

# The PhD Experience Internship Report

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## Overview

'The PhD Experience' is a Bangor University undergraduate internship scheme run in partnership with the Doctoral School. The scheme appointed two interns, Azat Kalybay and Ross Smith, tasked with determining : what makes Bangor a great place to do a PhD; how best to market the Doctoral School; how to improve the Doctoral School website and to gauge any improvements that could be made to the PhD experience here at Bangor.

The scheme started with the planning and hosting of a social event for PhD students, followed by four focus groups. The programme also undertook research on case studies and how other global universities present case studies and market their PhD programmes. From this research and focus groups we have been able to produce a case study template for PhD students that we hope can be used for many years to come. We are also in the process of making videos to go on the Doctoral School website, a short film about the PhD experience at Bangor as well as a welcome by the PVC for Research and Impact Professor Jo Rycroft-Malone, in order to make the website more interactive for prospective PhD students who may be interested in coming to our university.



## Our work

The first thing we had to undertake was to research what information was being distributed by other universities. There was a range of different styles across different institutions, however, we came to the conclusion that the most effective would be a point by point styled case study so that the PhD student could fill it out at their own pace and it would not interfere with their studies. From this we drafted a skeleton case study which was to be sent to PhD students interested in doing a case study. Once we had an idea of where we wanted to take the Doctoral School website in terms of case studies, the next thing we had to do was to gain interest of the PhD students here at Bangor. We therefore began planning a social event, which consisted of an opportunity to present their research, and we offered refreshments. The event was opened by Dr Penny Dowdney of the Doctoral School, followed by a



presentation by Professor Oliver Turnbull who presented his own PhD experience. The interns of the scheme then presented their objectives of the internship in order to inform PhD candidates of upcoming events which may have been of interest to them. We then had four presentations from PhD candidates who presented their excellent research. All who attended the event were asked to complete a questionnaire so we could gain some level of character description, whether or not they would be interested in taking part in case studies, videos, or focus groups and what they wanted from the Doctoral School. The feedback from the questionnaire was excellent with the majority of PhD students saying they would take part in at least one of the opportunities offered to them. Many students also requested more interdepartmental activities for their studies to enhance their learning and employability prospects.

All of this data was then collated and we began working on planning the focus groups. We chose to do four focus groups, all of which focused on a different topic. The first was 'What makes a good case study' so we could ensure that the formatting we were intending to use was enticing to PhD students. The second was 'the Bangor PhD experience', where the objective was to understand why students chose to come to do their PhD at Bangor and what makes Bangor an excellent place for candidates. The third was entitled 'PhD Student Voice', where we wanted to engage with the student body about their representation within the university, and how their time at Bangor has been shaped by factors such as supervision and pastoral support. The fourth and final focus group was entitled 'The post Bangor experience' where we wanted to know what employability skills PhD students have gained during the course of their research, and where they were intending to go next. It should be noted that the following feedback is not entirely conclusive due to limited numbers who attended the focus groups, however, this is the information and feedback we received during the four focus groups.

## Focus groups



### **“BU Case study” Focus group:**

For the first focus group we presented the candidates with five anonymous case studies from five different universities, including a mock-up of a fake Bangor PhD student. We chose five varying styles in order to present the spectrum of styles we discovered from our research. We then asked them to rank the case studies on style, length, readability, structure, effectiveness, content and overall best. The overall feedback was that two of the case studies were tied, one of which was the Bangor one. We therefore made slight alterations to our case study in regards to picture size, colour and heading size so that it was the best given the feedback we received.

### **“Why Bangor” Focus Group:**

The second focus group was run as a liquid café. We posed the question of what one looks for when choosing somewhere for their PhD study and we discovered the top four reasons

were location, funding, student support and academic excellence. In terms of location, those who attend Bangor say it is great in terms of size, financially it is a great location and there is a sense of security; however, they feel more needs to be done to support international students who arrive with families as there is not enough support in terms of housing. The funding opportunities presented by Bangor are excellent according to the PhD students and Bangor has good financial support in terms of hardship as well as links with other funding bodies. Student support was praised immensely for their cooperation, particularly with international students. However, they did say that they felt the website was not clear in terms of visa support and they felt the website needed to be clearer. They also felt that there needs to be a more social side to the PhD experience and that more needs to be done in the postgraduate society to ensure this. They said the main reason Bangor was chosen was due to the academic excellence and that it excels in many areas which makes it attractive to students across the globe.

### **“Student Representation” Focus Group**

The third focus group was scribed by Rob Samuel the SU course rep coordinator here at the university. We were attempting to give the floor to students so that they could present their concerns, as well as praise the university for what it does well in reference to supervision, pastoral support, training and their representation. They praised the university for ensuring that each student has two supervisors; however, they felt there needs to be clearer signposting at the start of the PhD about specific deadlines which they must adhere to so that confusion and extensions can be avoided. They also felt there could be slightly better communication on the supervisors’ part to ensure that all these deadlines are communicated. Training was highly praised, ranging from one to one sessions offered by the library and academic services to the mindfulness programme. However, there were some issues with the PGCertHE, it was felt that this needed to be adjusted (organisation, communication, information and the amount of work were considered to be too much to do alongside a PhD). There was also a request for more interdepartmental training to give a wider series of training opportunities. They felt their issues were taken seriously and feedback was given in terms of their representation, but felt that the university is too undergraduate focused so it was difficult to always get responses at times when they were needed, and there needed to be clearer communication. Pastoral support was highly praised, especially the peer guide scheme and the counselling service. There was a desire for the support for mental health to be more widely advertised as even though the support is excellent it was sometimes difficult to gain access to.

### **“The PhD Experience” Focus Group**

The fourth focus group was the post PhD experience. We discussed what skills were gained during a PhD programme, plans for after the PhD and what employers want from a PhD candidate. The session was also fed into by Claire Brass from employability services at the university. We found that students doing a PhD gained many skills, such as IT skills, communication skills, conflict management, planning and organisational skills and team working skills, to name a few. Future plans involved travel, further academic work and education sector; the destination data we looked at showed that many PhD students go into high managerial roles and have excellent job prospects. Thanks to the information by Claire we discovered many things that employers are looking for, such as multilevelled communication skills, writing skills, subject expertise and being self-aware. She also gave excellent examples on how to market these skills to an employer, i.e. giving very specific examples of when you have used a certain skill.

Once the focus groups were completed and we gauged what it was to be a PhD student here at Bangor, we began our work to put all this information onto the Doctoral School website.

Professor Jo Rycroft-Malone gave us an excellent welcome video to put onto the website and we are currently in the process of interviewing PhD students and supervisors to create another video products for the website. We are also collecting PhD case studies, both written and filmed, to go onto the site so we can demonstrate the excellence within Bangor University.

## Last words from interns

Ross:

The internship has been an excellent opportunity to learn about Bangor University, specifically about what it is to be a PhD student. I have gained many skills that will be invaluable to my future and have gained an excellent insight into a world of academia different from our own. I have taken on roles which are outside of my comfort zone but they have served me invaluablely. The project has also furthered my desire to undertake a PhD and continue into the world of academia.

Azat:

This project proved to be both demanding and creatively stimulating for me as a student. During the course of the internship, I got to do various tasks of contrasting nature, starting from deskwork and moving on to filming and presenting. This internship has given me a chance to make mistakes and learn about things I only thought of doing, such as interviewing and designing a case study. I also got the chance to understand several things about working with people in a more professional environment with clear objectives.