

Persevering post-PhD: contemporary issues for early-career academics

Karol Mullaney-Dignam

National University of Ireland Maynooth

The rising levels of educational attainment in the Republic of Ireland are highlighted by the 2011 Census of Population reports published by the Central Statistics Office in 2012. Configured data contained in the penultimate report reveals that 31% of the population held a third-level qualification in 2011, an increase from 14% in 1991, and that 21,970 people held Level 10 (PhD) qualifications, of which 2,848 (13%) were in the Arts and Humanities. Although these statistics do not reflect the total number of doctorates awarded by Irish higher education institutions before April 2011 – or take into account the numbers of awardees who have emigrated in search of employment – they represent a significant 52% growth on 2006 figures.²⁴ Furthermore, despite the challenging economic milieu and an overall decline in postgraduate enrolments, figures published by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for 2011 show that full-time enrolment on PhD research programmes in HEA-funded institutions continues to increase.²⁵ While any expansion of access to the highest levels of educational attainment can only be welcomed, the steady build-up of PhD graduates in the Humanities with few or no employment prospects in academia must be seen as an undesirable outcome.

A prevalent issue among aspirant academics is the general lack of clarity surrounding the position, status and function of those in the post-doctoral phase of their career and the variety of existing definitions of the so-called ‘postdoc’ in the wider academic community.²⁶ This is particularly relevant to humanities researchers who tend to work independently, with the support of a mentor, or under the supervision of a Principal Investigator on a team project. Combined with a general uncertainty about other contributions made by PhD graduates who continue or commence affiliations with higher education institutions, both situations are frequently interpreted as mere extensions of the postgraduate student experience, a perception which is endemic at administrative levels and beyond. Accurate, up-to-date databases of persons employed as contract researchers, postdoctoral or otherwise, are infrequently maintained, for instance, hampering the

²⁴ Central Statistics Office, *Census 2011 Profile Report 9: What We Know – Education, skills and the Irish language* (Dublin, 2012), p. 9, p. 20.

²⁵ Higher Education Authority (HEA), *Key Facts and Figures 2010/11* (Dublin, 2012), p. 42-7. There were 7,512 full-time PhD enrolments in 2010/2011 of which 1,312 were in the Humanities and Arts (not taking into account a further 91 enrolled in Department of Education and Skills or other department aided institutions [p. 116]). This represents a dramatic 65% upsurge since 2006.

²⁶ Irish Universities Association (IUA), *Building research careers: the postdoctoral experience* [Proceedings of a conference held by the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities, 4-5 May 2005] (Dublin, 2005), passim.

development of institutional research communities as well as the delivery of targeted communications pertinent to early career development.²⁷ Consequently, there are substantial departmental variations in the integration levels of postdoctoral employees, especially full-time contract researchers. The majority of representative organizations, moreover, act on behalf of ‘research staff’ but not all researchers in the tertiary sector are necessarily post-doctorate or embarking on an academic career and not all post-doctorates are researchers.²⁸

It is generally accepted that of course few PhD holders in any discipline will immediately secure a full-time academic position, research-focused or otherwise, and more than 50 per cent will seek non-academic employment.²⁹ Yet, one need only glance at the numbers applying for postdoctoral research fellowships in recent years to deduce an inundation of would-be academics in the Humanities. In 2012, for instance, there were 94 applicants for 3 Postdoctoral Fellowships awarded by the National University of Ireland; 17 were shortlisted for interview. (A parallel NUI competition for 2 fellowships in the Sciences attracted just 14 applicants.)³⁰

Table 1: IRCHSS Postdoctoral Fellowship Applications and Awards, 2005-2011³¹

| Year | Applications | Awards | Success Rate |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| 2005 | 80 | 23 | 29% |
| 2006 | 116 | 22 | 19% |
| 2007 | 133 | 22 | 17% |
| 2008 | 97 | 28 | 29% |
| 2009 | 154 | 26 | 17% |
| 2010 | 253 | 25 | 10% |
| 2011 | 176 | 34 | 19% |

²⁷ This was certainly the author’s experience as a nominated representative of contracted postdoctoral fellows in the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy at NUI Maynooth and as a member of the university’s Post-doctoral Executive Board inaugurated in 2011.

²⁸ Established in 2007, the Irish Research Staff Association (<http://www.irsa.ie/>) serves as the national representative network for research staff associations in higher education institutions, the majority of which represent contracted researchers. At time of writing, NUI Maynooth appears to have the only institution-led, designated *postdoctoral* researcher forum with equal representation for practitioners in the Arts and Humanities.

²⁹ IUA, *The future of the PhD in Ireland: attracting and retaining postgraduate researchers in Irish universities* [Proceedings of a conference held by the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities, 9-10 November 2004] (Dublin, 2006), p. 8-9.

³⁰ Dr Attracta Halpin, Registrar, National University of Ireland, to the author, 30 November 2012.

³¹ IRCHSS Data Report, 2008-2011; IRCHSS Annual Report 2010; IRCHSS Annual Report 2011. These reports are available online at <http://www.research.ie/>, accessed 1 November 2012.

Prior to its merger with the Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology (IRCSET), applications for postdoctoral fellowships awarded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS), had increased from 80 in 2005 to 176 in 2011 with a dramatic peak of 253 in 2010 (see Table 1). (This mirrored developments at postgraduate level where applications for scholarships increased from 293 in 2005 to 537 in 2011 with a peak of 625 in 2010.) Given the intense competition for research fellowships – increasingly seen as a necessary first step along an academic career path – and few imminent options for progression even for those who have held a fellowship contract, budding academics increasingly find themselves in a nebulous post-PhD limbo.

The problem is compounded by the fact that there is a strengthening cohort of humanities PhD holders in Irish universities who do not formally occupy ‘postdoctoral’ positions as individual researchers or in research teams but who work as part-time, non-contract teachers.³² In saturated disciplines such as history they are increasingly forced to pursue an academic career on a voluntary basis, maintaining an academic profile and currency in their curriculum vitae by way of continued research, publications, conference organization, guest lecturing and other means. What is most disquieting is that some have already held contract posts but, given the limited jobs market, have not had opportunities to advance much further along the academic career path. Their designation in many institutions as ‘occasional’ staff implies that their contributions to university life are random, sporadic or by chance, when in fact many devise, deliver and assess entire undergraduate and postgraduate courses, usually for little remuneration. Moreover, much if not all of the emphasis in graduate programmes is on research – as are all of the postdoctoral fellowships on offer – but there seems to be little concern for cultivating quality teaching despite this being an important facet of many academic careers in the Humanities.

Acknowledging that early career academics are ultimately responsible for their own career development and a myriad of difficulties posed by the current economic climate, there are some challenges particular to the Humanities which might be obviated with institutional support. Most pressing is the need for more structured employment frameworks that would address the widening gap between the award of a PhD and a first contract post and between that and any further appointment. Such frameworks might also illuminate career paths which have less ambiguous role definitions, which are supported by transparent contract management policies as well as consistent recruitment processes for which information is more readily available. (Thus, it would be imperative that such frameworks be administered by Human Resources and/or Research Support personnel with backgrounds in the Humanities.) These processes have recently begun in some Irish universities but the focus tends to be where elements of structure already exist, in other

³² European University Institute, ‘Ireland, Academic Career Structure’ (2011) available at <http://www.eui.eu/ProgrammesAndFellowships/AcademicCareersObservatory/AcademicCareersbyCountry/Ireland.aspx>, accessed 1 November 2012).

words in science, engineering and technology research areas which comprise the majority of the post-doctoral population.³³ Years of investment in postgraduate humanities education has led to the development of more structured research programmes with a wide range of resources and supports, as well as dedicated and widely accessible information; this has evidently generated expectations of academic employment, or at very least a culture of ‘staying on’ in an academic environment.³⁴ Similar resources have not been devoted to those applying for or commencing in postdoctoral positions in humanities disciplines; many have begun contracts (often having received funding on the basis of a good idea and the support of a well appointed mentor) largely unaware of key performance indicators, requirements in terms of training or expectations in relation to profile enhancement. Having this kind of information available towards the end of structured research programmes would enable potential academics to make more informed decisions when considering their early career development.

The ‘solution’ habitually proffered by mentors, senior colleagues and advisory staff to the employment crisis amongst early career academics in Ireland is ‘emigration’ to other Anglophone countries but there is little conclusive evidence to suggest that the situation for practitioners in the Arts and Humanities is very much better abroad. However, what academic institutions in such places as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America do appear to offer is: better discourse on the plight of the early career academic; more research and information on academic and non-academic employment prospects and patterns; better integration between junior and senior colleagues; more evident concern for fostering and retaining academic talent.³⁵ Besides, Irish universities have a longstanding international reputation for scholarship in the Humanities, and as custodians of heritage and culture, which should translate into employment for early career academics. The HEA reported in 2011 that the Arts and Humanities were on a par with the Social Sciences, Business and Law as the most popular fields of undergraduate study for non-Irish, non-domiciled new entrants in 2010 – and

³³ See, for example, details of the Research Careers Framework at University College Dublin available at <http://www.ucd.ie/hr/rcf/>. Trinity College Dublin has also launched an Early Career Mentoring Initiative to support new and recently appointed academics in their first 3 years of service. See: http://www.tcd.ie/hr/development/staff/mentoring_early_career.php, accessed 1 November 2012.

³⁴ This ‘staying on’ phenomenon was identified by University of Oxford’s Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice which has examined the career paths and experiences of recent Social Science PhD graduates working in academia in the UK and USA. See http://www.apprise.ox.ac.uk/academic_career_paths/, accessed 1 November 2012.

³⁵ For examples, see Prospects, the UK’s official graduate careers website, http://www.prospects.ac.uk/your_phd_what_next_academic_jobs.htm; University of Manchester, Careers & Employability Division website, <http://www.academiccareer.manchester.ac.uk/>; Guardian News and Media Ltd’s Higher Education Network, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network>; websites of the National Postdoctoral Association, USA, <http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/>, and the American Historical Association, www.historians.org/; UniJobs, Australia’s university jobs website, <http://www.unijobs.com.au/>; the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada *University Affairs* magazine and website, <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/Careers.aspx>. All sites accessed 1 November 2012.

have been consistently since 2006. However, this has not been sustained at ‘research’ level where study in the natural and life sciences has by far the most enrolments.³⁶

The so-called ‘knowledge economy’ in Ireland should not be the monopoly of practitioners in the Sciences, Engineering and Technology but this is increasingly becoming the case. With no strengthening of the academic job market in sight and no apparent end to the oversupply of aspiring academics, higher education institutions would do well to ensure that the social and cultural impact of humanities research is more widely appreciated and that its future is secured.³⁷ The provision of greater opportunities for the commercialization of ‘knowledge’ in the Humanities and greater engagement with relevant industries, particularly in the heritage, culture and tourism sectors, might alleviate the burden of employment expectation among those persevering post-PhD in the tertiary education sector. It might also lead to the recognition of non-traditional performance indicators in academic appointment, tenure and promotion assessments and, eventually, less need to continually reiterate the public ‘value’ of the Humanities.

³⁶ HEA, *Key Facts and Figures 2010/11* (Dublin, 2012), p. 110-11.

³⁷ Royal Irish Academy, *Advancing Humanities and Social Sciences Research in Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), passim.