Strengthening a Liminal Community

Anthropological Framework for Rethinking University Support Strategies for Early Career Researchers and Ph.D. Students in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

An AHRC-funded Research Report with Strategic Recommendations
By Dr Hannah C. Wadle for the University of Manchester
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Recent academic studies\(^1\) and policy-led research documents\(^2\) have pointed out the difficult and insecure situation of ECRs, and have drawn attention to the increased professional risks of mental health problems in academia more broadly. Meanwhile, this discussion around job insecurity and stress also dominates the social discourses of doctoral students, Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and academic staff in the UK and internationally. Given the situation of changing university employment structures, the issues of precariousness, stress, and overall dissatisfaction with the current state of academia have become central points in discursive encounters between academics. Moreover, it has become a conversation through which current academic communities identify and build a certain sense of community and work ethics. This document begins with the position that – if they are not directed towards actively negotiating work conditions, taking political action and solving concrete problems – such negative discourses are damaging and self-harming to the research community. For this reason a replication of these pre-existing discourses will be avoided. Instead, the document proposes an anthropological gaze through which the particularities of contemporary academia and the challenges for young researchers in this contemporary context can be revisited. The document further promotes a strengthening and preventive University support strategy for ECRs during and after their doctoral education. Related to this support strategy it also suggests a better collaboration and dialogue between different agents within the University. This strategy paper was produced with regards to the situation of junior researchers in the Humanities and Social Sciences. It might however inspire debates in other subject areas.

With the anthropological concepts of liminality, the “betwixt-and-between”, “neither-here-nor-there”, the document creates a deeper understanding for both positive and negative forms of instability and transgression in academia. Liminality is further applied and re-defined to introduce the concepts of *Liminal Thinking Capacity*, *Structural Liminality*, and *Professional Hybridity* to address the specific experiences of PhD and ECR researchers. The documents is organized in four parts. Part one addresses the situation of Ph.D. students and gives propositions for how early support structures can strengthen individuals and the doctoral community to prevent common crises and illnesses during and after the Ph.D.. Part Two is concerned with the unsettling transitional phase that Early Career Researchers often experience after their Ph.D. graduation. It offers ideas for simple and effective structural frameworks that the University could introduce to give ECRs some stability in a very unsettling and frequently damaging phase. Part Three deals with the necessity of seeking alternative professional research pathways to the classic academic ones in the Humanities and Social Sciences. It addresses the difficulties that researchers who transgress

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\(^2\) Renfrew, Kay and Howard Green (September 2014). *Support for Arts and Humanities Researchers Post-Ph.D*. Final Report. The British Academy and AHRC.
academia face and gives suggestions on how to build a skilled, respected, sustainable and professional cohort of independent, public, or cross-sector researchers. Part Four illuminates the problems with communication flow between academic departments and university careers services and offers some propositions of how to improve mutual respect and foster collaboration.

Note: In short term research projects there are always subjects that cannot be included. This happens for different reasons: some subjects appear marginal to the central theme and are excluded for that reason; other subjects again, one comes to realise as a researcher, are so important and weighty that it feels simply indecent to include them in a reduced form, in which their complexity would be flattened by simplistic solutions and their urgency brushed aside through a too short discussion. Of the latter category are the themes of gender-specific and family-based support for Early Career Researcher, and of dealing with, in the words of ECR-Residential participant and Gender Anthropologist Patricia Scalco, the “Reproductive Burden” in academia. As the researching author of this paper and as a female ECR myself, I want to emphasise that the subject of the “Reproductive Burden” for ECRs and in contemporary academia urges for a more substantial and self-standing policy research project with its own empirical research and theoretical framework. For this reason the subject cannot and will not be covered as a sub-section in this paper. However, all of the recommendations provided in this document have been made with thought of doctoral and post-doctoral students who have got families, children or the wish for them and should largely be compatible and supportive to their life situations.

**Research Methods**

The document is based on two months of ethnographic observations and conversations at the University of Manchester and on auto-ethnographic reflections. More precisely, it draws on conversations with career advisors, counsellors, academics, and, most importantly, with post-Ph.D.
researchers from Social Anthropology, Art History, Theology, and Media Studies. The focus group amongst the Early Career Researchers were the four AHRC Public Engagement Fellows from 2016 (the author of this document included). The document centrally draws on conversations between the group of fellows and on bi-weekly, half-structured questionnaires about the experience of the fellowship. It further takes into account observations that were generated during group excursions with the ECR Fellows to their respective fellowship work places (Quarry Bank Mill and Manchester Cathedral). Apart from that, the document is based on ethnographic observations from participation in University services such as counselling and workshops from the careers service and the University library. Ethnographic depth is achieved in the document through auto-ethnographic observations of the author as a Ph.D. student and Early Career Researcher at the University of Manchester. Given the short period of funding that was allowed for the producing the document (one month), the document makes no claim for providing any representative numbers and data concerning Early Career Researchers at the University of Manchester. The purpose of the document is therefore a different one: This document comes from within the studied community; it unfolds and re-assembles the situation of Early Career Researchers with the authority of experience, anthropological curiosity, and with empathic constructivism.

The Document formed the basis for the design of a ECR/ Post-PhD residential workshop that was held in Manchester in June 2016. A first draft of this strategy paper was peer-reviewed and discussed with the participants of the residential.

“Hannah, this is a really good starting point for future discussions. I hope the comments I’ve made aren’t too negative in themselves – I think there’s a lot here to discuss at all levels but I do wonder if it’s a bit too human for the corporate nature of academia these days. They may well have a duty of care towards their students and employees, but radical change of this nature perhaps needs selling in a way they are bound to understand – that they will get money and intellectual capital back for their investment, not just in the long term but also in the here and now. A well-thought out offering for ECRs would enhance their reputation and could be advertised along with their research base when they are trying to recruit PhD students.” (Dr Jenni Hyde, ECR in Lancaster)

The workshop brought fifteen Early Career Researchers from different disciplines and different northern UK universities3 together to share their experiences as ECRs and develop ideas for improving their own situations and the situations of future ECRs. The results of the ECR residential workshop will be showcased in a pop-up exhibition starting in the University of Manchester in September 2016. This strategy paper is illustrated with images from notes and posters that were created during the ECR workshop and that form part of the pop-up exhibition.

Liminality and Living on the Threshold

Liminality, a derivative from the Latin word for border, *limen*, is a notion that describes a threshold state for groups or individuals in society. It is a key concept in Social Anthropology that is used for understanding processes of transition in society, the making and un-making of hierarchies, the formation of communities, and the maintenance of social order.

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3 All from North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership universities
Famously it has been studied by Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957)\(^4\) and by Victor Turner (1920-1983)\(^5\) in relation to rites of passage and rituals. Both Anthropologists observed in different societies in Europe and across the globe that it is through a particular threshold stage that temporary or permanent transformation can happen in rituals and rites of passage. In rites of passage, liminality occurs at a particular stage, during which dominant hierarchies and values are suspended and people’s previous social selves fade, giving way to a new sense of community based on the equality of a common experience of transformation or transition – *communitas*. The liminal stage often entails practices of excess and chaos that may be described as *transgressions* since they contrast with social order and ideas of normality. It will be argued further on that the PhD could be seen as a rite of passage, in which people experience a particular form of intellectual liminality. Central to the idea of liminality is the resolution of the same in the end of a transformation process. Unresolved liminality can be experienced as trauma or mental illness and may be perceived as social stigma and uncanny transgression. This document suggests that the resolution of liminality in the rite of passage of the PhD has become fuzzy and incongruent with its institutional structure in the present day. For post-PhD researchers this results in an experience of what for the purpose of this report will be called *Structural Liminality*.

In modern, open societies moments of liminality can be found in different forms and appear in various areas of society. Victor Turner finds liminality institutionalised in certain religious groups, which build their social orders around their particular experiences of transgression and understanding of communitas. How academia may also be viewed as a sphere of institutionalized liminality and what the problems with this are will be explored further on in this document. Turner also distinguishes the socially unavoidable, enforced liminality from new forms of voluntary inbetween-ness, as in tourism, which he calls liminoid. Whether a situation is liminal or liminoid can be very subjective – the same experience can be liminal for one, and liminoid for another: In the ECR setting we could think of those researchers who want a career in academia but are forced into waiting, and those who choose and are able to make a living in the area in-between academia and beyond.

This relation between chaos and order is deepened by structuralist Anthropologist Dame Mary Douglas (1921-2007), whose body of work offers another important way of thinking about inbetween-ness.\(^6\) According to Douglas it lies in the human nature to organise and compartmentalise the world according to particular principles. By defining what is clean and what is polluted, cultures maintain symbolic boundaries between categories. Danger, goes the argument, therefore comes from things or beings that do not fit in one single category or have no clear opposition; it comes with ambivalence. Douglas observed that ambivalence and inbetween-ness between categories is often perceived as a threat. Douglas’s work helps to better understand the difficulty of cross-sector collaboration and of building a professional identity and ethos as a researcher while transgressing the traditional boundaries of academia. This strategy paper


suggests that once universities find a compartment and a terminology for hybrid professional research identities and have organised them in a formal curriculum, it will become easier to recognize their value and give recognition to those researchers who hold them.

Douglas’s approach also provides explanations for the cunning of communication between academic departments and university services. This subject will be addressed in the final section of the document.

These different anthropological approaches for thinking about thresholds, transgression, and inbetween-ness will be the starting point for fostering an alternative understanding for the chances and challenges of early career researchers. The creative continuation of these approaches forms the basis of the suggested University support strategies for fostering and valuing positive forms of liminality and hybridity and reducing negative experiences of liminality.

One particularly valuable form of liminality that is necessary for excellent research is what in this document shall be called Liminal Thinking Capacity. Liminal Thinking Capacity is a close relative to John Keats’s notion of Negative Capability. Keats describes a poet’s capacity to mentally last through difficult, unsettling periods of internal ambivalence in order to provide a channel for creativity that is untamed by reason or logics. Liminal Thinking Capacity may be viewed as the intellectual sibling of Negative Capability. This positive form of liminality in academia describes a researcher’s capacity to embark on long intellectual journeys into the ontologically unknown. It emphasises a researcher’s ability to develop new ideas and innovative thoughts as a result of these intellectual journeys. Liminal Thinking Capacity further implies a researcher’s emotional strength and psychological toolkit to withstand and counterbalance long periods of ontological insecurity and fruitless experimentation that are integral parts of the research profession and that bear health risks. Personal balance is thus just as much a part of the concept of Liminal Thinking Capacity as is intellectual inbetween-ness.

Liminal Thinking Capacity is not a “natural” trait; it is an ability that young researchers acquire as part of their doctoral qualification. At present, this ability is undervalued and not sufficiently fostered by the university. This leads to a lack of confidence in researchers as well as to significant health problems, as young researchers often do not have the necessary toolkit for dealing with the psychological risks of research. This strategy paper proposes a targeted support programme for fostering the Liminal Thinking Capacity in researchers during their doctoral studies and thereby strengthening both their mental health and their professional value. It includes concrete ideas for empowering, training, balancing, stabilising researchers and thereby creating a healthier research environment, in which people can thrive as persons.

Structural instability, on the other hand, is a central source for experiences of negative liminality for Early Career Researchers and must be taken seriously. Structural instability is caused by different factors, one of them being the pre-mature institutional resolution of the doctoral rite-of-passage.

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before all necessary qualifications (such as publication records or practical training) to a successful transition into a different sphere of professional life are achieved. This pre-mature institutional ending of the doctoral qualification forces many Early Career Researchers into a personally and intellectually damaging phase of post-doctoral transgression after the end or their “official” rite-of-passage. **Structural Liminality** is often accompanied by harmful experiences of social rupture, economic deficiency, and lack of professional recognition.

These experiences have been reported by Early Career Researchers for the transitional phase in the first years after finishing their PhD studies. Such negative **Structural Liminality** is related but not synonymous to the notion of precariousness that has been iconic for the description of a whole generation of well-educated young adults seeking permanent employment in a post-crash neoliberal economy as well as to the professional class of academics. Other than precariousness, a broader term that related to the new sets of rules on the job market, the notion of **Structural Liminality** is used to point at the specific structural form of precariousness shortly after the PhD, and to the context, in which this is rooted, UK academia in the humanities and social sciences. After graduating with a doctoral degree Early Career Researchers are expected to further invest in their professional profile rather than being sufficiently qualified and equipped to enter either an academic or non-academic job market with precarious opportunities.

This particular negative form of liminality is an experience that grows out of a set of particular structural problems which cannot be solved solely on an individual level by ECRs. It cries for wider policy solutions that actively tackle the structural gaps on university level which are responsible for the ECR experience of **Structural Liminality**. This document contains two structural interventions that aim at reducing the experience of **Structural Liminality** for ECR and at smoothing the transition between their doctoral studies and their professional and personal futures. The interventions are designed to support researchers in their decision-making on their professional paths. They further give ECRs the chance to acquire the necessary qualifications for entering the professional world as academics or as cross-sector research collaborators. Given the economic loss and psychological harm caused by **Structural Liminality**, it is essential that universities quickly respond to the problem with resolute and well-thought through structural solutions.

A further problem raised concerns the perception of ambivalence and multiple loyalties in the profession of a researcher. This is addressed by the notions of Cross-Sectoral Transgression and **Professional Hybridity**. Cross-Sectoral Transgression research to the researchers diverse work engagements across a variety of sectors, through which they become liable to different work

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9 Sociological studies on academia in Germany have pointed at the German academic “Mittelbau”, hence any researcher who has not finished their PhD and has not reached the status of a professor as a the “academic precariat”: a professional class with almost exclusively fixed term contracts of maximum eight years and insecure employment futures. This analysis is not fully transferable to the UK, where permanent contracts for lecturers and readers below the level of professors do still exist more frequently as part of the higher education system. However, the precarious nature of work in academia is a common phenomenon also in the UK. Compare: Sander, Nadine (2012): Das Akademische Pr

Leben zwischen Frist und Plan: UVK-Verlag.
cultures and ethics. It is time to discuss how universities train and value those researchers who seek research engagement outside academia or who work across different sectors including academia. The strategy paper suggests two key interventions that contribute to changing Cross-Sectoral Transgression and Professional Hybridity from a moral betrayal and professional failure into a personal and professional asset. One of these interventions concerns changing the story that people tell themselves about their individual or group identity as independent, public, or cross-sector researchers. The second intervention has the goal of formalizing sectoral transgression as a professional skill and offering tailored training for different research professions through a newly designed curriculum.

Part One: Fostering a Balanced Doctoral Community with Liminal Thinking Capacity

As part of the creative programme the participants of the ECR Residential held in Manchester, in June 2016, received the task to make an object that would be helpful for Ph.D. students. One group designed a Ph.D. Voodoo Doll.

The Ph.D. as a Rite of Passage: Re-visiting a Liminal Period of Uprooting and Transformation

Doctoral studies have a long tradition as a rite of passage through which scholars were initiated into the academic universe with its beliefs, values, and hierarchies. Since the middle ages, it has served as an apprenticeship for joining the guild of lecturers of philosophical studies and later also
researchers (doctor derives from docere, Latin for lecturing). Today, the Ph.D. remains the key transformative phase during which a person has to prove him or herself as a serious researcher, independent thinker, and valid member of the academic community.

However, with the changing shape of academia and with new destinations beyond academia that Ph.D. researchers might be envisaging in their professional futures, the very nature of the doctoral rite of passage is not self-evident. It is thus central that we do not take this rite of passage for granted; that we do not think of its liminality as unchangeable in nature, but rather consider the possibilities for change, intervention, re-design where necessary. Change becomes necessary, when liminality stops being productive to the development of the individual and becomes damaging; when the liminal phase transgresses the institutional framework, and where the liminal experience of *communitas* hinders the positive transformation of the individual.

Questions to be asked in this context are then: What is the contemporary role of liminality in the Ph.D. studies? Where is liminality timely, necessary, and empowering during the Ph.D.? What are the risks of liminality and transgression during the Ph.D. and how can we counterbalance them? How can we strengthen the liminal community of peers? The next section will focus on one particularly necessary and useful form of liminality during the PhD: Liminal Thinking Capacity.

**More Positive Liminality! Growing Liminal Thinking Capacity During the Ph.D.**

The necessary liminality for a Ph.D. becoming a researcher lies in the capacity to last through extensive periods of ontological insecurity and work one’s ways out of them. During some of these periods, dominant values and “secure knowledge” are challenged, while during others new research is carried out. Both of these periods lead the doctoral candidate to develop courage, resources, and skill to formulate own ideas, make strong arguments, and draw autonomous conclusions. This *Liminal Thinking Capacity* (LTC) is essential and should be viewed as positive. It is what could be seen as the liminal core not only of the Ph.D., but of the whole of academia. Without this insecurity and the openness to the unknown, we would have no innovative, creative thinking.

Universities that claim to be excellent places of research and to train excellent researchers need to encourage Liminal Thinking Capacity and as part of that take responsibility for the prevention of risks related to intellectual liminality.

This means teaching doctoral researchers early strategies for cultivating intellectual liminality, protecting it, and using it responsibly with regards to their own mental and physical health, their social relationships, and their cultural identity. Universities need to put in place the necessary support for that, a support that differs significantly from the support that B.A. and M.A. students need.

**Be Brave, Be Proud, Be Kind. Fostering Confidence and Strength during the Ph.D.**

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Mental health risks are extremely high for Ph.D. students and most junior researchers known to me have suffered from some sort of mental fragility or illness during their Ph.D.s.

Rather than beginning the support with treatment of symptoms the suggestion here is to provide Ph.D. students with a positive, preventive support from the start and growing them strong as they move through their Ph.D.s. Working at the threshold of one’s capacities is essential for achieving excellence, yet it is always also a risky endeavor – whether one is a ski jumper, a virtuoso musician, or unthinking the world as we know it. Therefore the counselling service\textsuperscript{11} needs to be a key partner in providing high quality support that is tailored to the specific needs of young researchers of learning to develop Liminal Thinking Capacity to their full potential without negative impacts on their mental health.

This support programme should include elements that:

- **Strengthen the individual researcher psychologically and help them to deal with upcoming challenges on a regular basis through:**
  - An offer of regular counselling sessions for Ph.D. researchers and incentives for regular participation.
  - Establishing a volunteer-led peer-to-peer PhD and ECR helpline in collaboration with the “Greater Manchester Nightline”: a group of PhD- and ECR- volunteers will

\textsuperscript{11}At the University of Manchester the counselling service seems to work at the very limits of its personnel capacities and appears to be least informed about the situation of young researchers, and least prepared to offer the very necessary services for the Ph.D. and ECR community.
participate in the 5-week psychological training provided by “Greater Manchester Helpline” for their volunteers and in a set of supplementary training sessions tailored to supporting PhD students and ECRs. This will give junior researchers the opportunity to raise their profiles as future supervisors while providing a valuable service to their peers. It will also be a very valuable asset for the university in recruiting future PhD students.

- **Foster pride in Liminal Thinking Capacity & teach responsible use of intellectual liminality**
  This can be achieved by designing the course material and finding facilitators to teach:
  - A workshop series on threshold thinking and creativity
  - A workshop series on taking care of an active brain through nutrition, sleep, meditation, mindfulness

- **Counter-balance ontological insecurity of Ph.D.s through regular positive activities in other domains of life**
  This may be achieved by:
  - Initiating a cycle of creative activities and groups for Ph.D. students at university or in collaboration with local arts and music centres
  - Setting up a network of institutions that provide social volunteering opportunities for Ph.D.s, where people can and expand their skills and can work flexible hours.
  - Encouraging foreign students to partake in native-language (social, physical) activities and cultural activities, and support these activities through a cultural fund
  - Organise events that encourage PhD students to practice physical exercise and team sports and foster their social relationships (School ball games tournaments, PhD swimming club, Sunday hiking club)
  - Set up a socio-cultural events cycle, such as a regular Ph.D. talent evening, where people can showcase other skills and talents of theirs and can perform together
  - Set up a family friendly PhD activity group

- **Foster a positive, well-balanced communitas of peers**
  Strategies for achieving this are:
  - Setting up a peer support system of small support units of 3-5 Ph.D. students from different subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences. These small groups will persist throughout the Ph.D. process and will be fostered through social networks (eg sharing a whatsapp group or a blog), regular social activities (eg an outing plus meal once a month), training (active listing, peer support), and designated peer-support group meetings (regular meetings for talking about individual and celebrating successes).
  - Provide a tailored training scheme for peer support and mentoring in which Ph.D. researchers learn strategies of positive communication, active listening, and emotional support // ECRs in the Publication and Orientation Phase (view section

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12 In Manchester, these institutions could include: Islington Mill, Zion Centre, Whitworth Gallery, Manchester Art Gallery, Chinese Arts Centre, Band on the Wall
below for details) could be employed to run these courses and manage the peer support system

- Assign a designated area for Ph.D. students in each department, where young researchers can talk at a normal voice, eat together and socialize.

“In history, our workroom was taken away from us when we were moved into the graduate school in Ellen Wilkinson. No-one wanted it to happen, and from my personal experience of talking to others PGRs in the department, no-one liked the new space – not least because it moved us OUT of our department. It also reinforced the feeling that our views didn’t matter. It also increased the already heavy pressure on desk space.”

- Facilitate a better, more reflexive and mediated relationship between Ph.D. students and supervisors

The relationship could be improved by initiating:

- Regular (annual) mediated workshops with supervisors and their supervisees, where the pairs learn to benefit from each other and establish their desired work relationship, and learn about each other’s expectations and backgrounds. This may be particularly useful in intercultural supervision relationships, where expectations and academic writing traditions can vary significantly.

- Designing and distributing word-templates designed to help establish a supervisor-supervisee work relationship and which can be used on a voluntary basis: supervision relationship questionnaire, supervision meeting protocol and supervision preparation diary

- Engage senior academics in creating a more satisfying academic work culture

This could be achieved by initiating a “I pledge to be an example” programme for senior academics, which will be based around:

- Communicating to senior academics the importance of their own practices for younger researchers and the use of setting positive signals about, for example, good work-life balance, passion for research, motherhood and academia, transnational identities.

- Elaborating concrete pledges with academics about how they will set an example to junior researchers.

- A series of small drama workshops following the Theatre of the Oppressed: In these workshops, senior academics will get the opportunity to step out of the trodden discourses about academia and learn to re-assess their values, opinions and experiences of being an academic in a safe space.

- A university wide “I pledge to be an example”- day, for which

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13 This deserves mention in a modern University architecture, where large offices, transparent rooms, and frequent room changes are the norm and it can be difficult to create a safe space for Ph.D. students.
- an exhibition of portraits of academics with their particular pledges will be produced. The exhibition will be showed centrally and will be published as a booklet.

○ Strategically prepare Ph.D. students for the professional (potentially precarious) environment after the Ph.D.

This may be achieved through a certified professional skills course that is particularly tailored to researchers and will deal with the following themes:

- negotiating between forms of liminal (such as research, writing-up) and non-liminal work (such as administration tasks) as a researcher within or outside academia
- valuing and pricing one’s work as an ECR
- pitching projects and writing funding applications
- basics in accountancy and tax-management
- project and time management
- events management
- self-employment and setting up a business
- international collaboration and networking

Part Two: Reducing the Risk of Structural Liminality for Early Post-PhD Researchers

As part of the creative part of the ECR Residential in Manchester, June 2016, participants were asked to build a sculpture that represents their ECR experience. This was one of the outcomes: A naked, struggling individual, burdened by the weight of balancing financial instability (money on one side) and time pressure (a surreal Dalian clock on the other side).
Queuing up for Academia or the Experience of Structural Transgression after the Ph.D.

It is rare for Ph.D. graduates to feel ready for the job market directly after their viva or the final PhD submission. We could thus say that the institutional framework of the Ph.D. and the real duration of the rite of passage of the Ph.D. no longer match here: With the pressure of finishing the Ph.D. in a relatively restricted time, supervisors are often cautious about encouraging Ph.D. researchers to publish during their doctoral studies. Yet, it is commonly agreed upon that publications are the deciding factor for finding a job in academia. ECRs therefore often finish their Ph.D.s in the knowledge that with limited job offers in academia there is a long waiting queue of qualified academics with growing publication records. This means that those with aspirations for and academic position will have to invest a significant period of time and money into publishing, before even having a realistic chance on the academic job market. It has thus become common sense to accept that Post-Ph.D.s have to extend the doctoral phase on their own cost and without continued institutional affiliation or official support. To bridge this problematic phase and support Post-Ph.D.s, it has become an informal practice of many departments in the Humanities to employ ECRs as teaching assistants. However, there are no rules or guarantees concerning such opportunities and the minimum number of teaching hours. Meanwhile the departments benefit from highly qualified, cheap academic workforce.

For ECRs, this phase is marked by emotional, economic, and intellectual instability and lasting slow recovery from the Ph.D. Finding the inner peace and mental focus to work on publications, while the world is kicking in again can be very difficult: one feels threatened by the highly competitive job market, is stressed by the pressure to earn a living, and isolated from one’s early academic community.

Due to their finishing student status and the duty to pay council tax, many ECR can no longer afford their rents and decide to move back home with their parents, who do often not understand the situation of their highly qualified children and the professional and personal pressures that rest upon them. Young students ask themselves questions about the compatibility of founding a family and continuing their academic careers. Mature students may already have a family to bring up and. International students are often additionally pressured by their expiring visas and/ or by the daunting question about their future whereabouts.¹⁴ Post-Ph.D.s, who are staying local and around university, are usually asked to clear their desks and look for non-permanent work spaces. This may be a cathartic moment, but it is very often also an unsettling one, particularly, if no concrete departure is in sight and a familiar workspace needed to work on publication output. This phase is thus often marked by the negative force of Structural Liminality as outlined previously.

Structural Liminality gets in the way of the productive Liminal Thinking Capacity that researchers need to embrace in order to produce excellent research. Negative experiences of liminality through structural instability and lack of recognition can thus significantly damage the quality of the work of ECRs and impact in harmful ways on the health of ECRs. It is thus a priority to reduce such experiences of Structural Liminality to a minimum. Structural Liminality is first and foremost a

¹⁴ It would be very important to widely communicate the possibility of a special Post-Ph.D. visa extension over a year.
problem that must be tackled by the University through changes in the institutional framework of Doctoral Studies. The process of reducing this *Structural Liminality* through structural changes in the organization of the doctoral programme should be supplemented by a narrative re-framing of the professional identity of ECRs that is community-led. Tackling this problem is not solely a moral obligation for universities that will be supported by public funding bodies such as the AHRC. Once economically and socially sustainable solutions are put into place and well-thought through aftercare and transitional support for PhD graduates is in operation, they will become strong economic assets for the respective university. A re-designed framework that offers a post-PhD support net will attract new PhD students and impact positively on future recruitment numbers. Business and public institutions will be interested accessing the trained pool of researcher and offer new terms for future collaborations. Graduating researchers who experience a successful transition into professional life will also be able to pay off their student loans more swiftly and may want to join the alumni scheme.

**Early Post-Ph.D.s Welcome! Institutional Framework for a 3-Year Post-Ph.D.**

**Publication and Transition Phase**

The honest solution for this problem lies in re-designing the Ph.D. programme in a way that publishing and academic outputs become an integral, institutionally accommodated part of it. One suggestion would be to institutionalise the commonly practiced (Post-)Ph.D. production and transition phase and thereby take away feelings of social isolation, intellectual anxiety, financial pressure, and guilt about not having found a job yet. By guaranteeing ECRs a number of teaching hours that secures a living wage, by extending institutional affiliation, providing workspaces, and by linking up with local and state institutions to secure a stable legal status for ECRs, the University could create a much healthier environment for ECRs. It would reduce the experience of *Structural Liminality* significantly.
Outline of ECR support during the *Publication and Transition Phase*

**ECRs will be supported through:**

- A set amount of teaching or university work hours that secure living wage for every ECR
- Guaranteed, stable work space in Manchester, potentially in the new science hub in the centre of Manchester that is currently developed by Manchester City Council
- Legal status as Post-PhD Graduates that allows for housing benefits (or at least freedom from Council Tax) and facilitated visa extension for international students
- Access to a pool of small AHRC and NWCDTP funding programmes for the organisation of events, workshops, social activities with ECR peers
- Conference vouchers for participation in a number of UK based conferences per year (this should be arranged in collaboration with UK Subject Associations, such as Royal Anthropological Society)
- Cultural and sports vouchers issued by the City Council for participation in cultural events and physical activities
- (Continued) access to affordable child-care for members of the university

**Conditions for participation in the programme may include:**
- Submissions of written work to academic journals and books: to submit a set number of publications; confirmation of submitted publications have to be collected in a designated dossier
- Participation in peer review network: Regularly peer review written work of other Post-Ph.D.s in the Publication and Transition Programme
- Submission of a set number of abstracts to academic conferences
- Demonstrate pro-active engagement in applying for research jobs
- Accept the conditions of a realistic set amount of paid hours of teaching and lecturing, lecture design, digital course building, student mentoring, librarian work, and/or marking duties
- Active participation in the cultural life of the City of Manchester

This Ph.D. Publication and Transition Phase should be voluntary and can last up to 3 years after the Ph.D.

While the University would have to put into place an administration structure for the programme either at a departmental level or centrally through the school, a key benefit would be the continued access to a pool of qualified staff for a variety of academic and administrative duties including teaching, marking and course building. An incentive for the City of Manchester to support the initiative is the value that junior researchers can bring to cultural life of the city in this Post-Ph.D. period. Further an extended period could influence the decisions of Early Career Researchers to stay in Manchester and work against brain-draining with the loss of qualified populations and their migration to London or abroad. Further, the University of Manchester would set a UK wide example about how to significantly improve the situation of ECR researchers after their Ph.D.s. A functioning after-care and transition support for PhD researcher will impact positively on the future recruitment of postgraduate students.

Part Three: Valuing Professional Hybridity and Cross-Sectoral Transgression as new Assets in the Pathways of Early Career Researchers
Build an object that represents your ECR experience! This group of participants from the ECR residential workshop in Manchester, June 2016 built a battery powered, fast-spinning propeller object. It shows the drive, the motion, the flexibility, resourcefulness, and multi-purpose functionality that ECRs find they are showing in their post-Ph.D. everyday work life.

“So, do you want to stay in Academia or leave?” Challenging Professional Categories and Allowing ECRs to Be Hybrid and “Become”

The frequent question of “Will you stay in academia” is revealing about the way in which we think about the academic and non-academic realms as separate from each other. It is curious that while collaboration projects are becoming increasingly more important, there is a general assumption (and convention) that individuals can either be in academia or outside it, and that, generally, a decision is necessary to be made about one’s institutional “whereabouts”. A person that operates in two different environments (unless it is the arts, another, even more treasured realm of liminality) is not necessarily perceived as somebody who benefits the cross-fertilization of spheres, but can also be viewed as an uncanny element of two different value systems who lacks professional commitment to either value system, similar what Mary Douglas is arguing in her work.

However, with the current political emphasis on impact of research\(^{15}\), fully trained researchers who are also able to operate across spheres will increasingly be in demand. Further, the reality is that neither option - staying in academia or leaving academia – is a safe bet for newly trained researchers. While some people might choose to stay on the threshold, most do not even have a choice but to work in both “worlds” and mix and match their tasks: Since this space at the threshold is relatively recent, it yet has to be institutionalized and lacks common socially acceptance. It is thus not uncommon for Early Career Researchers to start straddling and fall into excuses, when they are asked what they are doing, even if they involved in an array of varied, challenging projects that show the diversity of their skillset. This stumbling also has both to do with a feeling of fragmentation and lack of social and economic for one’s work, and with a deeply embodied assumption that only strictly academic work of writing and research is “valid” work.

Two complementary strategies are recommended to address the issue of reconciling multiple value systems and working across the traditional professional boundaries. Together they encourage a re-definition of the new researcher; they empower Early Career Researchers to operate across sectors and moves between universities, the public sector, and the private sector without losing their professional credibility and identity. The first part of the strategy concerns re-telling the story of ECRs – as individuals and as a professional community. The second part of the strategy concerns the formalization and re-organization of sustainable training opportunities for ECRs in the field of cross-sector research collaborations and public engagement.

Re-telling and Re-valuing Hybrid ECR Identities through Storytelling and Coaching

Finishing the large project of the Ph.D., which doctoral researchers have identified with for a long time, and diving into a number of small projects can carry along a feeling of fragmentation. This

\(^{15}\) Impact: “an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia”, [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/), accessed 23 June 2016
feeling of fragmentation can be experienced as refreshing, but also as unsettling for the self. In this situation, learning to tell one’s story and crafting an own professional narrative can be extremely liberating and empowering for Early Career Researchers, whose most common feature is that they are highly educated and sport very diverse life experiences, talents and skills. Storytelling for ECRs should be encouraged on two levels: on the level of the individual researcher and on the level of the ECR community of peers. On the individual level of the researcher storytelling practices will help to step out of conventional discursive formats of constructing the post-Ph.D. self and re-define what it means to be an ECR based on one’s individual experiences, skills, and aspirations. On the collective level of the ECR peers, storytelling will help to foster sense of community, set shared goals, voice common concerns, and propose innovative solutions. This will help new researchers to negotiate better work conditions, foster a positive sense of social belonging, re-kindle professional values, create a strong support network, and take ownership of defining the role and engagement of researchers in a changing academic environment.

To fight the feeling of fragmentation and inbetween-ness after the Ph.D. Scott came up with his own strategy. He took the time to formulate his email signature, assembling all his duties and roles. “This was a real confidence boost”. The strategy was quickly copied by other Fellows from the Public Engagement Fellowship group. Sometimes small changes can make a big difference and improve how we perceive ourselves.

**Support Strategies for Managing Hybrid Professional ECR Identities**

- Individual coaching, workshops, and interactive webinars about diverse strategies of storytelling and identity building for ECRs, including the workshops on the concept of portfolio-careers, planned happenstance, and challenging ones “work ethics”. They can be offered as “interventions” for Early Career Researchers. The Career Centre should offer such services to Early Career Researchers form the University of Manchester and for Early Career Researchers who work at the University of Manchester.
- Affirmative counselling services for Early Career Researchers to who experience low self-esteem, stress, and anxiety.
- The initiation and support of peer-led ECR workshops and local, regional, and national networks of ECRs

**Training to Transgress Traditional Fields of Academic Activity: Towards a Professional Curriculum for Independent, Public, and Cross-Sector Researchers**

Universities that acknowledge their responsibility to re-define the concept of a researcher in a transforming, less compartmentalized professional field of engagement will need to make certain elements of post-doctoral training part of a formalized, sustainable curriculum. Formalised Public Engagement Fellowships can be excellent moments to Ph. D. graduates for re-identifying as a researcher and testing, how to benefit a cultural project with one’s skills, how to be researchers in
a different socio-economic and cultural context. They also help re-discovering one’s passion for the profession of a researcher and learning something new about ourselves and about our talents. Carrying out research outside the University can be a strong confidence boost and help ECRs rediscover enthusiasm for research after the Ph.D.

The model of short term public engagement fellowships and trainings is not new and has been used with different thematic foci under different names and within a variety of funding programmes16. Reports and personal communication indicate the success of these programmes and affirms them as powerful tools for ECRs to gather experience in the broad field of the research profession working across sectors. The benefit of such programmes is the safe, institutionalised framework of mutual trust between the university and the institutions involved, which allows ECRs to make new connections and acquire new skills, while at the same time applying one’s knowledge and skills as a post-doctoral researcher.

“Through the Fellowship Programme I re-discovered my passion for research. If you see hundreds of volunteers doing research in their free time, how can you moan about being a researcher? At the same time I love the fact that in my tasks as exhibition designer, I can approach things more creatively and be at time a bit more provocative than it would be acceptable in academia. A Ph.D. is a lonely self-centred affair, and I really enjoy contributing my skills as a researcher to a bigger project from which many will benefit.” Ruth Colton, AHRC Public Engagement Fellow at Quarry Bank Mill.

Towards a Sustainable, Transparent, Accessible Public Engagement Fellowship Programme

While, as said, such fellowship programmes do already exist, they are relatively dispersed, unsustainable, and follow different rules. The suggestion here is for a commitment towards a comprehensive, transparent, sustainable, and potentially unified Public Engagement Fellowship Programme for ECRs. This programme would be based on a well-organised and regularly updated pool of public engagement opportunities with local, national, and international institutions. As participants of the formalized and certified programme, Early Career Researchers would be placed in participating institutions in Manchester, elsewhere in the UK, in their native countries, or in the countries where they conducted their research.

After a thorough phase of consultations of different UK funding bodies and with the involved hosting institutions, all public engagement opportunities could ideally follow a similar model and be based on a unified work agreement between the University or funding body, the participating public institution, and the researcher. ECRs should also have the possibility to use the provided agreements and documents to set up their own, new collaborations locally and internationally.

It would be desirable to offer increasing numbers of Public Engagement opportunities for ECRs and to put in place a well thought-through recruitment system, which matches people and

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16 Such as the CEELBAS Internship Programme for ECRs in the field of Slavonic Studies at Institutions in or around the theme of Central and Eastern Europe, “Researchers in Residence” Programme (University of Manchester), the North-West Consortium “Public Policy Engagement Programme”, or the AHRC Public Engagement Fellowship Programme.
institutions. The programme could be one part of the previously suggested *Publication and Orientation Phase* and follow the same payment structure as the academic work programme. Once the University and the involved institutions have established a relationship of trust, and the value of the projects have become clear to the hosting institutions, the University should begin negotiations about sharing the fee paid to the researcher with the institution. To build a pool of partners and partner ECRs with institutions, a networking and showcase event could be organized around the Public Engagement Programme.

**Peer network and Events Cycle**

“I experienced my Post-Ph.D. phase as an anti-climax. Being in a group with other Fellows has really given me a boost of positive energy. It has helped me to feel hopeful about the future and less isolated in my position.” Scott Midson, AHRC Public Engagement Fellow in ECR Policy Research.

Part of the centrally organized public engagement fellowship programme should also be a peer network with regular events, meetings, personal coaching, and online platforms, in which fellows can share their experience and feel connected to people in similar situations.

**Pre-Fellowship Volunteering and Continued Commission Work: Before and After the Fellowship**

A prior step for preparing researchers and students for the programme could be a volunteering scheme for Ph.D. students with the same pool of institutions. This also speaks to the common practice in UK cultural institution of gaining access to them through long periods of volunteering. Since volunteering for Ph.D. students can be a risk in terms of the time investment required, this particular volunteering scheme would be regulated through an agreement with special respect to the availabilities of Ph.D. students. It would give them the opportunity to have a glance into a cultural institution without the risk of over-commitment.

For arising job opportunities after the Fellowship Programme, the University should offer ECRs advice on how to continue collaboration with institutions, how to financially value their services. There should be an online resources centre that provides fellows with access to templates for work agreements, contracts and invoices.

“After my fellowship, the team at the Cathedral was satisfied with my work and extended my contract. I will be working on the funding bid for another six months. I just assumed that I would charge them whatever a post-doctoral researcher receives from a university, but actually it would be good to re-visit the issue of payment. In the end, I do have the risks of self-employment and project work.” Andy Hardman, AHRC Public Engagement Fellow at Manchester Cathedral.

**Outline of the suggested Public Engagement Fellowship Programme:**
- Includes paid placements over 3-6 months and fully-funded intense training courses
- Is based on a well-managed, up-to-date Public Engagement Opportunity Pool with different local, national, and international host institutions. In the initial phase the host institutions will have to commit to host five Fellows as part of the partnership programme. After this period, a longer collaboration contract should be drafted.
- Promotes a unified fellowship model and legally regulated and transparent through a publicly available contract template that is applicable in the UK and internationally.
- Is open to all graduating Ph.D. students from the University of Manchester up to 5 years after their graduation. Multiple applications to different institutions are possible.
- Is voluntary part of the Publication and Transition Phase, and follows the same pay scheme as the Teaching Assistant work (plus potential travel and accommodation costs)
• Is initially financed by the University or external funding bodies, after five successful Fellowships the costs will be divided between the University/external funding body and the host institution.

• Is supplemented by a volunteer scheme for Ph.D. students and dossier of documents for further collaboration between ECRs and their previous fellowship host institutions.

Part Four: The Pearl in its Corporate Shell: Recognising University Career Services as Safe Spaces for Early Career Researchers to Explore their Aspirations

It is curious that on the level of the Ph.D., the authority of careers advice is steadily held by the supervisors or Heads of Department, rather than by the designated Experts in the Careers Service. A further observation is that very few Ph.D. students and ECRs are generally familiar with the diverse offer of services and workshops provided by the Careers Service.

If this seems at the first glance to be a problem of marketing strategies and resolvable through a simple readjustment of communication channels, the issue runs slightly deeper. It can be read as a result of structural, management-led transformations within the University. One could argued that the lack of interest in the Careers Service and the ignorance of its services is related to an underlying unease that these transformations have caused and are causing within the traditional culture of academia. Without going too much into depth here, it could be suggested that the authority of academics as careers advisors must be viewed in the light of a transformation of Universities into corporate units, in which the authority of the traditional academic gatekeepers is seriously threatened. Both Ph.D. students, who tend to identify strongly with this traditional culture of academia and their hierarchies (in the end they are seeking its acceptance through the title of a Ph.D.), and academic staff, whose authority is threatened and undermined by new management structures, regard University services more as foreign than as useful for them. In that situation, boundary drawing seems to be a more common strategy than sharing, recommending or using Career Services.

Apart from that, the general ubiquity of marketing culture at university, advertising services, events, and sending out bulletins, can lead academics to apply an automatic "spam blocker" and ignorance strategy of all branded University communications, which often seem meaningless and undermine the vision of the University as a place for liminal thinking and intellectual excellence.

At the other end, those responsible for the activities of Careers Services are not less critical about the increasingly corporate culture of the University and about its marketing strategies.
“I find the advertisement for Careers Services really childish and overly cute, and I think it does not suit grown-up researchers with serious decisions to make.” Postgraduate Careers Advisor at the University of Manchester

“We are the last ones to want people to work in Corporate. That’s why we work in a University and not in Corporate. We want them to find a way that suits them. But we also want to show people the challenges of a life as an Academic.” Postgraduate Careers Advisor at the University of Manchester.

While understaffed, with only two people for the development, facilitation, and marketing of training and advice for Postgraduate Researchers and Ph.D. students, the Careers Service offers a very important perspective to ECRs and Ph.D. students. In contrast to full-time academics, who have taken a particular career path as researchers, the postgraduate careers advisors are able to help young researchers to see academia as one of many professional pathways after the Ph.D.. A conversation with careers advisors allows ECRs to step out of the silent assumption that they want to become a full time academics and have an academic position at a university and that this is the only thing one is capable and destined to do. Why is it so difficult to have these conversations with senior academics? This is not only because senior academics have chosen their professional pathway, it is also, because it is usually them who write references for ECRs and therefore conversations tend to entail an element of selling oneself as determined and capable researcher. The perspective of careers advisors is therefore a particularly important one: It allows for honesty and an exploration of the self, ones real professional and private aspirations. Career Services are successful if they manage to offer a safe, non-judgmental liminal space that welcomes the individual with the different, potentially competing discourses that surround the decision-making process of individuals; if they create a space, in which ECRs are allowed to express both their professional and private aspirations, and to step out of habits of self-policing and social cohesion that may be practiced in discussions with academic colleagues or also within the family realm.

The same is true for much of the material provided by the postgraduate section of the Careers Service: The website www.academiccareermanchester.ac.uk offers a great portrait of the different aspects of the academic profession and is an excellent resource for an informed decision making process about becoming an academic. However, despite its national recognition as an excellent source of information by leading UK media, this website remains locally unnoticed by most graduates, if they are not pointed at it by their careers authority or by their peers. It would be important to both promote the website and bring it to life through the facilitation of directly related workshops.

In order to increase the impact Careers Service and to tailor its offers better to the needs of Ph.D. students and ECRs in the Humanities, the communication between the Humanities Departments and the Careers Service needs to be changed. It will further be important to include the University Counselling Service in the discussion about better support for Ph.D. researchers and ECRs. The aim of these suggestions is not to unify or homogenise the discourse around careers in University, it is rather to dilute the strong authority of the academic staff in giving career advice in favour of a more balanced advice system, in which different voices are equally valued and taken into account.
Ultimately, it should stand in the interest of all members of the University to help their Ph.D. graduates to find the professional activities and environments that suit them most.

**Strategies for Better Communication and Collaboration of University Services**

- Initiation of an annual round table and planning session with heads of departments, postgraduate course leaders, postgraduate student representatives, careers advisors, and representatives from the Counselling Service. During the session drafts for integrated, annual Ph.D. and ECR support programmes will be presented and discussed. The support programmes will be finalised and communicated after the meeting.
- Supervisors must be obliged to send their supervisees to regular consultation session to Careers Services and to Counselling Services during their doctoral studies.
- Each Ph.D. submission should be followed up by a phone call from Careers Service with an appointment for an advice session.
- All Ph.D. graduates should be registered by their respective departments and updated email and telephone lists of Post-Ph.D.s should be held in every department. PhD-graduates can opt in or out for their address to be made available to University Careers Services for support and information about career events.

**Conclusion**

This document has introduced the concept of liminality as a way for better understanding the particular situation of Ph.D. students and Early Career Researchers. It has provided strategies of
how Universities can offer better support for Ph.D. students and Early Career Researchers to help them embrace and foster Liminal Thinking Capacity as a positive form of liminality while reducing structurally caused experiences of Negative Liminality. Liminal Thinking Capacity is proposed as a strategy that helps achieving excellent research while supporting healthy and balanced researchers. Structural Liminality draws attention to common experiences of instability and transgression that are mainly caused by structural gaps, lack of sustainability, and a contemporary moment of reorganization of the academic field. Distinguishing the different forms of liminality can help to step out of a generic negative discourse around the situation of ECRs and Ph.D. students and create a better understanding for the complexity of the situation, while offering concrete suggestions for change. Strategies that we need to put forward to improve the situation need to take place on different levels; they involve a variety of agents across the university and beyond. The proposed strategies suggest changes in institutional structure, in socio-cultural value systems and work-life-ethics, in self-perception and self-respect. They are all there to protect both researchers as a holistic human beings and the researchers’ intellectual capital of threshold thinking. The strategies provided in this document encourage Ph.D. graduates as well as the institution of the university to cultivate, treasure, and protect their intellectual capital of Liminal Thinking Capacity and make it fit with the changing conditions of the blurring boundaries of academia and bring it to use in different spheres of society. At the same time they propose ways of bridging the very severe institutional gaps that produce negative experiences of Structural Liminality. Reducing these institutional gaps that leave Ph.D. graduates in an involuntary and damaging transitional stage that leads to loss of intellectual capital and is a threat to people’s mental health is a key task for today’s universities. Professional Hybridity and Cross-Sectoral Transgression of researchers need to be taken seriously and re-valued by universities and in the academic context. In a situation, in which academic positions are rare and more people embark on the doctoral journey, universities have the duty to offer a broader range of professional pathways for Humanities and Social Sciences Researchers beyond the traditional set of academic professions. Offering tailored, professional training opportunities and setting professional standards has thus been one of the suggestions in this paper.

At the heart of the document are three main strategic suggestions:

1. A confidence oriented, preventive support programme for fostering Liminal Thinking Capacity for Ph.D. students
2. An institutionalised Publication and Orientation Phase for Early Career Researchers
3. A formalized and widely accessible, centrally coordinated Public Engagement Fellowship Programme for Early Career Researchers
4. Regular collaboration and improved communication between Departments in the Humanities, Ph.D. and ECR students, Postgraduate Careers Advisors, and Counselling Services
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