Postgraduate Research Student Career Development in the UK

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Experiences, insights & opportunities

UKRI, the UK's largest funder of PGRs, commissioned this study. The aim was to gain insights into PGRs' current experiences and perceptions of career development to inform a series of recommendations, intended to act as catalysts for the ongoing enhancement of career support.

PGRs career development is impacted by a range of factors.



Study Participants

161+ PGRs

44 Stakeholders

Study Modes

40 Conversations

2 Round tables

35 Interviews

1 Focus Group

1 Survey

3 Polls

Study Incuded

Literature Review

Current Practice Review

Analysis of the data highlighted:

- **Understanding of career development varies** across PGRs and stakeholders, resulting in inconsistent provision and engagement.
- **Definitions of career success are diverse,** shaping PGRs' motivation and engagement.
- **PGRs form personal views of success from mixed** signals, often defaulting to academic norms even when aspiring to a role beyond academia.
- **PGR attitudes to career development vary:** some prioritise thesis completion alone, while others see career development as mistimed, resulting in delayed engagement.
- There is **demand for greater exposure to industry and non-academic sectors.**
- **International PGRs face additional barriers** (e.g. visa constraints, cultural adjustment, financial pressures), influencing their engagement.
- **Peer networking and support are widely valued** by PGRs and stakeholders.
- **Lack of clarity about career development at PhD entry contributes to low prioritisation.**
- **Barriers to engagement** include time constraints, competing priorities, evolving professional identity, limited awareness, unsupportive environments and personal circumstances.
- **Opportunities for enhancement** include cross-disciplinary and cross-sector networking, stronger PGR communities, mentoring and coaching, broader sector exposure and empowering PGR ownership of career development.

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Recommendations

1. Establish and integrate a consistent definition of career development within postgraduate research degrees

A consistent definition of postgraduate career development should create a shared foundation from which stakeholders can design, develop, deliver and evaluate the impact of their provision.

"Career development is one of those terms I suppose where I can't take for granted what someone means when they say it to me, I have to do some unpicking."

Researcher Development Training Officer

2. Clarify shared ownership and responsibility for PGR career development

Recognition of the individual and collective responsibilities that underpin effective career development provides an opportunity to shift the narrative and foreground its value to PGRs, the sector and the wider knowledge economy.

"Because PGRs are not staff, but researchers are staff. So do you split teams that once worked together supporting researchers?"

Lecturer in Business Education

3. Enhance awareness of the breadth of PGR career outcomes

Raising awareness of this multiplicity of career outcomes at all levels of practice and responsibility is key to releasing the potential of PGRs through effective, accessible development.

"How do we shift everybody's mentality so it's not perceived as a failure (...) if it's not an academic career?"

Associate Professor and Head of Researcher Development

4. Reflect the plurality and individuality of PGR experiences and outcomes within career development

The PGR population reflects a diversity of lived experiences, personal circumstances, characteristics and aspirations. Each of these factors shapes how PGRs approach, interpret and engage with career development.

"Role models, stories, seeing what else they can do, seeing people being successful (...) in a variety of settings so they know what it entails, so they know how to set themselves up for that."

Careers Advisor for Researchers



5. Optimise the communication of PGR career development

Amidst the noise and competing priorities of PhD life, career development should be understood as a purposeful, integral aspect of the doctoral experience.

"The challenge for me doesn't usually come in that there's not enough being offered. The challenge comes in how do we pull that together into something coherent that the PGRs can make sense of."

Careers Adviser for Postgraduate Researchers

6. Share effective practice across the sector to support continuous improvement

Opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing between organisations, stakeholders and practitioners should be promoted and incentivised.

"Make coherent what we do. Because everybody's in these silos working to different objectives."

Careers Adviser for Postgraduate Researchers

7. Build sustainable resource models to enable effective PGR career development

PGR career development should be recognised as fundamental to the role and impact of research within society and this should be reflected in the support it receives.

"People are now realising that doing a PhD or postdoc doesn't always lead to an academic job (...) but we don't really have the support that is needed."

Scientist



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