

All in This Together: Developing Doctoral Experience through Community-Building Scholarships

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Introduction

- **What is the University Graduate School?**
 - Dedicated support service for postgraduates at the University of Birmingham,
 - PGR training, development, wellbeing, community
- **UGS Scholarships have been running for last eight years**
 - Asking PGRs to enhance their postgraduate community through events and other projects
- **This Paper**
 - Provides case study of community-based Scholarships and the benefits of foregrounding community in doctoral training
 - Experiences of students and staff on scheme



What are the UGS Scholarships?

- 10 scholarships for 10 PGRs each academic year
- £2,500 p/a in return for approx. half day a week, recruited in summer of each year
- Tasked with enhancing postgraduate research community by running peer-led events in-person and online
- Also point of contact for staff
- 'Scholarship' lends prestige
- **Foregrounds creation of organic peer community, belonging & soft skills development**



Why do the scholarships exist?

1. Supporting Success

- Success for PGRs = academic achievement, personal growth, well-being, and community engagement.
- Academic success underpinned by belonging and peer support.

2. Supporting Training and Skills

- Skills gap: interdisciplinary collaboration, practical experience and insight into HE beyond academia
- Useful soft skills: teamwork, communication, and project management, and event management

3. Inclusivity

- 10 PGRs on the scholarship team = PGR communities across underrepresented backgrounds & protected characteristics

A sense of belonging is a key contributing factor to postgraduate experience, with a poor sense of belonging linking directly to poor wellbeing and engagement with studies.

Charlotte Morris (2021)



What happened?

- Enhanced Programme of events:
 - Social/cultural events
 - Wellbeing support
 - Writing groups
 - PG Festival
 - Peer networks
- Tailored Support Services
- Connecting PGRs to other staff
- Celebrating PGR success



Measuring Success

Feedback from PGR Community:

“[the best thing was] hanging out and networking” PGR Christmas Social

“[The best thing was] chatting with current students and sharing experiences” Feedback on writing Session with AcWriMo

“Great to hear from other international pgrs, helped me feel less nervous about starting” PhD Chat Support Session on being an International Student

“SO heartening” PhD Chat on being a PGR and a parent

“A welcoming atmosphere which helped me feel less alone” PGR Welcome social



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Measuring Success

"It was a wonderful opportunity to have served my community as a UGS Scholar - I enjoyed every bit!"

UGS Scholar 21-22

"I learnt transferable skills in teamworking, communication, promotion, events organisation, event planning, leadership, digital literacy, inclusivity, networking, marketing, just to name a few! I also feel confident in my skills and more outgoing as a result of being a UGS Scholar."

UGS Scholar 22-23

"I think the UGS scholarship is a great opportunity for PGRs to develop and serve the PGR community. [...] The experience is incredible, and I hope future Scholars enjoy it as much as we did."

UGS Scholar 21-22



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Challenges and developments

Challenges

- Staff time taken in recruitment and management
- Variation in Scholar's ability and enthusiasm for the role
- Inexperience with events management
- Losing expertise each year

Developments

- Allowing for some Scholars to return for a second year each year, to retain experience and enthusiasm
- Stock menu of events
- Expanded to include PGTs when PGTs brought into remit of UGS



A Scholar's Perspective: Background

- Joined UoB as a PGR in September 2019
- Took part in UGS community building events from day one
- May 2021 – July 2021: UGS Short Scholarship
- Sept 2021 – July 2022: UGS Scholarship
- Sept 2022 – April 2023: UGS Scholarship (Returning Scholar)
- April 2023 – Present: Postgraduate Community Engagement Officer, UGS
 - January 2024: Submission of PhD thesis



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A Scholar's Perspective: Reflections

- + Developed experience of small-, medium-, and large-scale events planning
- + Exposed to 'alt-ac' careers and working in HE
- + Working collaboratively in an interdisciplinary team
- + Ability to build upon previous experiences
- + Flexible scheme that worked around my PhD commitments
- + Supporting others!
- Varying enthusiasm for role among Scholars
- Hard to switch off!



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Concluding Thoughts

- Community-based Scholarships emphasise importance of peer support and enable creation of organic community
- Supporting PGR belonging and success!
- Foster collaboration, celebrate diversity, and prioritize holistic success.
- Provide valuable work experience for PGs



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Further Reading

Kim Beasy, S. Emery, L. Dyer, B. Coleman, D. Bywaters, T. Garrad, J. Crawford, K. Swarts & S. Jahangiri (2020) Writing together to foster wellbeing: doctoral writing groups as spaces of wellbeing, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(6), 1091-1105.

Milicev, J., McCann, M., Simpson, S.A. *et al.* Evaluating Mental Health and Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers: Prevalence and Contributing Factors. *Curr Psychol*, 2023, **42**, 12267–12280

Morris, Charlotte, “Peering through the window looking in”: postgraduate experiences of non-belonging and belonging in relation to mental health and wellbeing’, *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 2021, 12 (1), 131-144.

Panayidou, F., & Priest, B. (2021). Enhancing postgraduate researcher wellbeing through support groups. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 12(1), 42-57.

