

“Look for Internship or Placement Roles in Areas That Support Research”



Donna Palmer



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Abstract In our interview with Donna Palmer, she shares her journey from a chemistry PhD to managing doctoral training programmes. Initially planning for a postdoctoral position, Donna realised through conversations with peers that conducting her own research was not her passion. She became a project manager in industry, continuing to collaborate with her previous research team. Missing academia but not research, Donna moved to coordinate a network of energy research centres. She now oversees all aspects of funded PhD programs, managing doctoral training programmes. Donna values the variety of tasks and people she interacts with. She applies research mindsets like problem solving and communication skills. Though lacking industry connections currently, Donna engages her passion for supporting researchers. Donna advises talking to people in roles of interest and identifying transferable skills from PhD experiences.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?..... | 186 |
| What was the focus of your PhD?..... | 187 |
| As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?..... | 187 |
| How have your career plans changed as you’ve continued on to your current position?..... | 188 |
| Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?..... | 189 |

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| | |
|--|-----|
| What do you like most about your work?..... | 189 |
| And what do you like least about your work?..... | 189 |
| How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?..... | 190 |
| If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?..... | 190 |
| If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?..... | 191 |
| 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?..... | 191 |
| Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in their positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?..... | 191 |
| Have you thought about returning to academia?..... | 192 |
| Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?..... | 192 |
| Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?..... | 192 |

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

Donna: I have worked in academia but not as an academic for over 10 years. I currently manage two Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTP) at the University of Nottingham. These are funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC), which are two of the UK funding bodies that fund research across environmental science and economic, social, behavioural and human and data science, respectively. Doctoral training programmes provide funding and training opportunities to PhD researchers.

As a manager, I have an oversight of the full postgraduate research lifecycle and support those applying to and those on the programmes. Both programmes are collaborative partnerships with other universities, so the role involves working with central university services, supervisors, internal/external training providers as well as colleagues and researchers at other academic institutions. It is an incredibly varied role and that is what I love about it.

Previously, I worked at Loughborough University where I managed an Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC)-funded Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) as well as an EPSRC-funded research centre in electronics manufacturing. Prior to Loughborough, I was at the University of Nottingham, based in engineering, managing a Network of Centres of Doctoral Training, which were all focussed on energy research.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I have a confession... I am a chemist. My PhD was in green and sustainable chemistry at the University of Leicester with Professor Andrew Abbott and Professor Eric Hope. My PhD focussed on investigating the properties of supercritical solutions. I explored different types of compounds and how they behaved in different supercritical fluids. Supercritical fluids are used for material processing, so investigating the effects of different solution structures can inform processing conditions and, hopefully, new applications. My PhD was co-funded by an industrial partner but, unfortunately, they ceased trading towards the end of my first year. This meant that as I was able to have more control over the direction of the project but it also meant the work lacked the focus and 'real-world application' that it should have. It also meant that I was not able to gain experience working with an industrial collaborator. I am rather smug about the fact that I did it within 3 years, 2003 to 2006.

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

I simultaneously loved and hated my PhD. At the time there was very little training/development/focus on what was commonly called transferable skills. As time went on, I knew that the aspects of doing a PhD that I loved were not necessarily the aspects that you need for a career in academia. So I took every opportunity available to me during my PhD (coincidentally, these are often the things that those on CDT/DTPs get provided with these days). I was fortunate to attend a week-long programme of workshops arranged by an organisation called Vitae. I was also fortunate to attend a summer school and a number of conferences to present my work and meet other researchers.

Spending time with other PhD researchers from the same and different disciplines made me feel that I was not like them. I did not share the same passion for my research as they did for theirs, so I felt that a career in research was not for me. Typing this and looking back at this time, I now realise that I was suffering from severe imposter syndrome!

I explored a few different avenues (searching for jobs and making contact with employers that looked interesting) but really struggled to understand what a PhD graduate did if they did not go on to do postdoctoral research. As I was approaching the end of my funded period, my supervisor had been awarded a collaborative research grant funded by the UK government (what would now be called Department for Business, Energy and Industry Strategy). He offered me a two-year Postdoctoral Fellowship, which I was prepared to take with no other options presenting themselves; however, he also put me in touch with one of the project's collaborative partners who were recruiting a project manager to work on the same project. I had an interview at the company and was offered the position, so I took the leap to work

for them. This was a great decision as I was involved with my old research team but was also exposed to many other projects, people, etc. and quickly discovered that my happy place is surrounded by research by not ‘getting my hands dirty’ by doing it myself (as a chemist my hands were always in gloves or in need of washing).

How have your career plans changed as you’ve continued on to your current position?

I loved my first role, the company and the people I worked with. I was managing a portfolio of different research projects, working with colleagues (technicians, scientists, engineers, administrators, company owners) in the UK as well as across Europe. This meant quite a bit of travelling to visit project partners. Within 3 years, an opportunity came up to become the team leader of the team I was working in. Most people thought I was the obvious choice for the role so it felt like the right thing to do. This gave me the opportunity to gain line management experience and the focus of my daily life shifted away from being involved in my own research projects to having the oversight of the whole team. Unfortunately, a company restructure drastically changed the remit of the role, and after giving it time to let the dust settle, I found myself in a role I hated. This was my drive to seek out other opportunities and took me back to the question of what someone with a PhD does when they don’t want to be a researcher themselves.

After applying for a few roles that looked interesting on jobs.ac.uk, I was fortunate to be offered a fixed term role at University of Nottingham in Engineering, managing a project funded by Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). The project was a collaboration with the University of Leeds aimed to create a network of the Centres for Doctoral Training that were focussing on energy challenges. Centres for Doctoral Training provide funding for PhD researchers to study in a supported environment. They normally have a bespoke training and development programme which PhD researchers follow alongside completing their PhD research projects. My role was to provide opportunities (such as training, conferences) for the researchers across all the centres, as well as for the academic and administrative staff, to meet, work together and share best practices. I worked alongside a colleague based in Leeds whose remit was to enhance the delivery and impact of public engagement across the network of centres.

This role introduced me to working in higher education but not as a researcher or academic and also introduced me to the world of funded doctoral training programmes, which did not exist when I did my PhD. By working with a variety of doctoral programmes across the UK, I knew I wanted my next role to be one that would mean I was managing a doctoral training programme.

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

Every day is different and a lot depends on where in the calendar year we are.

At the moment (November), we are in the middle of recruitment for our next cohort to start next October. I am fielding enquiries that come in from prospective applicants, supervisors and academic colleagues across the institution. I am also ensuring that the content we have online is up to date and preparing information to be delivered at our virtual open day.

For our existing researchers we have a programme of events running throughout the year and I am making sure all involved know when and where, making the necessary changes to event programmes. I am also responding to enquiries from our existing researchers, advising them and checking progress. We have annual reporting deadlines for the funding bodies and the researchers have deadlines to report to us, so another task is following up outstanding paperwork and reviewing it. A lot of what we learn from our researchers goes into forward planning for future activities and changes. That was today!

What do you like most about your work?

The variety and largely being able to set my own schedule and priorities. I also love the range of different people that I interact with: PhD researchers, academic members of staff and professional services colleagues. This is extended to those at other higher education institutions as my current role is part of a consortium. I can sometimes spend more time working with colleagues at other institutions. Overall the variety can help bring about different insights and ways of working.

And what do you like least about your work?

One aspect I do miss in my current position is engaging with people outside of academia. In previous roles I have worked closely with those in industry and this is something that is not at the forefront of my current role.

The aspects of my role that I can find most challenging are at the interfaces with ‘business as usual’ processes. Working with DTPs can offer numerous benefits and opportunities to the researchers and academic members of staff but sometimes these do not map directly onto existing university processes. It is exciting to develop new ways of working but timeframes, priorities and systems do not always match up to make things run smoothly or quickly.

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

Firstly, there is a level of understanding, appreciation and empathy that I have because I have been through the process.

Secondly, I think the mindset and skills developed as a researcher (or dare I say project manager) have been crucial, e.g. problem solving, planning, organisation, presenting complex information to non-specialists, being able to motivate myself, plan work, prioritise.

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

There are several different approaches that can be taken; some of the ones below I have done myself, and others are things I would consider if I were in their position.

1. Talk to people who do the roles that they are interested in.
2. Look at job adverts and specifications (even if you are nowhere near applying for them). These give you an idea of the kind of things that are expected in the role and if you can get excited about them and imagine yourself doing them, that is a good sign.
3. Look for internship or placement roles in areas that support research. These will give first-hand experience and allow them to try out roles to see if they are a good fit.
4. Another aspect is to be honest with themselves about what they enjoy doing, e.g. what skills they like to use. There are many different self-assessments, like strength profiling, which are often provided by careers services and might help provide some focus. The kinds of roles which I have had focus more on what skills and experience you have, or the potential to have, rather than what your PhD was about and how many papers you have published. So, understanding what your strengths are and how to demonstrate you have them are crucial.
5. At times when I have not known what my next move was going to be, I have contacted organisations that were recruiting to 'find out more' and even sent speculative communications to those not currently recruiting but who I thought I might like to work for. Most of the time I was able to have a phone call or an in-person meeting, which helped me know if I wanted to work there or not.

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

Similar to above: talk to people in similar roles to get an appreciation, make some contacts and look out for internship or postgraduate placement roles they can do alongside studies or for a short period of time if they need to pause studies. These will give valuable insight and experiences that can be spoken about in future applications and open up networks. Look at job adverts and specification to understand what employers are looking for, and then look at yourself to identify where you can evidence that you can do those things. If there are gaps, then find things that you can do now to be able to give you skill or experience.

Research the types of organisations that do the kind of work that they are interested in because it is not just Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) and keep an eye out for opportunities to find out more about the organisation and the people who work there. The internet (and LinkedIn) is a marvellous thing.

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?

Definitely, I am passionate about supporting others to be the best they can be. This translates in my current role in several ways, providing individuals with the information they need in order to decide to apply for funding their PhD studies, and if successful, I support them as they go through the process and move to the next stage of their life. Support is a very broad term and can be done through providing and clarifying information, listening, advising, advocating, promoting, connecting and generally helping them navigate the way through.

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

For me the balance is right. There are deadlines that must be met and 'business as usual' processes that have to take place. These provide a comforting structure but at other times I can be proactive (or reactive to external influences) and dedicate time to explore things of interest. A couple of recent examples I voluntarily put myself forward to work on are (1) Athena Swan self-assessment team, a group formed in order to help the institution to prepare for its next Athena Swan submission, (2) the

Researcher Academy Wellbeing Group, which has a specific remit to work on initiatives for the whole of Nottingham, (3) the renewing of the ESRC DTP, I have been able to be part of a number of the working groups who are devising and deciding the scope and structure of the next iteration of the DTP, and (4) preparing a case study on our experiences of collaborative doctoral training with other Researcher Academy colleagues, which will be published in a book in 2023.

Have you thought about returning to academia?

No, I am very happy working in academia but not as an academic!

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

Congratulations on making it so far and the end is in sight. Remember, there is no such thing as the perfect thesis, only a completed thesis.

It can feel disconcerting when you finish or are so close to finishing and next steps may be unknown. These feelings are valid and you are not alone. You will make the best decision for yourself.

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

When someone describes their career path, it can often sound like a simple trajectory, starting at point A and moving sequentially through point B to C, D, etc. The reality is far from this and there are many ups, downs and turns.

Thank you for sharing your experiences, Donna!