

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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It's a win- win: Developing Post-Doctoral Researcher and Undergraduate opportunities

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Abstract: The idea behind our initiative was two-fold. We wanted to provide an opportunity for PDRA's to model grant writing and application processes, design an independent research project, gain a mentor, and be involved with short-listing, interviewing and managing a research assistant.

For the UGs, we wanted to give an opportunity to apply for a research orientated position, get feedback on their application form and interviews, and win an opportunity to be part of cutting edge research whilst earning a living wage of £10/hour.

A 6/10 of our PDRA winners are women, and the competition has succeeded in engaging Widening Participation UG students and giving them feedback and research opportunities (85/100 at application, 35/38 at interview, 9/10 winners).

Now we want to extend our competition into other institutions looking to provide a relatively low-cost option of PDRA and UG research development. We are actively seeking partners for a multi-site externally-funded study.

Paper:

It's a win- win: Developing Post-Doctoral Researcher and Undergraduate opportunities.

Post-doctoral researchers (PDRAs)

It is well known that there are limited progression and promotion opportunities for PDRAs (Grinstein & Treister, 2018). Whilst there is a growing concern from Vitae (Vitae, 2017) and Research Councils over PDRAs, the system as is has been described as broken (Powell, 2015). PDRAs are often ignored in the literature (Scaffidi & Berman, 2011). Instead, HE research tends to focus on 'tenured' academics; how they might go about developing opportunities for research, collaborations with others, and balancing it with teaching and other commitments (Brew & Lucas, 2009). Reflecting on research might only happen from the PI's perspective (Shakespeare, Atkinson, & French, 1993), though having a PDRA position is often seen as a required stage in the development of a successful academic career (Becher & Trowler, 1989). However, PDRAs do not always have a clear plan to develop an academic career (Sauer mann & Roach, 2016). They do not necessarily have opportunities to develop independent research, have a mentor, or think ahead to how they want to develop. Developing into a successful academic depends on many factors (van Balena et al, 2012). Research is seen as a game (Lucas, 2006), particularly in the context of the REF.

Undergraduates (UGs)

More institutions are recognising the value and importance of involving UGs in cutting edge, real research. Such work allows students to see the reality of research in a university, gain experience and employability skills, and promotes interest in further study. This is of particular value for Widening Participation (WP) students, who may not have had the same privileges and opportunities as other students. An UG might be identified as being a WP student because of their family history; being the first to attend university, having a history of care or being a carer, having a chronic illness or disability, or a BAME background. They might live in a deprived area, or have another protected characteristic. Such students are identified and supported differently across the sector. At the University of Kent, Home WP students are identified and invited onto an award winning Work Study Scheme. This scheme offers a variety of benefits, including CV writing, interview skills, and supported internships.

The Competition

The idea behind the Summer Vacation Research Competition was two-fold. We wanted to provide an opportunity for PDRAs to model grant writing and application processes, to design an independent research project, gain a mentor (which we know is beneficial to developing a successful academic career (Xuhong, 2013)), and to be involved with short-listing, interviewing and managing their research assistant. For the UGs, we wanted to give them an opportunity to apply for a research orientated position, get feedback on their application form, feedback on interviews, and an opportunity to be part of cutting edge research whilst earning a living wage of £10/hour.

After a successful pilot project in the Science Faculty last year, we have extended the competition across the university, targetting WP students, as well as opening the competition up to all Home and International UG students. We know there is a drop off in interest in pursuing a research career as students progress through higher education (Roach, 2017), and this competition promotes interest in a research career, and provides a supportive environment for PDRAs. A supportive atmosphere is the most important criterion in enhancing life satisfaction and maintaining positivity about a research career for postdocs (Grinstein & Treister, 2018).

Each PDRA applied for up to £2100, for a project that lasted between 4 and 6 weeks. The competition was funded through Careers and Employability Services, the Science Faculty, a Teaching Enhancement Small Award, Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor Discretionary Funds, the Graduate School and the Humanities Faculty for a total of 10 projects.

A prize panel comprised of staff from research, teaching and professional service roles across the University identified winners. Subsequently, UGs were invited to apply for specific projects, answering specific questions and submitting a CV. The PDRAs were then responsible for short-listing, interviewing, and selecting the students.

Why does it work?

Last year's three pilot PDRA winners were all women from the Science Faculty. The UG students applied to a general research internship opportunity, and were all identified as WP.

This year, 6/10 PDRA winners were women, and the PDRAs came from six different schools and all three faculties. The UGs were invited to apply to specific projects, and overall 100 UG applications were made. Of these, 85% came from WP students, and 2/3 were from women. All UG applicants received detailed feedback on their applications, and 38 were invited to interview (some had applied and were shortlisted for more than one project). Of these 38, all but 3 were identified as WP students. Of the 10 winning UG students, 8 were women, and 9 identified as WP, with the last being an international student.

What next?

We would like to continue to run the competition at the University of Kent – it was highlighted as a beacon of excellence in research support. We have full ethical approval to interview and follow-up the UGs and PDRAs involved in the competition, to examine how it impacts on their future careers. Last year's PDRA winners submitted three fellowship applications, and one was successful in securing a permanent position.

We are undertaking an epidemiology of the PDRA, identifying the support and development opportunities they need, and how this diverges between disciplines. We are interested in the effect of class, race, and other factors, and the hiring decisions. For example, if a PDRA is choosing between two students, one identified as WP and one not, we felt that it was appropriate to promote the WP student. However, in some cases the PDRA was choosing between two WP students, with one white, one BAME, and the choices they made in these cases varied considerably.

We want to extend the competition into other institutions looking to provide a relatively low-cost option of PDRA and UG research development, and are actively seeking partners for a multi-site externally funded study for this win-win initiative.

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