' but this is not to say that the site is wholly neutral. Rather it contains a range of authoritative voices, audible in the view points and opinions expressed across the articles, videoed discussions and audio content.

*Beyond the PhD* seeks to address the kinds of questions that preoccupy postgraduate researchers, to which the only possible answers are subjective ones: how do people reach the decision to pursue an academic career or to explore other options? How do those with a clear sense of direction get to where they want to be? What is the impact on an individual's career direction when they don't get shortlisted for the first few jobs they apply for? How long do people cleave to long-held career aspirations in the face of pragmatic pressures like paying the bills? When do people decide to take a job outside academia, and how do they reconcile that with the academic identity that has been under construction during the years of postgraduate study?

*Beyond the PhD* is a departure from approaches to careers resources which offer a "how to" methodology. It borrows from the constructivist approach endorsed by those such as Polly Parker who writes that "[i]n a 'boundaryless' career world, it is the internally generated subjective career, rather than the externally directed objective career, that can best guide the individual" (Parker, 2006, 179). The subjective voice that Parker refers to here is that of the person *exploring* their career, but *Beyond the PhD* employs the subjective voices of those who have *been through* the transition from PhD to life afterwards. The person who is *exploring* can therefore assess and reassess their subjective reality in light of someone else's – namely the person or persons whose experience resonates with their own. It is through listening to the choices and dilemmas faced by someone else, and hearing how they retrospectively make sense of them, which induces the listener's own powers of discernment. In short, other people's experiences have the potential to throw light on our own – our own predicament becomes more clearly understood when we have recognised it as someone else's.

## Uses

*Beyond the PhD* has received over 11,000 visitors since its launch in January 2009, and has gained enthusiastic feedback. A PhD researcher recently wrote: "the site ... offers a balanced and surprising selection of comments. It

was great to hear people assessing all the options involved in staying in academia or going out into the 'real' world. This is a very comforting and encouraging website which I'll be dipping into over the next year or so."

Additionally, careers professionals are using *Beyond the PhD* in group sessions, selecting interviews to demonstrate different stages, approaches, attitudes and emotional responses to career development at different stages of the PhD process. Learning aims from sessions such as these might typically involve learners:

- Interrogating and developing their own concept of career
- Envisaging and evaluating some alternative futures
- Thinking creatively about how their subject discipline supports their approach to career learning
- Learning about resources to support their career development

At the University of Sussex, all of these aims have been met in group sessions using *Beyond the PhD* as the main resource. Clips from the career stories of PhDs are used to stimulate discussion and generate new ideas. Participants in these sessions enjoy the authentic voices of their peers and value the honesty of their stories. The style of the resource suits very well PhDs in the arts and humanities who habitually de-construct language to elicit meaning and so discussions stimulated by the audio clips are interesting, meaningful and lengthy.

An advantage of the resource in practical terms is that it gives careers services access to a range and variety of different experiences without having to invite in so many individual speakers.

## Further development

The site is coherent as it stands but there is scope for further development. We plan to add new interviews, covering more disciplines and career areas, for example, and we are exploring ways to develop additional resources to support professional educators to design group sessions based around the site. These might include session plans, handouts and clusters of complementary clips. Updating the site will keep it fresh and add value. We are also developing interactive functionality so that the Postgraduate researcher user can make their own contribution to the bank of experiences. *Beyond the PhD* has also laid the foundations for similar resources to be developed for other PGR communities.

## Content destinations®

*Destinations®* covers broad career themes, including decision making, opportunity awareness, transition learning and self-awareness, delivered through 16 topics,

such as: 'Managing your career' and 'Postgraduate directions'. Typically, each topic is subdivided into 5-7 sections, with each section composed of a number of pages. The look, layout and content of the site aims to enhance learner engagement. 'Click-and-reveal' text entices users to find out more by uncovering hidden text or answering questions. The pages provide a range of resources: worksheets that can be downloaded and completed off-line, such as forms for work experience reflection; on-screen activities, such as card-sort exercises; and embedded videos of employers, alumni and students drawn from a range of UK universities. In all there are 50 downloads and 150 video clips which can be found easily using a searchable library.

Site structure is based on re-usable learning objects; 're-usable' by virtue of being entirely self-contained, each page makes sense on its own and none of the core pages specifically refers to any other page.

Designing pages as re-usable learning objects means that there is no prescribed path through the site. Someone browsing the site can choose their own route, and pages that strike a user as irrelevant can be bypassed. Rather than requiring the reader to progress through a fixed pathway that 'pushes' information at the user, the site enables the user to 'pull' down only those pages that appeal.

This approach also has important implications for curriculum purposes. The site has a dedicated staff area which contains lesson ideas, assessment examples and curriculum models. The site design and navigation has consistently been positively rated by focus groups as appealing and easy to use.

## Voice

*Destinations*® adopts a tone that is informal without being overly casual. It is written in plain English and avoids idiomatic expressions. The text aims to encourage an attitude to career development that is positive without being naively optimistic. The writing is active and engaging. Readers are enjoined to consider how they wish to respond to the text rather than being told they 'must' act in a particular way.

The voice is that of an informed professional mirroring the accepting non-directive stance used in careers guidance. Nevertheless, the site inevitably adopts a position. It assumes, for example, that a broadly planful and reflective approach aided by accurate up-to-date information is likely to be conducive to career development. Similarly, it embodies many other cultural assumptions, about, for example, individual choice and client autonomy. In this regard the 'neutrality' of the voice in *Destinations*® is more apparent than actual. Its value-free appearance is deceptive because, of course, no communication can be completely devoid of values. The voice of the 'objective' author of the

site, however, is shared with other voices from the unscripted videos of students, alumni and employers.

## Uses

For teaching and learning purposes the site is intended to be used as a resource that students are directed to through a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) such as Blackboard or Moodle. A VLE provides a dedicated space for a particular course – a course module – that is only accessible to those enrolled on the course. A VLE module enables a tutor to create a series of linked pages that contain course information, learning activities and links to relevant resources. Because *Destinations*® is composed of re-usable learning objects, it can be 'deep-linked' to from a VLE using hyper-links. In this way a tutor can pick out those pages that are specifically applicable to the course learning outcomes.

This flexibility to adapt to the needs of very different careers education programmes enables *Destinations*® to support a diverse range of curriculum initiatives. At the University of Reading, *Destinations*® underpins delivery of a five credit module component – Career Management Skills – via Blackboard, to around 40 programme areas. *Destinations*® has also been licensed to 45 other educational organisations in the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

The original intention for *Destinations*® was to improve the design and delivery of careers education by providing extensive, flexible resources that could be adapted by different institutions. The anticipated gains from *Destinations*® focused upon improvements to student learning and the creation of bespoke courses of careers education that were more responsive to the needs of different student groups. However, *Destinations*® has also led to a wider range of unanticipated benefits. One such gain has seen careers staff further develop a pedagogically aware approach to careers education. To a significant extent this development has been triggered by the structure of *Destinations*®. Where careers services have used *Destinations*® with a VLE to deliver careers education there has often been a deeper engagement of staff with teaching and learning issues. This has been because the non-directional nature of the site requires staff to carefully select which parts of the site to direct their students to. This simple but fundamental feature has led to a more deliberative attitude to the deployment of web-based resources by staff. They have had to carefully link learning activities and resources with course learning outcomes. Furthermore, using a VLE places a priority upon the sequence of online learning activities to ensure that students are introduced to resources in the optimal order. Additionally, the impetus provided by *Destinations*® has propelled many careers services to enthusiastically embrace use of a VLE, where previously VLE use was marginal to careers practice.

Another unanticipated impact of *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> has been at an institutional level. In a number of instances the acquisition of *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> by a careers service has helped the service project itself onto a wider stage within its university. Services have attributed this to several features of *Destinations*<sup>®</sup>: the fact that *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> is a teaching and learning resource (rather than a collection of advice and information); the quality of the product; the fact that it is owned and controlled by the service (rather than by another part of the university); and the right for institutions to edit and add to the content, as well as change the appearance to fit the local context; Birmingham University and Bradford University, for example, have incorporated videos of local students and employers into the site.

Together these factors have provided a credible platform for careers services to strategically engage with their institutions' teaching and learning agenda. *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> lends its self to diverse curricula and extra-curricula uses ranging from one-off workshops to substantial programmes of careers education. The University of Ulster's Career Development Centre (CDC) for example, is using *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> to support careers education work with multiple undergraduate programmes across the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences, as well as with taught masters and PhD students. These interventions encompass credit bearing modules that CDC owns, designs and assesses, as well as assessed modules that CDC contributes to, and non-assessed workshops.

Practically, use of *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> plays out in different ways. For example, a tutor could ask students to view videos *before* a lecture, complete worksheets from the site *during* the session and require students to read parts of the site *afterwards* for an assignment.

The site also has an important role in facilitating the exchange of material and expertise between careers educators. Institutions that have the site are encouraged to support each other by belonging to the *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> Community. Members of the community have access to the *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> Community Google Group. Using this online forum, members can upload and share curriculum material and new content for *Destinations*<sup>®</sup>. Limerick University, which has extensively modified *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> to the Irish graduate labour market, strikingly illustrates the possibilities for collaborative working, having shared their material with 15 other institutions in the Republic of Ireland.

Supporting individual users is another important dimension of *Destinations*<sup>®</sup>. Many institutions are starting to draw on the site when providing individual guidance to clients. An exciting innovation that will make this easier is the recent development of advice pages. These advice pages, jointly produced by CCMS and the University of Roehampton, address questions students typically raise during advice sessions. For example, questions about seeking work

experience, developing career plans and preparing for assessment centres. Each advice page takes one such question and addresses it by referring the reader to relevant sections within *Destinations*<sup>®</sup>. In this way the advice pages help to direct the unguided reader to relevant resources using a needs-based learning approach.

## Further development

CCMS is currently adding to *Destinations*<sup>®</sup>. We are in the process of writing two new Topics ('Using Recruitment Agencies' and 'Making the Transition into HE') and commissioning a suite of supporting videos. On top of this, CCMS expects to be able to release further material and interactive exercises in the coming year. We hope that the *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> Community will play a key part in further extending and renewing the site through becoming a fully fledged community of practice. If everyone in the community, for example, added one extra item a year (a few pages, a video, etc) the whole community would benefit from around 40 possible additions and updates to the site on an annual basis. Thus it could become an open, collaborative resource which is nonetheless tailored for (and at) each institution.

## Conclusion

Both *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> and *Beyond the PhD* illustrate different advantages of using information communication technology in a careers context and both approaches are alert to the distinct requirements of the autonomous and the guided user, but the approaches, as we have demonstrated, are not the same. *Destinations* is locally owned by its users and can be adapted by them. By contrast, *Beyond the PhD* is centrally owned and can only be adapted and updated by CCMS. *Beyond the PhD* is audio-led with adjunct text and video, while *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> is text-led with adjunct audio and video. *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> is aimed at educational course design, with the potential to also be used by independent users. *Beyond the PhD* is primarily designed for independent use, but also has applications in group settings or educational courses. *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> aims at an objective neutral style while *Beyond the PhD* explicitly brings together a range of subjective voices and experiences as a vehicle for reflection and exploration.

Indeed, what both sites demonstrate is that careers education is not limited to being one thing done in one particular way. *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> covers much territory and is 'comprehensive', becoming increasingly so as its users add further material. *Beyond the PhD* cannot and will not evolve in this way because of the discrete nature of the content. The 'careers' emphasis in *Beyond the PhD* is contemplative rather than didactically pragmatic; it is more about life stories than 'finding and securing employment'. Personal stories do feature in *Destinations*<sup>®</sup> but with a different purpose and with a secondary emphasis.

The story of *Destinations*® shows that a teaching tool has the potential to catalyze wider innovations and to impact on the changing professional identity of careers staff as careers educators. As for *Beyond the PhD*, while it is a more humble enterprise, it opens up new ways of envisaging how postgraduate researchers and other student communities can engage with employability and career-related learning. In this way it has enormous potential to influence and even revolutionise other career websites and forms of learning through engagement with personal narratives and life stories, especially those mediated through the use of audio.