

Career pathways – a seminar with graduates for graduands

by Matteo Petrich

Why did I organize this seminar?

As pretty much all my friends, excluding the rare exception, hardly anyone of us knew what we wanted to do after our Bachelor degree. We only knew that most people will not hire a person with a Bachelor's in Biology, so everyone went on to acquire their Master degree. So, did I. So, with the time of my Master's progressing and the end of it already being in sight, I had to think about what I wanted to do. The very first thing that came to mind was obviously going for the PhD. After all, throughout my time at two different universities, different labs and lectures, and seminars, the general consensus of my friends, fellow students, other PhDs and post-docs was that almost everyone is going for a PhD before ever thinking about leaving academia. Since I didn't know what else was out there, I wanted to find out and luckily was supported and encouraged to do exactly this by my PI.

Before getting started I didn't know if anyone outside of academia would be interested to share their experiences and be open to talk to students about their prospective careers. Neither did I personally know many people whom I could ask, nor how to go about finding them. Again, I got the support from my PI and simply contacted some of the people she had met throughout her life through working together, meeting at conferences, in seminars, and so on. So, I looked through 300 odd contacts, looked for people with jobs outside of academia, drafted an email, and established a first contact through my PI. In my first email I mentioned that I was interested to organize a seminar for M.Sc. and Ph.D. students. The idea was to get people from the industry to share their experiences on the job hunt, to get them to introduce their jobs on an informal level, talk about their day-to-day roles, and also share their experiences on the transition from academia to industry. I wanted to offer them the chance to say to students what they themselves would have loved to have heard before, during or after their PhD. To my surprise, the response rate was great. I managed to get positive responses from eleven people from the industry interested in helping and speaking to students.

After I had the first positive responses, I had to organize two dates and check if the speakers had time on those dates, create a flyer to publicize the event, and attract a few students as participants. To share the flyers, I asked my friends, now located at different universities all integrated in different social circles and bringing their own network of contacts with them, to simply share the flyer and spread the news about the event. I further used my own social media accounts and other ways to distribute the flyer. The registration for the event started slowly, but did take off eventually, resulting in around 70 registrations from four different European countries and ten universities. It was very interesting to see people from the University of Helsinki hearing of and responding to this small event organized by me. I was tremendously nervous about it in little old Freiburg.

With the day of the seminar coming closer and closer, I had to manage a few more things. I wanted to take up the mantle of moderator, but there were still some roles such as chat moderator, timekeeper, and someone to let registered participants into the virtual room. For these tasks, I asked my friends and some of them gladly helped out. Thus, I could focus on the moderation of the talks, while my friends managed participant entry, reminded me of the schedule, and helped me keep to the time. The first evening went great all things considered. However, I noticed that moderating for the whole span of 2.5 hours was a little exhausting. Therefore, I shared this role in the next seminar and let someone else take over the task of moderating some of the talks and Q&A sessions.

So, what did I learn throughout this process?

People who are interested to help will keep responding to your emails and are generally really nice and considerate. Student participation can be low, even though entry is free, and while luckily some were very active and engaged in the Q&A, the majority simply took in the information from most of the speakers, and only really participated with questions to speakers they were really interested in.

All in all, the whole seminar was a success in my eyes, and I personally took a lot of good tips, encouragement, and career advice away from it. Given the positive feedback from friends and participants, I certainly wasn't the only one who experienced this. If you are not happy with the information or seminars offered by your university, etc., I definitely would encourage you to try and do something like this. I had not thought that the responsiveness and participation would be as high as it was in the end. Given this experience, I would probably do it again at some point in my life and also take part in it, maybe as one of the speakers once I have found a job.