

What sort of support do PGRs want from the Careers Service?

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Project Snapshot
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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Project Overview

As the lead Careers Consultant at the Careers Centre working with PGRs, I wanted to find out whether the service we offered was meeting the career and employability needs of our PGR community. Having worked with this group of students since 2017, anecdotal evidence suggested this was not the case. An example of this is PGR attendance at our Careers Fairs. Having suggested our events to them in careers meetings and then speaking to them afterwards, most of them said they did not find them helpful and of no relevance to them. I suspected that this was their view of our services in general as attendances at some of my workshops pre-Covid were very low, between 1-5 attendees per session. Therefore, I wanted to gain a more evidenced based understanding of the PGR community's view of our services rather than basing it on mere speculation.

Project Objectives

- To gain as wide a view as possible of the PGR perception of the Careers Service
- To find out what aspects of our service they thought was most useful to them
- To find out about what kind of employer engagement would be best suit their needs
- To understand their engagement with our services via the MyCareer platform
- To find out what the profile was of the PGR Programme that we offer and its relevance to their career planning intentions.

Methods

There were three key methods of approach that I took when carrying out this project.

The first was to ascertain how many PGRs were undertaking a PhD programme during the lifetime of this project, September 2022 to September 2023, (here after denoted as the time period) broken down into year group, gender, ethnicity and whether they were UK or international students. This would be complemented by ascertaining their engagement with the Careers Centre and its services for the same period.

Secondly, an online survey, sent out via Graduate Managers to all faculties and schools as well as many PGR reps that I had got to know over this time period, including PGRs doing their PhDs at St James's Hospital.

Finally, I undertook six focus groups which were a mixture of pre-prepared questions and open-ended discussion for participants to add any further comment or thoughts on what they felt would be of use to them from the Careers Service. As with the survey, invites to



participate were circulated via faculty and school Graduate Managers and PGR reps including those at St James's Hospital.

Key findings

- From the survey, awareness of our services and how they can access them is high, with 27 or 93.1% being aware of us and only 2 or 6.9% being unaware.
- However, verbal evidence from the focus groups suggests that the further away from being a taught student, the less relevant they feel that the Careers Service is, especially re: employer engagement.
- PGRs would like to meet and speak to employers relating to the skills and knowledge they were accruing via their PhDs: 'employers who want their level of qualifications as well as subject matter and skills'.
- There were focus group discussions as to a 'realistic' pathway to academia and to have it 'demystified'.
- International students feel that there is not enough specific support put on for them about finding work in the UK, including academia.

Implications for practice

- Careers Service senior managers can use it to better inform our overall service to, where possible, consider if they are meet any of the needs of our PGR community. A good example would be how we can better engage employers who specifically would like to recruit PGRs, (see Outputs below).
- Where we cannot, as a Careers Service fill all the gaps highlighted in this report, look at where we can collaborate with other parts of the university. For example, providing one off sessions with faculties and PGR student bodies (see Outputs below).
- Doctoral College senior managers will be provided with an overview of the Careers Service provision and the PGR perception of it with a view to collaborative effort to meet PGR needs as part of the new PGR Opportunities and Futures Strategy (see Next Steps below).
- 4. Graduate School managers and other stakeholders working with PGRs can utilise the finding to create/implement bespoke events for their PGRs such as application workshops or alumni panel events.



- As a basis for further research into the employability provision to our PGR community for example helping to 'educate' employers as to the value of recruiting PGRs for their organisation.

Outputs

The findings from my LITE Fellowship have highlighted gaps that can and have been worked on since the completion of my project in August 2023. The two main gaps that have been highlighted are PGR employer engagement and collaboration with other parts of the university.

To take the latter first, I have been collaborating with OD&PL to deliver workshops to PGRs on the themes of applying for postdoctoral research posts and writing fellowship funding bids. I have also been working with a number of faculties and research institutes to deliver skills identification workshops and alumni panel events for their PGRs.

Regarding the former, I have been working with a couple of PGR interns to develop and build on a PGR specific careers fair, first delivered online during Covid. Bearing in mind the findings from the survey and focus groups about PGRs wanting to meet and speak to relevant employers, this year's PGR fair, 2024, was opened out Sheffield and York PGRs. This year, the starting point will be White Rose focussed, and the scaffolding of the fair will now be part of the Careers Centres Employer Teams' central remit.

Challenges

The main challenge that I faced, in common with most other LITE Fellows is that of time. Though one-day a week is bought out of our normal working hours and is of course accepted by the respective managers in my service, it can be hard to maintain that one-day a week 'space'. Teaching hours can be built in, but collaborative work with partners, internal or external, can be problematic as they are either unaware of or, in the case of employers, unable to work around the 'space' set aside.

The other challenge was around the ethics phase of the project. Part of this was impacted by the time element above, and maybe also by the fact that as a member of a professional service, have not had to do this since I did my PhD. For future professional staff this perhaps ought to be highlighted to them as a priority at the start of their project or even at the application stage. They should be encouraged to go to the any training such as the ethics cafe and take any advice from the research assistants and research and impact officers and this will be invaluable to getting their project off on the right foot and minimise some of the time issues mentioned above.



Next steps

As mentioned in Implications for Practice above, I think that this is a basis for further research into this area of the employability needs for PGRs. This report ties in with and overlaps with work I already do with PGRs and includes the PRG programme of workshops I organise for PGRs which culminates in PGR specific careers fair. It also includes a Mapping Exercise that I managed in 2023 and a current, 2024, PGR friendly writing of the PGR Futures employability strategy. All of these are or have been organised with the help of PGR interns.

Finally, one last area that I think is crucial to PGR needs is our understanding of employer's view of PGRs and the skills they are looking for when recruiting our researchers. Some employers readily state they are looking for PhD students, usually organisations with an R&D function, others such as patent attorneys, who know that an in-depth understanding of science is crucial to their success.

