Academic Capital, Postgraduate Research and British Universities:

a Bourdieu Inspired Reflection

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'And we must ask ourselves if the very plurality of hierarchies, and the coexistence of practically incommensurate forces, scientific prestige and university power, internal recognition and external renown, are not the effect of a sort of anti-trust law both written into the structures and at the same time tacitly recognised as protection against the consequences of a strict application of the norms officially professed.' [1]

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Introduction

In *Homo Academicus*, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological critique of the French educational system, he states:

> Academic capital is obtained and maintained by holding a position enabling domination of other positions and their holders, such as all the institutions entrusted with controlling access to the [academic] corps.[2]

Over the past three decades, Bourdieu has emphasised that the best way to wield academic capital is to determine, or 'name', the factors that an educational system uses to barter successful careers. Once academic capital is gained, it can be cashed in when it comes time to find employment or to move to another post. Though the teaching staffs of most British universities have learned how to gain academic capital over time, most final-year doctoral students are not familiar with the concept—despite noble efforts made by the universities to institute postgraduate teacher-training programmes or to offer teaching fellowships. Like economic capital, there are 'trade secrets' that are used to acquire academic capital and many successful academics are not interested in passing on these insights because it weakens their ability to outperform competitors both inside and outside of their university. The end result is that many students do not understand how to acquire academic capital until it is too late and they are terminally unemployed. This essay, therefore, outlines how a student can acquire academic capital in time to 'spend' it in the job market. Although academic supervisors and staff comprise my primary audience, the following suggestions could also be used as an 'academic capital handbook' by a proactive postgraduate. In particular, I propose a way that doctoral students can transform their research interests into three types of academic capital: publications, teaching experience and a viable network of like-minded scholars. In short, I show how a student's research can translate into an academic job. I will emphasise that doctoral candidates

[1] Bourdieu, Pierre, *Homo Academicus*, Collier, Peter (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) p. 20.

[2] Ibid., p. 84. For a broader introduction to Bourdieu's notion of capital, see Chapter 4 in Jenkins, Richard, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 1992).

need to start making themselves marketable as soon as possible. Indeed, in the current climate, young researchers should begin to prepare themselves for the job market as soon as they matriculate into a doctoral programme.

'Research' and the three types of academic capital

For British academics, the notion of 'research' is a familiar concept, especially since it is widely considered a key indicator of intellectual credibility.[3] For most first year doctoral students, however, 'research' is often a vaguely defined category. When they begin to write their doctoral theses, most instinctively associate this term with searching relevant databases, haunting the halls of the library and reading deep into the night. Although these pursuits are definitely part of 'research', there are other elements, especially concerning publication and teaching, which many students do not fully understand until they come to the end of their studies. Such a belated realisation usually places them one step behind candidates whose supervisors candidly disclose helpful advice on these topics that can be turned into academic capital. As the present job market for UK academics is quite competitive, students need to be told the criteria that will be used to assess their applications. In general, there are three types of academic capital that every doctoral student needs to gain if she wishes to become a lecturer or a postdoctoral fellow. These are (1) publications, (2) teaching and (3) networking. I will first define these categories and then I will explain how use them effectively in the job market in the next section.

Publications

As all full-time academics know, every UK department wants to hire a person who will help increase their score on the government's Kafkaesque Research and Assessment Exercise, or RAE for short. However, though staff members are familiar with the RAE, most post-graduates are not, and they need to be told explicitly that a department's

[3] Or even intellectual celebrity. Ibid., pp. 237-239.

score in this exercise determines directly the amount of funding it will receive for the next few years; likewise, students need to be informed that each member of staff is required to have at least four quality publications, that is, articles that appear in journals with high circulations or in books published by international printing presses. Even though new academics are not required to have as many publications, the reality is that most successful lectureship candidates have a strong publication record. In truth, recently graduated doctoral students will compete against those who have good publications and who are willing to start being paid at the bottom of the pay scale. For this reason doctoral candidates must work very hard to have as many quality publications as possible before they receive their degree. By 'quality' I mean a publication which either augments or challenges the works of what Bourdieu has called the 'hit parade' of intellectuals who are considered authoritative in any given field.[4] Even though, at the time of writing, the RAE is under review, it seems likely that the pressure on applicants to have a strong publications record will only increase under any future system, and post-graduates need to understand how this affects their chances of getting a job.

Teaching

At the most obvious level, 'teaching' includes one's experience with tutoring or lecturing. How a future employer (a university department) judges a potential candidate's teaching abilities, however, is often not fully understood by doctoral students who are entering the market. In general, most postgraduates will agree that one way to measure one's ability in this area is to obtain a shining reference from a supervisor or to perhaps to include positive student responses from departmental questionnaires. I even know some applicants who have included student 'testimonials' with their application packet. What some postgraduates do not realise, however, is that tutoring and lecturing are not the only part of one's 'teaching experience'. Indeed, it even could be said that, in the current British climate, the notion of teaching is merely window dressing, as it cannot be translated into an indicator that significantly enhances a department's RAE score. Departments need to

[4] Or even intellectual celebrity. Ibid., pp. 237-239.

inform their postgraduate students, therefore, that ‘teaching’ also includes managing modules, maintaining webpages, designing a module’s curriculum and participating in administrational tasks that foster an encouraging learning environment within the department. The web, in particular, is becoming a flashpoint these days because of the increasing sophistication offered by internet-based software that allows a lecturer to interact with students in innovative ways. Doctoral students need to be made aware of these factors at the start of their degree, but they also should be encouraged to find a way to integrate the research engendered by their theses into the lectures or tutorials that they lead. This type of integration is a strong selling point that many postgraduates fail to consider (which inevitably works against them on their applications). In Britain, the reality is that teaching is directly relevant to research, as I will address below.

Networking

I realise that this term is very American. However, as Bourdieu and other sociologists have shown, academics work within social communities and doctoral candidates need to know that a ‘network’ is the sum total of all their contacts in academia—particularly academics who know about their area of expertise.[5] At the top of such a postgraduate network needs to be a senior academic, a patron so to speak, who is interested in the student’s work and her potential to be a scholar. This person should be the supervisor, but I realise that we don’t live in a perfect world and so some students may also wish to use another person in their department. In my interaction with postgraduates around the country, I have found that many of them have not been shown how to intelligently introduce themselves to other senior academics. Showing students how to interact with people at conferences, on internet listservs and at other academic activities is crucial and must occur early so that they can create a research-orientated network that will also help them get a job. Additionally, such a network will help them obtain clearer feedback when a potential post is advertised on a

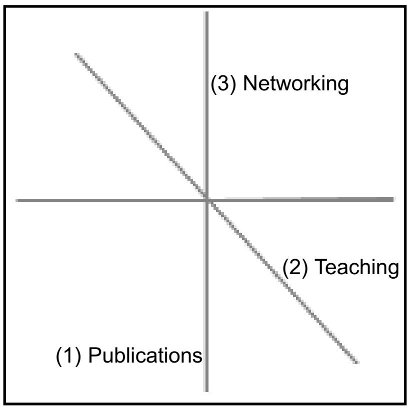
[5] Bourdieu addresses this issue throughout *Homo Academicus*. These networks are both internal to discipline and to the university, and external to the university and to the field. See Chapter 4, ‘The Defense of the Corps’.

listserv. Knowing somebody in Leeds, for instance, comes in quite handy if Leeds decides to advertise a post.

The reason I have flagged publications, teaching and networking is because the most successful postgraduate students that I know are those who decided in advance to accumulate academic capital in these three areas. More specifically, it is quite helpful for students to ask themselves how their doctoral research is relevant to their potential publications, to modules being taught in UK departments and to existing academic networks that organise conferences, give fellowships and award prestige.

The Academic Capital Graph

Over the past few years I have spoken to a number of postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows about the job market. One of the things that I find myself re-emphasising is that departments look for candidates that are able to integrate their published research with their teaching and with current trends in the discipline. Granted, this sort of balance is hard to achieve. But it must be done. One way that a doctoral student can translate her research into academic capital is to make a graph based upon the three aforementioned categories that create academic capital: publications (or intended publications), teaching and networking. Based on this information, students can develop the Academic Capital Graph (ACG). I first created this heuristic tool as a postgraduate. Over the years I have given it to my own students and many of them have found it quite useful. It is usually drawn in the following manner:



Bearing in mind the Bourdieuesque reflections made in the above sections, I will now turn to a more practical issue, that is, I will explain each line of the graph in detail and how it is relevant to improving a student's employment (and research) prospects.

Line 1: publications

I often tell my students that this aspect of the graph should be drawn from topics that they find personally interesting. I encourage them to ask themselves a few questions. The first question is: 'What is it, in one phrase, that describes what I'm researching?' Let's say for the sake of argument that it is 'the philosophy of John Locke'. Next comes the second question: 'What is the most original aspect of my research?' Again, this is sometimes hard to determine, especially for students. A good way to help them along with this question is to suggest that, in addition to approaching their supervisor(s), they could ask staff members in their own department. Another way is to keep close track of how people at workshops or conferences respond positively to their ideas—the pulse of academic capital, so to speak. I usually underscore the fact that it is often easier for others to notice a sliver of originality than it is for the person who is reading the paper. But I also caution students to be vigilant in answering these questions because they may sometimes find that they are being 'original' on a topic that they may not find interesting enough to develop in their theses. In any case, let us assume that a doctoral candidate used the above questions to refine her research interests from 'the philosophy of John Locke' to 'John Locke's Implicit Acceptance of Innatism'. This, in other words, would be a concise summary of her (intended) publication area. She could then write the topic on Line 1 of her ACG.

Line 2: teaching

Here I encourage students to be aware that most departments like to hire people who can use their research in their teaching. This can occur via the applicant's familiarity with the canonical authors of the discipline[6] or if a candidate's immediate research interests can be shown to

[6] Here I am referring specifically to the 'canonical master of the canonical disci-

be relevant to at least one module in the department's core curriculum. For instance, the above student writing about Locke's innatism needs to be shown that her research interest is relevant to the introductory epistemology modules taught in most philosophy departments. However, in order to be an attractive candidate for a lectureship, she additionally would have to expand her teaching experience into other related modules. Since most doctoral students' research interests are usually focused on a narrow topic, they need to ask themselves how the methods or topics of their research are broadly relevant to another module that is offered in the typical curriculum of departments in their field of study. In answering this question, the internet can be used as a profiling tool whereby students can look at the module summaries listed on the webpages of other departments. For instance, returning to our Locke student, a perusal of syllabi would reveal one module that sometimes addresses innatism is the Philosophy of Mind; so she could branch out into teaching on this subject. The more connections that can be made to other modules, the better. Knowing which modules intersect with her research interests allows her to pursue teaching in specific areas when and if her department appoints tutors or part-time lecturers. In the end, even if a doctoral student is unsuccessful in obtaining tutorials or lectures, she will still know how her research connects with her teaching—and this is a point that needs to be made in any cover letter. So Line 2 in the ACG should be a statement of how a student's research interests are relevant to teaching. For our Locke student, it could be written as 'Epistemology' or 'Philosophy of Mind'.

Line 3: networking

Making one's research relevant to one's academic network is not an easy task for postgraduates. They need to be reassured, however, that it becomes easier with practice—yet another reason for starting a network early in one's PhD studies. One of the best ways for a student to assess the potential relevance of her work is to subscribe to listservs that cover topics that are addressed in her thesis and those that cover her chosen field of study. So, for instance, if she were writing about the history and philosophy of science (HPS), she could subscribe to the

plines'. Ibid., pp. 90-105, especially pp. 100-102.

University of Notre Dame's HPS list while also subscribing to another list that covers all areas of philosophy; Liverpool's PHILOS-L for example. Based on these lists and on conversations with members in her department, she could be encouraged to see if her work is relevant to any sort of 'sexy' topic that seems to be attracting attention in the field. Notably, by 'sexy' I do not necessarily mean 'innovative', rather, I mean a unique view on the canonical authors and issues of a given field.[7] Once a student does this, she can then try to incorporate those who know about the subject into her network. (However, on this point it is crucial to remember that all fields have flash-fads and self-proclaimed gurus. Students must, therefore, be shown how to avoid these types of side-shows.)

So, returning to our Locke student, let's say that a sexy issue is 'the body'. A potential combination for Line 3 would be 'Locke's perception of the body'. Once Line 3 is decided, it is a good idea for the student to see if it connects with any other modules being offered her department or—and this is important— if she could perhaps devote part of a chapter in her thesis to the subject. A full-length article would be even better. Doing this will help attract more attention to her research and would help her expand her network.

Practice makes perfect

As mentioned above, the job adverts sent out on academic listservs provide the best way to try out the ACG. Again, a student must be encouraged to consult them early in her postgraduate career. Before doing this, however, it would be beneficial to tell her that her efforts to make her research interests relevant to her employment aspirations will be a bit difficult in the initial stages. In particular, after working hard to create an ACG, it will probably take her a bit of time to tweak it so that it is in touch with what the market is offering. The best way for her to test if she has created a potentially successful ACG is to suggest that she ask herself how the three lines (topics) of the graph match up with contemporary job advertisements. If her topics fail to show up, then she

[7] Ibid., pp. 94-95.

might want to reconsider adjusting her graph so that she can be more competitive.

Once a doctoral student begins to read the job adverts and research projects that are posted to listservs, she will start to see that there are areas that continually pop up; both in terms of teaching and in terms of research. It would be a good idea, therefore, if she were to find a way for her to match her interests with these reoccurring areas. Finding this match does not mean that she has to blatantly take on a popular topic. For instance, recent adverts for philosophy posts have underscored the successful applicant will be familiar with applied ethics. If this topic kept reoccurring on adverts, then it might be beneficial for her to consider how she could creatively integrate applied ethics into her research. So, using our Locke student again, it might be beneficial for her to ask if perhaps Locke's thought had any sort of connection to ethics, or even morality, that could be pursued somewhere in her thesis or publications. Even if she did not find this exercise to be appealing, the very process of asking how her work is relevant to ethical and moral issues might just help her make valuable connections within her own research and, possibly, in future cover letters.

The extended relevance of academic capital

If a doctoral student wants to become a career academic, learning to craft research that is relevant to her publications, teaching and network will be something that she will have to practise for the rest of her career. One of the easiest ways for a student to burn herself out in this process is to become overextended, that is, having a wide variety of projects and duties that run in different directions. This applies to both to academics and postgraduates. The best way to avoid burnout is to remain concentrated on projects that serve the goals laid out on the ACG. If a student is in doubt about a research idea or a potential project, she can go to the graph. The more she crafts her projects around the nexus core of the graph, the more organised she will be and the less time she will lose.

The ACG can also help students when it comes time for them to present their ideas at conferences, when they write cover letters and when they think about making postdoctoral applications. I'll treat these three topics in turn.

Conferences

As academic workshops and conferences reinforce the power and prestige which creates academic capital,[8] students should be encouraged to attend them—especially if their departments are able to help them financially with the travel costs and registration fees. Although most postgraduates do not realise it, established academics often go to conferences on the lookout for sharp students who fall in line with a project they are setting up or who are eligible for a new position that their department is about to advertise. Since they were once a postgraduate or postdoctoral fellow, they are quite aware that most young scholars are still working through some of their ideas. So if a doctoral student's paper is a bit unclear, they will be sympathetic. Yet, in my opinion, the thing that will most impress them is how a student interacts with them on a one to one basis. In these conversations, it will be crucial for a postgraduate to communicate that she has a pretty good idea of where she is going with her work. A very good way to communicate such a sense of direction is to rattle off the three areas on the ACG.

Cover letters

Cover letters are notoriously hard to compose. When students first start to write them, they quickly find that the letters consume a lot of their time. The process becomes easier with practice, so I encourage students to exercise their skills by applying for minor awards or posts early in their doctoral career. This helps them to become familiar with how to use the codes and canons of their field at an early stage.[9] Most societies offer travel grants, while a few of them give research awards. Students may wish to start out by making small applications and then working their way up. This being said, no matter the size of the award or the length of the cover letter, the ACG can be turned into three mutually relevant letter sections that allow a student to clearly present

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8 Ibid., pp. 234-237.

9 The relationship between codification, academic capital and symbolic power is addressed throughout Bourdieu,Pierre, *Language & Symbolic Power*, Raymond, Gino and Adamson, Matthew (trans.), (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

herself as an organised academic. As she begins to write more cover letters, she will learn how to adapt her graph categories to the position at hand—but the process of creating the graph itself will have already shown her how to think interactively about publishing, teaching and networking.

Postdoctoral applications

Almost every postdoctoral application asks for a written research proposal. A key component of most proposals is a section in which the candidate explains how her future project is consistent with her previous research. This is an implicit way of asking her if her thesis or subsequent publications were uniquely relevant to the research norms of the field. When thinking about how to craft this important part of the proposal, a student can draw from the thought that she put into creating the ACG; especially when it comes to verbalising the uniqueness of her thesis and the fact that she has a proven track record in producing research that is perceived to be relevant to the larger needs or interests of her discipline. Additionally, one of the most important ingredients of a successful postdoctoral application is an outstanding reference letter. In general, a student will have to ask academics to write on her behalf. It is here where her network becomes very helpful, as it will have already placed her in contact with people in her field who hold a significant amount of academic capital.

Conclusion

So what if a student thinks the ACG is a bunch of bunk? Fair enough. If she has her own way for integrating her current research with her future employment plans then she should be given the freedom to do so. There are some fortunate students who, for one reason or another, seem to haplessly engender success. Additionally, if a student's supervisor is a leading academic who has sworn to move heaven and earth on behalf of getting posts for her students, then the graph might seem a bit quaint. Yet, sadly, this scenario is not the case for most postgraduates. Most of them are very worried about the future. Indeed current employment figures in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* show that it is becoming harder for academics to get full-time jobs that are permanent. So if this situation worries one of your students, the graph just might help her to think about how to integrate her research with factors that are extremely relevant to getting a job in a university. Based on my experience, using the graph, or simply considering the rationale behind it, has helped a number of students that I've known over the years. The basic goal is to get them to think about how their research is directly relevant to their publications, teaching and networking. If they actively work to integrate these three categories, it just might give them that extra edge to get a job and perhaps to realise that:

> Academic power thus consists in the capacity to influence on the one hand expectations—themselves based partly on a disposition to play the game and on investment in the game, and partly on the objective indeterminacy of the game—and on the other hand objective probabilities—notably by limiting the world of possible competitors.[10]

[10] Ibid., p. 89