

Crafting an Employment Strategy: Case Study of PGR interns in launching a PGR friendly version of the Postgraduate Researcher Opportunities and Futures Strategy.

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Abstract

In an era of evolving career landscapes, universities have crucial roles in preparing postgraduate researchers (PGRs) for more than just academic paths (Times Higher Education, 2016; League of European Research Universities, 2018). This paper focuses on how the University of Leeds crafts a tailored strategy for PGRs, considering their unique needs. The University of Leeds Postgraduate Researcher Futures and Opportunities strategy 2022-2025 is an internal staff document and is rooted in a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities PGRs face in today's global economy. The existing strategy was designed by a panel of University of Leeds staff members to guide other staff members and services with how best they can support PGRs with their professional development and employability. The strategy builds upon the Leeds Doctorate which is a framework consisting of five elements that contribute to the experience that PGRs have at the University of Leeds, inclusive of but also beyond the research that PGRs are conducting (University of Leeds, 2024). Our primary task was to produce a PGR facing version of the Futures and Opportunities strategy. The strategy considers the PGRs' varied goals, skills, and preferences, outlining the different services available to support PGRs' professional development and employability, emphasising the need for flexible systems that support individual paths. We will navigate through the stages of developing the PGR facing strategy. We aspire for our paper to add to the ongoing discussion about the importance of working together to shape career development opportunities through our own experience.

Keywords

PGR employability
internships
career development
workplace skills
higher education

Introduction

The central focus of this article is to articulate our reflections of the PGR internship we undertook at the University of Leeds Careers Centre in 2024. We aim to develop our professional self-awareness and to outline our experiences of balancing our PhD studies with our internships in the hope that this may support future PGR interns at the University of Leeds.

Self-reflection consists of reviewing one's own actions and responses to events and opportunities which contributes to a development in self-awareness (Neale, 2019). Self-reflection is an important part of professional development and growth and is a practice that is greatly encouraged in a proactive and explicit way by organisations and, by extension, educational establishments (Hilden and Tikkamäki, 2013). Brownhill (2022) outlines different forms of self-reflection which includes presentations and written formats such as articles. This article is our form of self-reflection and accompanies our talk at the 17th Research Students' Education Conference (RSEC) on the 18th July 2024 at the University of Leeds.

The 17th RSEC had the theme of Global Research Journeys with one subtheme encompassing personal development and

growth. Tsai et al.'s (2017) research on interns in the hospitality industry noted that internships can enhance an individual's employability and professional skills development. The skills development includes communication and time management, but also developing confidence in abilities, research design and official document writing.

As we have concluded our PGR internship with the Careers Centre at the University of Leeds, we present this reflective piece of writing. Not only does this article serve as a valuable opportunity for us to articulate our experiences, but it could also present as a case study for future PGRs to benefit from and learn from.

First, we will outline our roles as PGR interns, followed by our motivations for undertaking this internship. Then, we will discuss the training we undertook to support us with our internship, including Power BI, project management and using MyCareer. We conclude with an outline of the challenges we faced and what we have learnt from the internship.

Our roles

The primary role of our internship was to write a PGR facing version of the Postgraduate Researcher Opportunities and Futures

Strategy that the PGRs across the University of Leeds would likely engage with. The second expectation was to create a video that outlines the salient services that are available for PGRs to access to support in their development and employability. Our roles therefore entailed ensuring that we understood, as much as possible, the support PGRs expect to see not only from our version of the strategy but also the support from the University of Leeds. We knew that our role would entail writing and holding meetings, which we classed as overarching roles, but within each of these were also organisation, collaboration and responsibility. This demonstrates that job roles and opportunities contain more skills than expected, which highlights not only our capabilities but also skills that we can showcase, demonstrate and transfer to future opportunities and careers.

Strategies “provide a logical path for the continued development of [a] university” (Nethravathi et al., 2022, p.218). In this context, opportunities and futures strategies enable PGRs to understand the approach that their university takes to support them in their development of transferable employability skills through a variety of services. For the University of Leeds, the services include but are not exclusive to the Doctoral College, the Careers Centre, OD&PL (Organisational Development and Professional Learning), and LUU (Leeds University Union).

The development of strategies also reflects the wider societal and educational environment. There is a change in employer demands and changes in the workforce requiring PGRs to develop and recognise the transferable skills that can be used in various employer contexts (PWC, 2018). The Leeds Doctorate frames the University of Leeds commitment to the development of PGRs through supporting the academic experience, the professional development, the research community, the wellbeing and the global engagement of PGRs to encourage the learning and prospects of employability (University of Leeds, no date). This is achieved through the University of Leeds providing the tools for PGRs to fulfil these elements of the Leeds Doctorate. It is on this that the development of the staff facing strategy and the PGR facing version has its foundations.

Our motivations

Any activity that is undertaken has an element of motivation which acts as a reasoning or justification for displaying an action. Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) note that people see their employment as either a job, a career or a calling but there can be intersections between all three. This internship was a great first step to establishing our careers and entering our callings. We acquired insights into the workings of a university context regarding supporting PGRs which offered us an opportunity to explore a potential career pathway inside and outside of academia.

Personal motivations for undertaking the internship

Megan

“My future career plans are to enter higher education teaching and research. An element of this career would include supporting students in their skills development and in their knowledge which is something I enjoy seeing people achieve. When applying, I felt that I would gain a greater appreciation for the academic working environment as a member of staff rather than purely from the perspective of a student, reflecting Tsai et al. (2017) that internships can support in understanding the workplace environment. Furthermore, I would gain an understanding

of the wide range of support that is available to students at the University of Leeds. If I were to be successful with my career endeavours, developing my knowledge and awareness of the different services available would help in directing students to the appropriate services in my future career, including if I enter another Higher Education Institution.

Another motivation was in the development of professional skills, knowledge and networks. While I have experience with communicating professionally, I had confidence that this internship would help me to utilise my skills not only in another academic environment but in a staff position. This internship would contribute to my skills in organisation and writing for a student body and would contribute to developing confidence in growing my knowledge regarding the education system. This would also be an exciting opportunity for me to ascertain my first steps in working within the higher education system.

I also enjoy engaging with other people as not only does this establish connections but develops knowledge, communication and networking skills. Another motivation for applying was the ability to work independently as well as collaboratively. Independent work deepens the ability to work efficiently alone and taking responsibility and personal accountability while group work allows for the sharing of ideas, making decisions and receiving feedback to improve and develop my learning.”

Durdona

“I was enthusiastic about applying for the Campus Internship: PGR Opportunities Intern position because it fully matched with my current status as a PGR at the University of Leeds. The prospect of actively contributing to the development of the PGR Opportunities and Futures Strategy deeply aligned with my preliminary career intentions in the UK. Since arriving in Leeds in mid-October 2023, I really wanted to socialise with more fellow PGRs, gather their perspectives and collaborate with the Doctoral College and Student Careers team. I believed that becoming the member of the Postgraduate Researcher Development Group would enable me to create a PGR-friendly strategy version. Though I am extrovert and sociable, still the opportunity to boost my communication and consultation skills, work collaboratively across diverse university teams and receiving mentoring from Dr Steve Carter was a priority. My professional growth would benefit from the process and ongoing training provided.

Though I have had several administrative and teaching duties back in Uzbek universities for almost two decades, as well as being a Fulbright language instructor at the University of Texas at Austin for an academic year, the UK higher education system was totally beyond my understanding. While doing my research at the School of Education, I aimed to get hands-on experience with other departments and the school of the University of Leeds. While enjoying my internship duties for almost five months, I had the privilege of meeting and collaborating with the Student Careers Centre, the Doctoral College, Leeds University Union (LUU), Organisational Development Professional Learning (OD&PL), the Library and Helix. This dynamic interaction allowed me to explore what services these sections offer to the University of Leeds student community. While crafting the strategy, I was highly impressed with the diversity of their services, the collaboration among the university bodies and the way in which they successfully accomplish their mission of

meeting students' needs and interests. I believe that my observations, project involvement and system learning will facilitate ideas for innovative projects once I have gone back to my home university in Uzbekistan.

One more motivation of mine was to improve my academic writing and research skills. Writing an official document like an opportunities and futures strategy requires mastering English academic writing (Swales and Feak, 2012). Email communications, preparing the survey reports, crafting several drafts of the strategy and composing the video script gave me an opportunity to upgrade my writing. Also, I am thankful to Megan for editing and proofreading my text production when required. Also, I would like to express my immense appreciation to Dr Steve Carter, who was our project coordinator for providing the timely feedback on our work and scaffolding us through this internship journey.

Regarding the research skills, the essential stages included piloting a survey, conducting the survey, analysing the survey findings thematically and reporting were my first-ever experience in data collection. I am happy to have been directly involved throughout and as a result my research skills have improved immensely.

Another motivation was setting up networking links for my further academic and professional collaborations. Owing to this internship, I met with the PGR diversity team, where I was able to socialise with local and international PGRs from STEM and non-STEM fields, which gave me the sense of belonging (Wenger, 1998). In addition to social support and community belonging, this rapport can build a bridge for future university-link projects between Uzbekistan and other countries including the UK."

Our training

During our internship, we undertook training to maximise the skills necessary to effectively carry out our roles. Our internship means we are recognised as staff of the University of Leeds. All staff are subject to complete the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) training provided by the University of Leeds. This online 'self-paced' training is designed to ensure that staff, faculty, and students understand their responsibilities regarding data protection and privacy under the GDPR. This training covers a wide range of topics to ensure compliance with legal requirements and to protect the personal data of individuals. The training introduced us about the legal framework of GDPR, including key definitions, principles and requirements. It raised our awareness on our legal and ethical responsibilities regarding data protection.

Another training session was an Introduction to Power BI, delivered by a Careers Centre specialist. The Power BI training covered a range of topics aimed at developing our skills in data visualisation and analysis. During the training we were introduced to the basics of Power BI, including its interface, features, and capabilities. We also learned how to import data from various sources, clean and transform data using Power Query, and create data models. Since one of our roles as interns was to launch the PGR survey, we have learned how to create interactive reports and dashboards, using various types of charts and visualisations to represent data effectively.

Moreover, we attended a full-day of Project Management Training organised by the Careers Centre, where we worked in teams and were guided through the different stages of a project

of our interest. This training enabled us to think deeply about managing a project more effectively, make informed decisions and think of different scenarios that could arise during our employment. One example of where we applied this training was determining what to include in the strategy and what to take out. This training equipped us with valuable leadership skills, such as initiative taking and assuming responsibility. These skills that have not only been applied to our internship but also to our PhDs, alongside the confidence to apply them in future endeavours.

Another important training session was about navigating the MyCareer platform, conducted by the Careers Centre. The session aimed to provide guidance and tools for managing events through the platform. During this training, we have learned about important aspects of event management, from creation to post-event follow-up. We were trained on how to manage event attendance through MyCareer, including setting up self-check-in processes and tracking participant engagement during the event. Also, we have found out about methods for collecting feedback from event participants through MyCareer, including using standard feedback forms and analysing responses. Understanding how online platforms such as MyCareer operate provided us with the knowledge to take forward and apply when we want to schedule events.

Events

We attended a panel event held by the School of Earth and Environment which provided an insight into the type of events that other schools put on for their PGRs. This was a whole day event and invited alumni from the School of Earth and Environment to discuss with current PGRs their career pathways and journeys since graduating with their doctorates.

We believe attending events such as panel/alumni events, Careers Fairs and PGR diversity reunions, organised by the University of Leeds, is important for all in the PGR community. They can serve as a significant space to offering personal, academic and professional growth. Alumni panels provide real-world examples of different career pathways, where PGRs can learn about the diverse career trajectories of former graduates. This learning raised our awareness about the variety of options available after completing doctoral studies. In addition, alumni stories about their challenges and successes can inspire and motivate us to navigate our own academic and professional journeys more effectively. Staying engaged in discussions, Q&A sessions, and informal networking helps us develop soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication. From our own perspectives, we can say that attending university events can offer valuable benefits ranging from career development and networking opportunities to personal growth and academic enrichment.

Conducting research

To collect data on PGR employability, we designed and distributed a structured survey. The survey included multiple-choice questions, closed questions and open-ended questions. This method enabled us to gather quantitative and qualitative insights on various aspects of PGRs' career preparation, skill development, perceptions of employability support, and their awareness of academic and non-academic career opportunities. The survey allowed us to reach University of Leeds PGRs efficiently, providing a snapshot of the challenges they face and needs they have in navigating the job market.

Our survey collected data across several key areas:

- **Career Aspirations:** Understanding PGRs' preferences between academic and non-academic careers;
- **Employability Skills:** Assessing the skills PGRs believe they have developed during their research and identifying areas they feel require further development;
- **Perceptions of Support:** Gathering feedback on the support services provided by the university, including the effectiveness of career advice, internships, and professional development workshops;
- **Barriers to Employability:** Identifying any obstacles PGRs face in securing employment, such as lack of experience, networking opportunities, or knowledge of academic and non-academic career paths.

Based upon the responses we received from PGRs, we developed an outline of the PGR facing version of the strategy.

Survey

The next stage of our roles led us to designing a survey, piloting, and launching the survey to gather insights and feedback from University of Leeds PGRs regarding their career development needs, challenges and expectations. The survey was developed in Microsoft Forms and distributed via the Leeds Doctoral College PGRs Teams Channel and the Faculty central emails. Some of the questions included:

- What would you want from a PGR opportunities and futures strategy?
- Do you have any suggestions for enhancing the University's opportunities and futures strategy for PGRs?
- What would make you engage with the University of Leeds opportunities and futures strategy?

These questions gave our respondents the opportunity to have input into the development of the strategy. The responses also provided an understanding of how PGRs feel at the university regarding the support that is available to them and how best they could be encouraged to engage with the strategy and the various services at the university.

This information was essential in identifying key areas to report to the departments at the University of Leeds who support PGRs with their opportunities and futures concerning PGR suggestions for further improvement. In addition, the survey findings helped us ensure that the employment strategy presented data that effectively addressed the specific needs and aspirations of PGRs, so that any PGR reader should be able to locate opportunities at the university to enhance their employability and career prospects.

Challenges

There is always something that could have been done differently. To acquire more detail into the experiences of university services and what PGRs want to see in the strategy, we were planning on holding a couple of focus groups with PGRs who expressed interest after conducting our survey. However, we did not include provisions to collect the email addresses from the PGRs who were interested. As the survey was anonymous, participants' personal data (including email addresses) were not collected. In the interest of time and organisation, we made the decision not to hold the focus groups; but it has given us something to reflect upon. Therefore, we have learnt to ensure

that provisions are in place so that, when appropriate, contact details can be safely collected.

The ethical implications that we had to consider included maintaining the anonymity of our participants. We ensured that the responses collected were anonymous through not collecting email addresses and names.

Another challenge was the time needed to create a video; something which we greatly underestimated. We did not expect that a five-minute video, highlighting the services and opportunities available to PGRs outlined in the strategy, would require a couple of months to create. This meant that the video was not published before the official end date of our internship, however, we did establish a script to take forward to start the production of the video.

Reflections

Durdona

"On a more personal note, though I have 18 years of teaching combined with administrative experience in Higher Education of Uzbekistan, for the last six months I have been exploring the UK education cycle from scratch. Indeed, there have been several novelties for me to learn and integrate into my learning path as a PGR. My participation in this internship has presented a unique opportunity for me to deepen my understanding of the intricate dynamics within the PGR community while contributing meaningfully to the development of a PGR-focused opportunities and futures strategy. This experience has empowered me to bridge any existing skills gaps, especially in the areas of stakeholder collaboration and strategic communication (Nethravathi et. al., 2022), skills I had utilised in Uzbekistan but have only now started transferring to the UK context"

I can say that these internship duties align with my future career plans of becoming a lecturer and, later, Doctoral College officer upon returning to Uzbekistan. I believe that engaging with the PGR Opportunities and Futures Strategy has equipped me with valuable experience in strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, and effective communication. Since crafting a PGR-friendly version of the strategy involves working closely with diverse teams, this diverse collaboration has improved my team-working skills, providing a first-hand understanding of the academic environment. This hands-on experience is crucial for my aspiration to become a lecturer, allowing me to develop my consultation skills with both PGRs and academic professionals. Additionally, my internship duties have offered insights into employability strategies, as well as enhancing my capacity to contribute meaningfully as a future Doctoral College officer (Tsai et al., 2017). Also, I believe that this experience will be a cornerstone to adapt the 'already launched system' of the University of Leeds back in Uzbekistan to help Uzbekistani PGRs build and express the qualities, skills, and behaviours necessary to reach their goals."

Megan

"I started my PhD with no teaching experience but with an understanding of and enthusiasm towards the UK Higher Education world as a student and course representative from the University of Portsmouth. I was working in retail when I started my master's degree which I completed in 2021. I continued to work in retail for two years before I started my PhD in 2023. I have however always had an interest in education and learning. I have learnt that I have

more knowledge of the Higher Education framework than initially thought but also an appreciation that there is always more to learn. What I would encourage anyone to take away from this article but also in their applications is that showing enthusiasm for learning and acknowledging your lack of knowledge in areas displays a level of personal accountability and responsibility and enables for more conscious thoughts into the skills and knowledge that you do possess. I have learnt to not count myself out or believe that I cannot do something because I am not as experienced as someone else. I still have much to bring and not knowing enables education to develop.

I can safely say that this internship has provided the opportunity to further develop my own professional skills regarding communication, writing and collaboration with other departments, which has also widened my network and contacts. Collating the support resources has not only been helpful in establishing the PGR facing version of the Postgraduate Researcher Opportunities and Futures Strategy but has also generated a bank and greater appreciation of the services that are on offer to support PGRs. This internship was an important opportunity in developing professional skills and mindsets that will be helpful in providing a foundation and knowledge of the professional academic world not just as a student but also as a member of staff."

Conclusion

Self-reflection has enabled us to identify and consolidate what our role entailed, what our motivations were and what we have learned from undertaking this internship regarding our capabilities, skills and knowledge that we already had and where we could develop. During this internship, through a variety of challenging tasks and tailored trainings, we have facilitated our abilities in critical areas as academic writing, research methodologies, and professional communication. This hands-on experience has not only scaled up our technical competencies but also enhanced our ability to work collaboratively in diverse teams (Tsai et al., 2017). We believe that this experience has laid a solid foundation for our professional development, and we are confident that the skills and insights we have gained will enable us to successfully accomplish future internship commitments and beyond (Hodge, 2010).

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