YOU’VE done the hard yards and now, with your PhD tucked firmly under your arm, you’re off up the career ladder. But what if you decide to stay in a university? Following the academic track is one of many options for PhD graduates, particularly those with a passion for research.

The money is not great, and in many circumstances cannot compete with industry, but the other rewards can be high. And for those appointed to teaching and research positions, it will usually mean a foray into the world of the large lecture theatre.

“If you are not prepared to front up to a class of 400, you don’t go there,” says deputy dean of the University of Queensland’s graduate school, Christa Critchley. “And these days doing first-year lectures is about crowd control rather than anything else. If you cannot do that, and you don’t want to do it, it’s tricky.”

Professor Critchley says few, if any, universities would now consider making an academic appointment to anyone without a PhD.

“The PhD is the entry qualification for an academic career from architecture to zoology.” Further, many PhD graduates are now expected to complete a postgraduate diploma or certificate in teaching before they are allowed into the lecture theatre.

Most institutions now have a strong emphasis on research and publications. The best way to achieve this is through a PhD. University of Queensland academic Peta Mitchell is among those who have chosen the academic route and juggles teaching with research.

“I would much prefer to manage my own time rather than having it managed for me,” she says.

Dr Mitchell completed her PhD in literature and critical theory in 2003. Soon after she was offered a job at UQ in writing, editing and publishing. She now teaches classes ranging in size from 150 to smaller tutorials of about 20 students, consisting of both undergraduates and postgraduates. In between her teaching commitments she has to do research to try to get her publications up. She says it has been tough but rewarding. And being in a small school such as English, media studies and art history, she enjoys a degree of autonomy.

After her one-year contract finished, she was lucky enough to secure a continuing appointment. But not all aspiring young academics experience the same fate.

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations president Nigel Palmer warned that some could languish in departments on casual appointments for years before securing a permanent job.

“The real issue is, how long can you reasonably be expected to hang in there?” His advice to academic hopefuls is to make the most of opportunities to publish while they are doing their PhD and, within reason, try to get some teaching experience.

“But the reality is that in the current environment academics are rewarded for their research profile and not for their teaching skills,” he says.