



From PhD to Job Market. A case story from Ghent University

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Introduction

In 2007, Ghent University established five Doctoral Schools, each with its own research focus: Arts, Humanities and Law; Social and Behavioural Sciences; Natural Sciences; (Bioscience) Engineering and Life Sciences and Medicine. The Doctoral Schools enhance the support provided to doctoral candidates in the course of their research, organise the Ghent University Doctoral Training Programme (concentrating first and foremost on the Transferable Skills Programme), engage in national and international academic networks, establish quality management systems and actively interact with the (non-academic) labour market.

The kick-off of the Doctoral Schools on 26 September 2007 involved a round table discussion featuring PhD graduates employed in the non-academic labour market who happily shared their experiences with PhD graduates.

From PhD to job market

The round table format was continued into a series of *Annual Doctoral Conferences: From PhD to job market*. The series started in 2008 with a two-day conference focusing on empowerment: *Your career in your own hands*. PhD candidates from all scientific disciplines attended keynote lectures and testimonials of PhD graduates working beyond academia. They engaged in networking moments and round table sessions. In 2009, hands-on workshops during which the participants were encouraged to explore and further develop their career management competencies were added to the programme.

In the course of the following years, *From PhD to job market* became one of the core activities of the Ghent University's Doctoral Schools. Today it has become a flagship activity of the Doctoral Schools in Flanders. Every September, 150 to 200 PhD candidates from all 5 Flemish universities gather in Ghent to 'take their future career in their own hands'. Key ingredients of a successful edition of *From PhD to job market* are testimonials of alumni who hold a non-academic career, as well as workshops focusing on career management skills and a (free) networking lunch.

From PhD to job market never stops evolving. In 2009 and 2010, the conference was theme-based: creativity (2009) and internationalization (2010). As of 2010, the Free University Brussels (VUB) joined the event. At the same time, the event's popularity also grew within Ghent University and the number of potential attendees boomed. In 2011, *From PhD to job market* was downsized to a one-day event (making it more manageable for the organisers and more cost-efficient). For the first time, it catered for only a segment the PhD candidates. This was a necessary response to the event's growing success in terms of numbers as well as to the criticism that the conference's programme failed to take into consideration the differences between scientific disciplines. The programme of 2011-edition of *From PhD to job market* was tailor-made for PhD candidates in natural sciences, life sciences and engineering. The 2012-edition was organised exclusively for PhD candidates in social sciences and humanities (with the novelty that PhD candidates from Antwerp University could also attend).

A year later, the universities of Leuven and Hasselt joined in (thanks to a subsidy from the Flemish government), turning *From PhD to job market* into the largest (free) career management event for PhD candidates in Flanders. In 2013, nearly 200 PhD candidates in the life sciences from all five Flemish universities gathered in Ghent for a fruitful day packed with keynote lectures, PhD career stories and labour market oriented workshops. In 2014, *From PhD to job market* targeted PhD candidates in (bioscience) engineering and life sciences and in 2015 the focus will turn again to social sciences and humanities.

In 2014, the event's organisers took the actual next step from academe to the job market and left the university buildings in which *From PhD to Job Market* had been traditionally organised. Ghent University joined forces with ArcelorMittal, a leading international company in the Ghent harbor, to take the PhD candidates into its the training facilities.

Looking back and forward

From PhD to job market has proven to be a powerful platform to bring PhD candidates into close contact with the labour market, make them more aware of (and train) their career management skills and engage them in networking with peers and alumni. The content, target audience and format have changed over the years, but the ultimate aim remained the same: making PhD candidates aware of the career opportunities beyond academia and develop their career management skills. For Ghent University, *From PhD to job market* is a crucial element in the doctoral training programme. *From PhD to job market* brings the university and the labour market together; it connects (young) academics and professionals; it makes companies more aware of the added value of PhD studies.

Although on the one hand there is certainly still room for growth – a larger number of attendees, more academic collaborators, perhaps two editions per year, go (inter)national; on the other hand we will not allow it to expand. The actual size of the event is what makes it attractive and useful: small-scale workshops, networking opportunities, open discussions with the audience. The current format and size are, from the organisers' point of view, manageable, fundable and fun (with a fair share of dedication, passion, hard work, tight budgeting, open mindedness and flexibility).

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