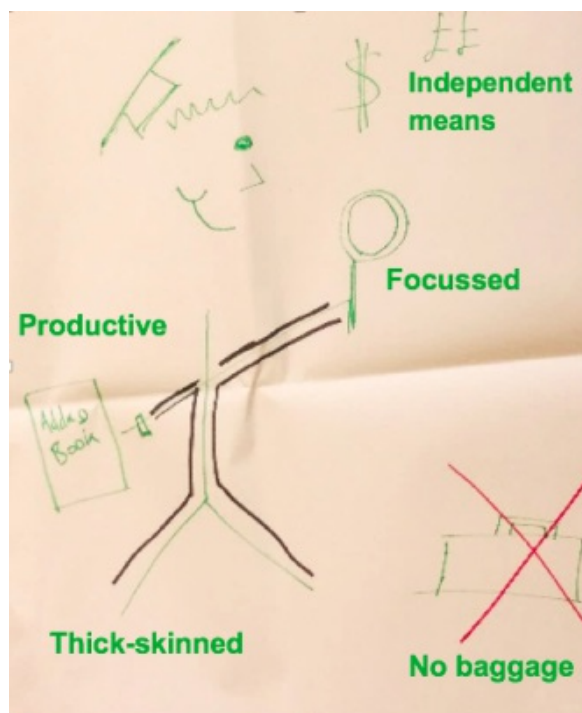


The ideal PhD researcher has no baggage



The way institutions conceptualise doctoral candidates – as individuals without baggage, able to devote all their time to their research – has very real consequences for those who do not fit this profile. **Marie-Alix Thouaille** reports on recent research into the professional development behaviours and experiences of doctoral and early-career researchers. Findings reveal that many diverse factors, from funding status and caring responsibilities to the location of one's institution, can contribute to PhD researchers experiencing highly unequal access to professional development opportunities.

In a workshop I ran last year, I asked a group of doctoral researchers to draw “the ideal PhD student”. Beyond being a fun ice-breaker, the point of the task is to spark conversations about the skills, competencies and behaviours which doctoral researchers need for, or develop through, their doctorates.



In this particular workshop, though, one of the participants drew something rather different. Subverting the task, they drew what they felt the institution *expected* doctoral researchers to be like. In their drawing, we see the institution's presumed ideal: an independently wealthy, young, unattached, able-bodied, thick-skinned – probably white and male – individual who has no responsibilities other than their PhD and is therefore able to be focused and productive and devote all their time to doctoral research. In short, the ideal PhD student has no baggage.

The point the participant was making was that the way institutions conceptualise doctoral candidates – as individuals without baggage – has very real consequences for those who do *not* fit this profile. Which is to say, most people; because, of course, all doctoral researchers, and indeed all researchers, have some kind of baggage. As Emily Henderson of the [In Two Places at Once project](#), a study exploring how academics' caring responsibilities intersect with conference attendance, notes: “academics are not unencumbered individuals but nodes within a network of relationships” (you can listen to Henderson's talk [here](#)).

This theme came up again and again in my research into the professional development behaviours and experiences of arts and humanities doctoral and early-career researchers. Many respondents felt frustrated, isolated, or abandoned because their “baggage” was not being accounted for, meaning they lost out on valuable opportunities to develop themselves and their careers.

As the data we collected through the survey continuously highlights, many diverse factors can limit doctoral researchers' ability to access professional development opportunities. These include:

- Funding status
- Mode of study
- Distance from institution
- Access requirements
- Caring responsibilities
- Work commitments
- Previous professional experience

In other words, doctoral researchers experience highly unequal access to professional development opportunities.

Other important factors creating inequalities operate at institutional level, for example:

- Location of institution
- Size of institution
- Size of doctoral cohort
- Support provision
- Teaching
- Supervisory practice



465 responses from Arts & Humanities doctoral researchers



Key findings

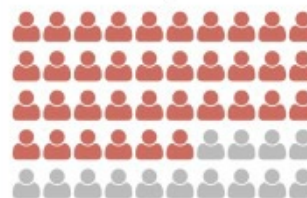
50% cite time constraints as barrier to professional development



55% cite improving career prospects as motivation for engaging in professional development



71% regularly devote time to professional development



“

'Take an individual and human approach to student professional development - one size does not fit all. Not every student has the same goal or needs the same resources, support and time.'

”

Key factors creating inequalities

for Arts & Humanities researchers

Funding, mode of study, distance
 “As an unfunded student, I feel that there are sometimes opportunities that are not available to me.”

Caring responsibilities
 “A huge barrier for me is childcare but it's not a cost I can claim as part of my expenses. For training events so far I've had to cover costs above and beyond other students.”

Access requirements
 “Not all researchers are the same. More should be done to design events in such a way as to facilitate participation from those of us who are under-confident.”

Institution & cohort size
 “I am at a small institution and feel quite forgotten about, [...] missing out on professional development activities that others are offered in a larger institution.”

Teaching
 “At present, there is no teacher training [at my institution]. This means that the path towards becoming a temporary lecturer is unequal.”

Supervisory Practice
 “[My supervisors] showed little to no interest. 'Do your PhD,' they said. 'Everything else comes afterwards.'”

www.vitae.ac.uk/one-size Vitae, ©Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited.

Unsurprisingly, in my sample, those studying part-time were significantly more likely to have had a previous career: 75% compared to 47% in full-time students. If we consider, in addition, that of part-time respondents, 72% identified as female, and that women are statistically more likely to be primary caregivers, then it starts to become clear how identities intersect with one another in ways which further constrain doctoral researchers' ability to engage in professional development.

An important blind spot of this research is that it did not explore questions of race, religion, or disability. This is a shortcoming, as we can only surmise how these intersecting identities can further limit someone's access to development opportunities. But what we can suggest by looking at this data is that **inequalities of access to professional development intersect with existing inequalities**, undermining, in turn, the diversity of researchers as a workforce.

When we make assumptions about the identities or unencumberedness of researchers we make academic life difficult – if not impossible – for certain already marginalised groups, meaning only those who most fit this expected profile, **or who most perform unencumberedness** are likely to succeed in academia.

Universities, funders, and researcher developers have a duty to provide equal access to opportunities to all doctoral researchers, which means developing thoughtful, and inclusive development provision and conducting further research to better understand the barriers researchers come up against every day.

You can download [“One size does not fit all”](#), the full report into arts and humanities doctoral and early-career researchers' professional development, from the Vitae website (free registration required).

This blog post originally appeared on the [All the Single Writing Ladies](#) blog and is republished with permission.

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About the author

Marie-Alix Thouaille is a CHASE-funded doctoral researcher at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Her doctoral research explores representations of authorial labour the contemporary single woman author film. As part of her [CHASE](#) studentship, Marie-Alix undertook a placement project with [Vitae](#) investigating the professional development of Arts and Humanities doctoral and early career researchers. She blogs about her research at mariethouaille.wordpress.com.