

How My PhD Training is Empowering Me

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Story Key Points

Keep an open mind
about academia

Seeking for non-
traditional paths after
graduation is not
failure

Extra-curricular
activities are not waste
of time

Teresa is a second-year PhD student at the Centre for Doctoral Training in Sustainable Chemistry at the University of Nottingham. She graduated from La Sapienza – University of Rome cum laude and her current research focuses on catalysis. She is also Ambassador for the Society of Chemical Industry in UK, Ambassador of Sustainability for the University of Nottingham and she created her own website www.phdtosuccess.com, where she shares her knowledge on leveraging transferable skills to explore career options beyond academia. Teresa is also an active science communicator. Presently, she runs a YouTube channel to share her knowledge on the elements of the periodic table. Teresa can be reached out on Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/phd_to_success/), YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkiKPT5vdEpiq3SCESesXMA>), Twitter and Facebook: Teresa Ambrosio ([phd_to_success](#))

Growing up, I was fascinated by atoms, acids, bases, and basically any chemical reaction. I knew by the age of 13 that my passion was in chemistry. At school, I participated in anything that was related to chemistry and ended up doing exceptionally well during high school and college. I often won scholarships and prizes for being a model student, which made my teachers, family, and friends proud of me. I never doubted my future career. I was sure that I wanted to do a PhD so I could become an academic educator and researcher.

However, during my final year of my undergraduate studies, I had what I would describe as an existential crisis. What happened? I realized that all the time I spent studying had kept me away from exploring pretty much everything else. Apart from studying and spending time in the lab, I had no other interests in life. I didn't do sports or play an instrument, or even have any other hobbies! I was in a bad emotional state and I feared there was no future for me either in academia or in the job market for that matter. I started to question my path towards academia along with my life choices and as a result, I underperformed during my last year. I wasn't aware I was suffering from depression for so long and I blamed chemistry for missing out on all the other aspects of life. I suddenly realized that my whole world was my 1x2 square meter desk and 1.5x1.5 square meter fume hood.

After graduating, I applied for jobs in my field of study and even received a few job interviews. However, I only received rejections. It was like there was no space for me. I also tried looking for jobs in a different field, but I was quickly overwhelmed and gave up. I just didn't know where to start or what to look for. So, I took some professional advice and was told that someone with my CV would be better suited with a PhD. As such, I found myself starting my PhD at the University of Nottingham. Interestingly, the program partners with biopharma companies, which allows students extra opportunities that they wouldn't necessarily get elsewhere.

Through this partnership, I quickly learned that – although PhD students are highly qualified in terms of their scientific and lab skills – they lack the awareness of a lot of the soft skills that are also required for working outside academia. Furthermore, it was eye opening to hear that only a small fraction of PhD students ends up in an academic position. It became clear to me that I needed to develop a variety of transferrable skills to ensure employability after finishing my PhD.

With this newfound wisdom, I decided to get involved in activities beyond the bench, which is something I failed to do as an undergraduate student. A year into my PhD program, I started my own website (Phdtosuccess.com). The site attempts to bring to light the transferrable skills that can be developed during the PhD process, so students who may want to work in non-academic settings, are better prepared once they finish. Through the site, I attempt to demonstrate that many of the skills you learn as a PhD are indeed transferrable into other areas. For example, for a graduate student in chemistry like me, the most obvious career choice would be to work in the pharmaceutical industry or do a postdoc. However, these are only two of the many available options, as there are so many career options out there, which we would not be able to see if we keep a closed, narrow mind about future. In fact, many fields value independent thought and analytical skills, both of which you develop as a PhD student.

I have developed a totally different approach towards my education now. I have learned that extra-curricular activities, such as science communication or running my blog, complement my research and make me a well-rounded scholar. I have acquired a set of social, professional, and especially networking skills, which I wouldn't have gained if I dedicated 100% of my time to research. Remember to be open-minded about academia, get involved in activities outside your PhD and learn from them. You never know what the future holds for you!