

**2015 ASET Research Bursary
For Small-Scale Research into Placement or Work-based Learning**

Project Title: The impact of the placement experience on returning doctoral students

Applicant:

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1. Project definition, broad objectives and timescales

Definition

Research into the impact of placements on PhD students returning to their research.

Background

The proportion of students graduating with a doctoral degree who subsequently establish an academic career is in the order of 10%, with both funders and universities acknowledging the broader application of the skills of the researcher in the wider economy and society. As a result, placements for PhD students are becoming more and more commonplace, with large funders encouraging or making mandatory the inclusion of a placement in the doctoral degree. This is a very positive development, and the increasing number of doctoral interns are providing valuable knowledge transfer to organisations in the UK and beyond.

The acceptance and full potential of the doctoral placement programme is being hindered by a concern amongst academic staff in some departments that the placement experience may reduce the likelihood of successful completion. Some of the specific concerns listed are reduced motivation, losing touch with the research whilst away on placement and late submission of the thesis. Failure to meet thesis submission deadlines results in penalties for university departments and is therefore a legitimate concern.

Whilst there is much anecdotal evidence that doctoral students return with increased motivation, new ideas and better career contacts, there is little data to allay or substantiate the concerns of academic staff. An initial study such as this, would provide some initial data and may pave the way for a larger, UK-wide data-gathering project.

Objectives

The research project will:

- Document students' skills and attitudes as they return from a placement to their PhD research
- Investigate supervisors' opinion of the skills and attitudes of students returning to their research
- Analyse progression data of students who have completed a placement

Timescales

The research project will be conducted throughout July and August, and will be broken down as follows:

Week 1	Design of student questionnaire
Week 2	Design of academic questionnaire
Week 3	Identifying students and supervisors and recruiting them to the project
Week 4	Analysis of progression data
Week 5	Interviews with academic staff and returning doctoral students
Week 6	Analysis of questionnaire responses
Week 7	Preparation of report and presentation
Week 8	

2. Supervisor's role

The student will be supervised by Dr Hilary M Jones, postgraduate Internships Coordinator at the University of Sheffield. Hilary is an expert in postgraduate professional development and internships and has worked in this area for more than a decade.

In 2014 she published a HEA-funded *Towards a Competency framework for Student Work-based learning*, and her paper *When a PhD is not Enough - A case study of a UK Internship Programme to Enhance the Career Opportunities of Doctoral Researchers* has been submitted to the Journal of Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning. She has obtained further funding from the HEA to create customisable competency frameworks for use by HEIs across the UK to promote their internship opportunities to employers.

She holds a PhD from the University of Sussex, a Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy and is currently completing a postgraduate qualification in Careers Education Information and Guidance, specialising in work-based learning.

Hilary will line-manage the student and support them in the preparation of the final report and presentation.

3. student's role with the project

To ensure the success of the project, the student will:

- identify returning PhD students across the universities of Sheffield and York and recruit them to the research
- design a questionnaire to elicit information about students' skills self-assessment on returning from their internships
- design a questionnaire to elicit information from supervisors regarding their returning students motivation and skills
- track progression dates for PhD students that have undertaken internships in the past to determine whether undertaking an internship has a positive, negative or neutral impact on their student journey

4. Why the outcomes will be important to other HEIs

The data from this initial study will be crucial to other HEIs as they pursue the doctoral placement agenda. If the findings substantiate the concerns expressed by academic staff, this will enable the placements process to be improved to address them. If the findings show that placements have no negative impact, then HEIs will be able to bring their academic staff on board with placements. This is likely to increase the number of successful funding applications, as well as increasing the number of doctoral students that undertake beneficial placement experiences.

5. Support from senior management

This proposal has the full support of the senior management at the University of Sheffield Careers Service.

6. Recruiting students to the role

Students will be recruited to the role by:

- Advertising through the Prospects MyVacancies system
- Promotion through the Careers Service website and social media
- Promotion through the Announce email system
- Promotion by Careers Advisers working with students

Development of the student

By undertaking the project, the student will develop the following:

- Questionnaire design
- Interviewing skills
- Data analysis
- An understanding of skills development and its analysis
- An understanding of broader academic issues such as employability and internships

The student will also receive one-to-one support from Hilary on their own professional development and will be encouraged to reflect on the work done and skills developed during the course of the work.