

Review of: "Applying Behaviour Change Theory to Understand PhD Supervisors' Barriers and Enablers to Supporting PhD Students with Academic and Other-Sector Careers"

Holly Prescott¹

¹ University of Birmingham

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This is a valuable article focusing on a crucial aspect of researcher careers and professional development: namely, the role of supervisors in PhD careers support and professional development. As the article alludes to, we often see reports and policy papers recommend that more careers support be provided for PhDs; however, if engaging with this support is not endorsed (or is even discouraged) by supervisors, then increasing the amount of support on offer will have limited impact. It's therefore very encouraging to see work like yours providing evidence and suggestions that acknowledge and tackle this challenge.

The article draws on a thorough and comprehensive range of existing work in the field of post-doctoral career destinations and transition. The responses included show a rich and insightful variety of supervisors' challenges, current practice, and suggestions, making this paper very useful for helping researcher developers, careers consultants, and other similar colleagues to make a case for, to design, and to deliver training and resources for PhD supervisors. It is also very encouraging to see you acknowledge the unhelpfulness of using dichotomous language like 'non-academic careers' and to use the phrase 'other-sector careers' throughout the manuscript to avoid maintaining this dichotomy.

P.2: When making statements about the percentage of PhD graduates working beyond academia, it may be useful to acknowledge that this may differ across different settings. For instance, data suggests that over 90% of doctorate holders in Poland and over 80% of those in Portugal remain employed in the Higher Education sector, so percentages may differ significantly across different economies (OECD, 2013: 97).

P.2: It is good to see you acknowledging a range of 'push factors' away from academia and including the fact that the numbers of PhDs awarded have not been matched by increases in the numbers of academic jobs. It may be worth acknowledging intersectional issues here and how protected characteristics can make some of these 'push factors' even more pronounced for some (e.g., (Ivancheva *et al*, 2019)).

P.3: When discussing evidence that supervisors may favour academic career destinations, it could be useful to acknowledge that, as well as a lack of knowledge about other career sectors or hierarchical thinking in terms of career options, this may also be down to the motivation behind recruiting PhD students and how spending time exploring career options beyond academia may be seen by some supervisors as contrary to the purposes for which a PhD student was recruited (e.g., to focus on the project in hand). This comes to light in some of the supervisors' responses on pages 12-13, where issues such as dividing time between the research project and other-sector pursuits are mentioned. As well as the four already identified, therefore, perhaps an additional 'barrier' to supervisors supporting other-sector careers could be something like 'political issues,' i.e., when other-sector training and pursuits compete with focus on the research project.

P.3: It is great to see the use of AGCAS research and an acknowledgement that careers support services are already being offered to PhD students, rather than simply presenting a 'lack' of current support. It's refreshing to see work that acknowledges that supporting post-PhD careers requires complex partnership working across different roles and functions, rather than solely being 'the job of careers services.'

P.5: I especially appreciated the inclusion of the scenario question around what a supervisor would do in response to a question about other-sector careers. This not only 'tests' awareness of institutional careers services but could also highlight practice that training could challenge, e.g., not needing to 'be an expert,' and not shutting down the conversation by ending with 'I don't know.'

P.8: The fact that only one respondent said that they had never had a career conversation with their PhD student(s) suggests that the results of this study may involve self-selection, i.e., that supervisors who responded are likely to be those who are more engaged and do have experience of managing career conversations with PhDs. It's good, therefore, to see this acknowledged on p.19 and p.20, but I would agree that this is the study's principal limitation.

P.16: Pleased to see you include balance here by drawing attention to students' ownership of their career development as a specific theme. This point about empowering PhDs to explore their own options is crucial, both for the students' long-term career management skills and to help relieve supervisors of the pressure to 'be careers experts.' This theme might even deserve further attention, for example, more suggestions on how this can be enabled. The current point around creating a safe environment for students to share their aspirations is a good one,

P.17: This is a very useful, clear summary of actionable suggestions here. As a careers practitioner working with researchers, this both provided further evidence for some things I'd like to do, whilst also reassuring me that I'm on the right lines with some things I've recently implemented!

P.18: You make a few references to posters or hard-copy guides for supervisors. It may therefore be worth noting that, due to meeting sustainability goals, some careers services (and similar departments) are under pressure to reduce (or

even eradicate) their production of hard-copy documents and materials. It may therefore also be useful to offer some alternative suggestions here.

I might suggest an additional limitation to the current work, or at least an opportunity for development. Many of the supervisors' responses around their confidence in advising on academic careers (e.g., around having 'a pretty straightforward and direct path into academia' and feeling like a 'lack of experience' of other-sector careers leaves their ability to support lacking) seem to me to portray a potential bias. Many responses imply that supervisors feel that you need personal experience of something to be able to support students regarding it, which *may* imply that some supervisors view 'advice' or 'guidance' in the line of 'here's my experience, here's what worked for me, so it will work for you.' Guidance based on projecting personal experience can run into bias, as what worked for someone years ago may not work for a student today from a different background who is also operating in a different political and economic context. This could be highlighted more clearly by the current work, or inform future work, with suggestions on how to challenge these attitudes around what guidance is/isn't and how this can in turn help empower supervisors to guide without personal experience.