

The Academic Path is far from being the only option

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*Published 12 December 2022
Uniscope (the UNIL campus magazine)*



Martine Schaer (left) and Verity Elston (right) both work at the Graduate Campus. ©Félix Imhof / UNIL

The Graduate Campus has published its first annual survey on the career development of UNIL doctoral graduates. An interview with Verity Elston, co-director, and Martine Schaer, deputy and manager of the survey.

What happens to graduates after their doctorate? The question is posed by the Graduate Campus, which on 21 November published the first annual survey on the professional futures of UNIL doctoral graduates, three years after their thesis. The goal? To paint a portrait, year by year, of a group of graduates three years after they obtained their degree, taking in their professional situation, the relevance of the doctorate to their current activity, and their satisfaction. Conducted through an online questionnaire with the support of FORS, this first survey focuses on those who defended their doctorate at UNIL in 2018. Of the 290 individuals concerned, 103 took part.

What do these first results reveal? And what is the purpose of this initiative, in a context where working conditions and the lack of opportunities in the academic world are regularly the focus of attention? Verity Elston, co-director of the Graduate Campus, and Martine Schaer, deputy and manager of the survey, explain.

Verity Elston, Martine Schaer, the Graduate Campus has just published the first annual survey on the future of UNIL doctoral graduates. What is the goal of this initiative?

Martine Schaer: Our goal is to understand the roles and professional environments in which these graduates find themselves. Today, many scientists leave the academic world after their doctorate. However, as the recent report from the Swiss Science Council shows, data on their trajectories are lacking. The annual dimension of this survey allows us to monitor and analyse the situation over the long term.

Verity Elston: This survey also collects qualitative feedback that we will further develop through interviews. It will help UNIL evaluate the quality of doctoral training in order to adjust it to real needs. This is also the opportunity for us to inform and raise awareness on the variety of career options that a doctorate can offer, even outside the university.

Indeed, your survey shows that 40% of professionally active respondents are not pursuing an academic career. How do you interpret this?

VE: There are many reasons why people change direction. In some disciplines, such as law, a doctorate is highly valued in the working world. Sometimes people leave academic research with the desire to discover new professional horizons, or to have a more direct impact on society. Many turn away because of a lack of opportunities, precarious employment conditions, or the competitive culture. Having to take on several fixed-term positions for example, and sometimes abroad, can be a very difficult experience.

According to your figures, graduates from the social and political sciences tend to be less satisfied than others with their current situation...

MS: This result echoes trends shown in other studies, such as the VITAE European survey, or our 2007-2017 survey published in 2019. These are the same people who, at the time of their thesis defence, least imagined themselves doing what they're doing today. This suggests an interesting hypothesis: the ability to imagine ourselves in our next role may contribute to our satisfaction once hired.

Almost half of the sample was from the Faculty of Biology and Medicine. The number of people representing the other faculties is very small (sometimes less than ten). What is the relevance of these results?

MS: We have highlighted certain trends here, and we'll see if they are confirmed. We do indeed need to be cautious and see this survey as the first stone in a larger edifice that will grow in strength. The survey will be repeated every year in order to aggregate the data from a larger sample.

Overall, 92% of those surveyed are in paid employment three years after their defence. However, more than a third of them have experienced a period of unemployment in the meantime...

VE: Unfortunately, we can see this trend as well in similar studies. During the thesis, you are often so immersed in your research topic and the tasks associated with your assistantship, it can be hard to project yourself beyond the defence. It's this lack of preparation that we need to work on.

What are you going to do?

VE: It's in the works! We want to work with the faculties to encourage doctoral candidates to prepare themselves from their first year for what will come next. But we also want to help thesis directors keep these issues in mind, and to make employers more aware of the value of a doctorate. In 2023, we will develop our activities in several areas, in support of early career researchers and their supervisors.

It's often said that doctoral graduates are overqualified... What's the advantage of having a PhD in the professional world beyond academia?

MS: This idea needs to be deconstructed. People with a PhD bring a range of skills that are highly sought after by employers. There's the theoretical and technical knowledge, especially in the private sector or in public administration: it's the case for nearly 50% of those who responded to our survey. The transversal skills developed during the doctorate are also in high demand; skills such as analysis, synthesis, or project management. The doctorate really is a qualifying experience: the challenge is to know how to translate it into an employer's language.

When will the next survey take place (2019+3)?

VE: It has already begun!

Experience: From Anthropology to Social Work

Romina Seminario Luna holds a doctorate in social sciences and has been working for over three years as a coordinator at AVIVO Vaud, an association for the defence and well-being of retired people. Her mission? To organise social action, with the help of a hundred or so volunteers, to support around 6,000 beneficiaries. "The daily life of a social worker is very different from that of a scientist, and sometimes trying. But it suits me well," says this sociologist specialising in migration, gender studies and life paths.



Romina Seminario Luna. © Félix Imhof / UNIL

Born in Peru in 1984 and trained in anthropology in Lima, as a young researcher, Romina first carried out fieldwork in the Amazon before leaving Peru to bring a thesis at UNIL in 2013. Halfway through, she decided to leave her academic career once she had obtained the degree. "I wanted to do research. But I didn't have the strength to move abroad again, to hope to one day get a permanent position in such a competitive field... At 33, I just wanted a stable life."

The call of the field

Attracted by social work, Romina took advantage of the last two years of her doctorate, alongside her research, to map out her future in this new direction. "I liked the field. I had already worked with vulnerable populations as a volunteer. I thought I would find interesting opportunities." Two further training courses later – to acquire practical knowledge in social insurance – and with her doctorate in her pocket, she started looking for a job.

"I answered a lot of job ads for which I was largely overqualified... Once I targeted positions with responsibility, I had interviews."

It was finally a change in her CV that opened the door to her current role. "I presented my thesis as experience in project management. In the eyes of the management committee, this gave me the legitimacy to manage a team." On a day-to-day basis, her scientific approach gives her a global perspective on the social phenomena encountered in the field. "A real asset!", she concludes.

[More testimonials are available on the Graduate Campus website.](#)

Resources available!

To support researchers in their professional development, the Graduate Campus offers, in addition to the [CUSO transversal programme](#), [numerous workshops and meetings](#), as well as [coaching and individual follow-up](#). Its career guide, "[Beyond the Doctorate](#)" will be revised and translated into English in January. Other offers exist at UNIL, such as the [Skills for Scientists programme](#) at the FBM, and the [PROWD programme](#) for women, at the Equality Office.