

Research synthesis summary:

PhD graduates' career choices and impact: a review of UK evidence



**What career choices and paths do PhD graduates take?
What social, cultural and economic impact do doctoral graduates have in society?**

A new report, commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Research Councils UK Research Careers and Diversity Unit, addresses these topical questions by reviewing what is currently known about who studies for a PhD, why and with what outcomes.

The review also highlights gaps in existing knowledge in this area and points to future research priorities.

Key findings:

- PhD graduates are found across the full range of professions and sectors, with low levels of unemployment and high employability over time. The majority of PhD graduates are generally satisfied with the careers they are in, and wish to stay in their respective field.
- Growing numbers of international and part time people are studying for doctorates including increasing numbers of experienced professionals returning to study. Academic and non-academic organisations which employ PhD graduates are, on the whole, very positive about the skills and abilities which these graduates bring to the workplace.
- Higher qualifications generally have a positive impact on wages, but this varies according to sector, gender and discipline.
- In the academic world, the value of and demand for the PhD qualification appears to be rising, although there are concerns that the wages and attractiveness of employment in this sector are causing problems with recruitment. Satisfaction among PhD graduates working in higher education appears overall to be lower than those working in non-academic positions.
- Among non-academic employers, demand appears to be growing for these highly skilled individuals in a number of areas. However, some employers seem to hold false perceptions of PhD graduates' abilities. This clearly highlights the importance of demonstrating the impact and value of PhD graduates more widely, as well as supporting PhD graduates in appreciating and presenting their skills effectively.
- In some specific areas of employment, such as Research and Development, PhD graduates are seen to bring competitive advantage and invaluable knowledge and connections. Disciplinary differences exist, with areas such as the sciences currently seeing strong competition for PhDs.

For further information on the report:

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Moving forward:

Knowledge gaps exist in many areas including:

- Career choice and transition into employment
- The direct impact of PhD graduates in the workplace, particularly the social and cultural impact; the impact of a PhD in particular (as opposed to higher qualifications in general) on wages
- How the PhD shapes the lives of those undertaking it.

Future priorities include:

- A fuller examination of the concepts of career choice and impact
- More in-depth explorations of the experiences of PhD graduates undertaken ideally as large-scale studies carried out across the disciplines/Research Councils
- Fuller examination of non-Research Council graduates, Professional Doctorate graduates and across different programmes of study.

This synthesis is part of a series of research syntheses produced by the ESRC as part of its Science and Society Strategy. Further information on this and for other syntheses please visit:

<http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/scienceinsociety/>

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