"I Am More Passionate About Supporting Researchers Than with Any Research I Did During My PhD"

Andrew Rowe

Abstract In our interview with Andrew Rowe, he shares his journey from a transport studies PhD to managing researcher training and development. Inspired by supporting peers, Andrew realised academia was not his passion. He now develops workshops and initiatives to support researchers' needs. Andrew continues applying research skills like critical thinking, presenting, and project management. He encourages finishing PhDs to be proactive in gaining experience, use social media strategically, and utilise campus career services. Andrew advises finding what you're passionate about.

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Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Andrew: I'm Andrew, a Researcher Training and Development Manager at the University of Nottingham. I work for the Researcher Academy in a highly skilled and passionate team who promote healthy research cultures and provide support to enable our researchers to flourish. We provide training and development opportunities for all researchers at the university, from postgraduate researchers right up to senior leaders. Our researcher community is at the very heart of everything we do and we take great pride in the sheer number of opportunities we are able to offer them. We have completely revamped our training to connect researchers with the skills they need to take their specialism out into the big, wide world. We have specific programmes of training for research staff and supervisors and sessions which cover foundational skills and knowledge that all researchers should possess. We also offer specialist training programmes. Themes covered include: Innovation and Knowledge Exchange, Policy Engagement, Public Engagement, Research Administration and Management, Research Methods, and Research Communication. I convene, teach and lead on the latter of these programmes which lends to the skills and knowledge I developed whilst doing my own doctorate.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I technically have a PhD in Transport Studies from Loughborough University (graduating in 2017) and was based in the school of Architecture, Building and Civil Engineering. My research looked at new media technologies (specifically Twitter and Facebook) and the challenges and opportunities these bring when they are incorporated into existing protest campaigns, through a case study of long-standing campaigns against the expansion of Heathrow Airport. You can see that this really isn't engineering focused at all and it was more relevant to my undergraduate degree background in human geography. To be honest, the research was incredibly multidisciplinary and was influenced by other areas such as computer science,

information science, sociology, human factors and environmental politics. Mixed methods research was also very much at the foundation of my thesis and I would say that this has made me an 'all-rounder'.

Firstly, my interest in the many parts of the Occupy Movement started me on this path. I was fascinated by how these campaigns organised and mobilised. The anti-Heathrow expansion aspect evolved from the work I'd done at the undergraduate level. Some of these campaign groups were transient in nature, whilst others had been active for long periods of time. It became clear that these long-standing groups had had to adapt and change over time with the advent of more contemporary communication tools; and it was trying to understand the issues around this change in approach that led me down this path. Secondly, social media piqued my interest too, particularly with how a message could reach so many people, at very little financial cost, and still have the potential to have a huge impact. Then, I fell down the rabbit-hole of social network theory and analysis and the 6-degrees of separation idea that any person on the planet can be connected by five other intermediaries (made famous by the "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" game!) I managed to incorporate all of these interests together into a thesis. So, you can see how it became such an inter-disciplinary piece of research.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career lans?

I'd been thinking about my post-PhD career since 2014 (I started my PhD in 2012). I had developed a real passion for supporting other postgraduate researchers through the doctoral journey, so much so that a friend and I created a university-wide support (and social) network for postgraduate researchers. It was a peer support initiative designed to get PGRs together on a Tuesday lunchtime to take some time away from our research, to meet new people and just talk to each other – a simple concept really, but it worked. We won numerous university awards for the scheme, which was brilliant, and I believe it is still running today, several years after we graduated. I developed some great relationships with staff in the Doctoral College and got to know what they did and the role they played in supporting PGRs. It was very soon after setting up this initiative that I decided supporting PGRs, more formally, was something I really wanted to pursue; and fortunately, I've found my dream job.

I knew, after this fire was ignited, that an academic career wasn't for me; in part because of the mental and emotional exhaustion doing my research had put on me, but actually I really wanted to pass on my knowledge and experience to other PGRs and support them along their own doctoral journey. I must say that after I passed my viva, I was fortunate to get three papers published, with my incredibly supportive supervisor, and I tried to ride the crest of that wave which led to me applying for a couple of grants with an encouraging and dedicated mentor at the University of Nottingham; but ultimately the fire for doing more academic research burnt out.

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

My job is incredibly varied and no 2 days are the same, which is why I love it. We design our provision and activities to make sure that by the time our researchers leave the university, they have developed a well-rounded, transferable skill set to apply them to their future careers. As well as leading, and teaching, on the Researcher Academy's Research Communication Programme, some other parts of my job entail:

- Supporting the training and development of Faculty of Science researchers alongside a senior academic, who is the interface between the Researcher Academy and Faculty of Science.
- Teaching some of our other courses in our Researcher Fundamentals Programme related to constructing a literature review, how to be an effective doctoral researcher and mixed methods research, to name a few.
- Designing, developing and delivering training. I have the opportunity to create course content, across platforms, through synchronous, asynchronous and hybrid delivery.
- Representing the Researcher Academy on certain school level postgraduate researcher committees.
- Managing a dedicated networking and collaborative space for researchers over at our Sutton Bonington campus.
- Providing training for some of the University's Doctoral Training Programmes and Centres for Doctoral Training.
- Being part of a dedicated well-being group which has been tasked to develop a holistic approach to the Researcher Academy's activities to support and understand researcher well-being.
- Sharing knowledge and best practice with other researcher training and development managers in the Midlands as the University of Nottingham representative on the Midlands Researcher Development Forum.
- Co-leading on the University's FameLab Competition, a research communication and public engagement opportunity where participants communicate their research with the public.
- Co-managing a pool of demonstrators who support us with certain courses.

The list could go on! Long before each academic year starts, we collectively sit down and plan our teaching schedule so that we know, in advance, how much time we have to complete additional activities and projects to meet the needs of our researcher community.

What do you like most about your work?

There are a few different things I could have talked about here, but I'll mention three:

Firstly, I have to say the people. The Researcher Training and Development Team are a wonderfully supportive, intelligent and compassionate bunch! Open and honest communication has helped us to build relationships, not just with each other, but with our stakeholders. Each member of the team is given space, and encouragement, to come up with innovative ideas to provide our researchers with the most up-to-date training and development opportunities. We are incredibly adaptable to the needs of our researchers. This was typified during the COVID-19 lockdown when we had to quickly convert a lot of our in-person training into an online format. My colleagues in the wider Researcher Academy also make it a truly fantastic place to work. Yes there are challenges and sometimes frustrations, but we all work together towards the same goal. We respect and value each other's opinions, ideas and experiences as we are able to bring so many different skills to the table – the true epitome of teamwork. We also have brilliant staff in the other professional service teams that also provide support for researchers, and so getting to work with (and learn from) them has been incredibly rewarding.

Secondly, the other part of my job, which I get a lot of energy from, is the day-to-day interaction with our researchers. I've learnt a lot from them, and hopefully they have learnt a lot from me too. Seeing our researchers learn, develop and evolve is special. Without our researcher community we wouldn't be in a job! They challenge us to design and deliver the best possible training and we are continually improving our support and development opportunities to meet their needs.

Lastly, I also like the fact that we are encouraged to think critically and creatively to respond to the ever-changing landscape of researcher development and that our ideas are not simply dismissed but listened to and adapted and altered where necessary.

And what do you like least about your work?

I love the vast majority of what I do, but there are irritations. I suppose the main one, and I know that anyone who teaches or trains (irrespective of whether it's for researchers) will be able to relate to this, is course conversion rates (the numbers who book onto the course and actually attend). It's really frustrating when people book onto sessions, and don't notify us that they can't attend. We appreciate that things come up last minute but this isn't the case for everyone. We put a lot of time and resource into designing and delivering engaging training, so it is really disappointing when people just don't turn up. To be honest, I feel sorry for those that sign onto a waiting list (if a course is full), often desperately wanting to join, but they don't get the opportunity to attend that training if people don't cancel.

We have developed our new training programmes, with different engagement requirements for a certificate of programme completion, and I think, anecdotally speaking, that the conversion rates have improved; but it's an ongoing issue for graduate schools and doctoral colleges across the country. Just don't get Researcher Training and Development Managers started on this subject!

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

I think it has helped, as it has meant that I can certainly relate to some of the struggles that researchers face during their PhD, because I've been there, done it and got the t-shirt. I've found that the stories and anecdotes that I tell about my own journey, when delivering training, help researchers realise that not everyone sails through a PhD and they are not alone with the difficulties they face. They say that they find this approach reassuring. On the other hand, there are people in the team who don't have a PhD but have lots of experience supporting researchers, so I think having a PhD is desirable for my role, but I wouldn't say that it was essential.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

If researchers are passionate about supporting their peers, have been proactively involved in their development in some way (maybe through organising events, setting up support groups, creating blogs/vlogs/YouTube videos about their experience) and enjoy teaching, then this role could be a good fit. In our team we have people who have come into this role from both traditional research backgrounds and other professional service roles (both internal and external to the university). These experiences have enabled the team to approach researcher training and development with diverse skill sets and expertise, which are key components of why we work so well together because we all bring something different to the table to make our provision so well-rounded and all encompassing.

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

From my own perspective, working with researchers is the key part of this role, so some previous experience of doing this is really important, in whatever capacity. If they do not yet have this skill set, then reaching out to someone who might be able to help advise and guide (a mentor, for example) would be important. LinkedIn is a brilliant tool to help with this! There are also other skills which are developed with doing a research project, so sitting down and really thinking about some of these transferable skills and how they might relate to a role like this, for example presentation skills, managing and prioritising your own workload, including project

management, working as part of a team, problem solving skills, interpreting and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data. Also, reading around current national and international policies, legislation and regulation associated with research training and career development and understanding the wider issues and challenges affecting other doctoral researchers is imperative.

I think my path helped me, so I would say that if there is a gap in support within your school, faculty or wider university, then be proactive and do something about it. Although, it's always best to look into it first as it could be that a different person or group of people have set up something similar! Also, try and involve others and relevant support services to ensure what you're doing has buy-in, impact and longevity.

Finally, I would always suggest that researchers book appointments with Careers Advisors (who particularly specialise in postgraduate/postdoctoral researchers) as they can help navigate job descriptions, assist with CV building and guide researchers through the process of identifying key skills and requirements from job adverts. We are very lucky to have fantastic support from the Careers team at the University of Nottingham and they go above and beyond to help support our researchers to carve and navigate their own path post-PhD.

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

Oh yes, definitely. I am more passionate about supporting researchers than with any research I did during my PhD. It's strange, in a way, because I'd always had a desire to teach and be able to pass on my knowledge to others. I filled out a PGCE form to teach Geography back in 2010 (when I finished my undergraduate degree); but something didn't feel right, so I never submitted it. Then, when I started my PhD, in 2012, I found the transition really difficult from a non-academic role (working in the NHS) to a research-focused one; and had crippling imposter syndrome as a result. I ended up not having the best PhD experience; but sometimes challenges present unexpected opportunities. This was how the peer support network at Loughborough was born, and when we started to support an increasing number of postgraduate researchers, I knew then that I had found my calling. So, I've almost come full circle because I am able to combine both passions into one job: teaching and development. The role still retains an academic perspective because, as a team, we are strongly encouraged to present, write papers and network with others in the sector.

Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?

Interestingly, one of the many benefits of this role is the freedom, with encouragement, to design initiatives that will really engage our researcher population. Of course, we can't just do anything and we have to critically justify why we think a training course, or event, would be useful to our researchers. With this overarching ethos, you really feel like your expertise and knowledge are valued! Of course, we don't know everything, but the team is brilliant at thinking of creative ideas and then, logically, coming up with a plan and course of action, with the ultimate aim of putting our researchers at the centre of everything we do. We are also fortunate to have experienced and supportive colleagues, within the Researcher Academy, to run ideas past and provide us with critical feedback.

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?

Firstly, I would say think about your next career step long before you finish your PhD. Try your hand at different things to build your skills further and think about your strengths. We have a brilliant placements team who support researchers at the University of Nottingham with their personal and professional development. The wide-ranging opportunities they provide are invaluable to help researchers experience the world outside of research. Doing things like this certainly makes researchers more employable as it demonstrates that they can apply their skills to different problems and projects outside of the confines of a PhD.

Secondly, increasing numbers of researchers, with PhDs, are looking for opportunities outside of academia. This means there is not just competition from other newly graduated PhDs, but also from more senior researchers who decide to leave academia, so the pool of job opportunities becomes smaller. As a result, it is important to enter the job market search with realistic expectations – don't think that because you have a PhD you can walk into any job, be prepared to apply for entry level positions. Anecdotally speaking, if you can apply those transferable skills, learnt during your PhD, and show willingness to learn from others whilst you are in the role, then your chances of progression, once you're in a job, could be accelerated.

Thirdly, utilise LinkedIn and other social media tools to publicise your profile and network with others. I totally acknowledge that these platforms can be double-edged swords but this is the way the market is moving. Developing these social networks doesn't come overnight and so fill your network with a rich variety of

people; after all those whom you least expect may be looking for someone with your very skill set. Once you've identified an area/role that you might want to pursue, you can then strategically hone your network further by investigating certain individuals and their connections and experiences – why not message them and seek advice?

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

I would always advise researchers to participate in training from their graduate school and doctoral college (or in our case Researcher Academy) as this helps them to unlock their potential and provide the skills required to go out into the world post-PhD, whether that be in academic or non-academic roles. Also, make themselves known to their Careers Service as Careers Advisors are best placed to support researchers with job applications, CVs, identifying strengths, careers and personal development resources, interview preparation and so much more! Additionally, finding a mentor can be really useful as this can help their career development, help them trouble-shoot, give them contacts in the right networks and is a crucial part of helping the transition into life after a PhD.

Thank you for sharing your experiences with us, Andrew!