

Reflections on a policy internship

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In April 2016, I took three months out from my PhD to undertake a policy internship in a policy organisation. In this blog I describe the placement and the work that I did, what I learned, and give some information about the application process.

What is the opportunity?

[RCUK Policy Internships](#) provide opportunities for PhD students funded by UK Research Councils to work for three months in one of a selected group of highly influential policy organisations. One of the ideas behind the scheme is to give new academic researchers a taste of the world of policy-making. It allows you to gain some understanding of how information and ‘evidence’ is used in contexts outside of academia, and helps you to develop your skills in evidence synthesis and information dissemination within an environment that is very different to that of PhD research.

Internships are available at a number of different organisations, both parliamentary and non-parliamentary. Examples of host organisations include:

- Centre for Science & Policy
- Government Office for Science
- Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology (POST) – London
- Royal Society of Biology
- Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) – Edinburgh
- The Research Service (RS, National Assembly for Wales) – Cardiff
- The Royal Society

I undertook my placement with the [Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology \(POST\)](#).

What sort of work is involved?

POST is Parliament’s in-house source of independent, balanced and accessible analysis of public policy issues related to science and technology. It provides overviews of research from across the biological, physical and social sciences, and engineering and technology, and places the findings of this research in a policy context for use by MPs and Peers. These overviews typically take the form of ‘POSTnotes’, which are four-page summaries (about 3000 words) of public policy issues. They are publically available on POST’s website, with printed copies available for Parliamentarians in the Commons and Lords libraries.

POST is made up of a Board of Parliamentarians and non-Parliamentary experts from the science and technology community, a Director, and a small team of advisers. The advisers research and produce proposals for POSTnote topics. These proposals are presented to the

Board, which selects topics to be developed into POSTnotes. Most POSTnotes are written by PhD students on placement, under the supervision of an adviser.

I was assigned the task of writing a POSTnote about electronic cigarettes. In this note I summarised the scale of use, quality, safety, and evidence for the effectiveness of electronic cigarettes as a smoking cessation tool, and discussed regulatory issues. You can read it [here](#).

POSTnote are produced using a rigorous, structured approach. To start with, you conduct a rapid literature review, including academic research and grey literature. You also interview a broad range of experts in the field, which in my case included academic researchers, governmental departments, charities, regulators, and e-cigarette industry and user groups. Following this background research, you draft your POSTnote with your adviser. It is then reviewed internally by other advisers, redrafted, and reviewed externally by the experts you interviewed, before it is finally signed off for publication by POST's Director.

POST also arranges seminars for Parliamentarians on science and technology topics. Interns are often needed to help out at these events, and in the first week of my placement, I helped to run an event about evidence-based policing.

Why do it?

Stepping out of the comfort zone of your PhD topic and into an unknown subject area can be rather daunting, but this sort of test can be a great opportunity to learn new skills and confidence.

I knew virtually nothing about e-cigarettes and the highly politicised world of tobacco control, but I was able to turn myself into an expert in the space of a few weeks. Learning that I have this skill, and that it is possible to gain a thorough understanding of new subjects quickly, has been very good for my confidence as I have made the transition from my PhD into post-doc research and have joined a new project team.

I developed my skills in communicating complex information in a clear and concise manner to non-academic audiences. Writing a 3000-word briefing for a lay audience is very different from writing an 80,000 word thesis that will be read by a handful of academics. It is important that as researchers, we are able to write for a wide range of audiences.

I also gained some insight into how research evidence is used within a policy environment, and the processes by which research is disseminated among Parliamentarians. It is important that as academics, we have an appreciation of how research (which one day might be our own research) is used outside of our own profession and institutions.

More generally, working in Westminster every day was really exciting. I made the most of my Parliamentary pass, going on a variety of tours of the Parliamentary Estate and attending Prime Minister's Questions. I was also (un)fortunate to undertake my placement during the EU Referendum, which lent further excitement to the whole experience.

I shared an office with around 10 other PhD students, all of whom were on internships at the same time as me. It was great to meet a diverse group of students from different universities and disciplinary backgrounds. We became a close group, and still keep in touch around a year later.

Interested? Then why not apply...

The application process takes place over summer (the next call opens in June and closes in August). As part of the application you are required to indicate which organisation you would prefer to work in.

There are two stages:

1. A written application form with questions about why you want to undertake the placement. You are also asked to submit a mock briefing on a topic which you think needs policy attention. In my PhD I was exploring the implementation of remote monitoring technologies in care homes, so I wrote my mock briefing focusing specifically on the use of video cameras in this setting. I decided to write this because it is a topical and controversial issue, but focusing specifically on video cameras, rather than many different technologies, allowed me to make my briefing precise and clear.
2. If shortlisted, you are called to interview with your preferred organisation. In this interview you will be asked to expand on details in your written application to show why you are a strong candidate for the placement.

What about money and time?

Your PhD stipend payments will continue as usual during your placement, and you will be able to obtain financial support for travel and accommodation. You will also be given a three-month extension to your PhD deadline in lieu of the time you spend on placement. Therefore, you won't lose money and you won't lose time.

Having said this, it is a good idea to think about when you might take time out from your PhD - for example, you probably wouldn't want to interrupt your data collection for three months. The good news is that there is likely to be some flexibility from your host organisation about when you take your placement. Remember that your PhD supervisors will have to approve the interruption, and the chances are they will not be aware of the placement scheme or what it entails. Therefore, you will probably have to sell it to them on the grounds that it will be a brilliant experience, but probably more importantly, that it will not harm the progress of your PhD.

I was able to negotiate the timing of my placement so that I did it after I had written up my thesis and before my viva. This worked very well as I was able to finish writing my thesis to a manageable deadline, and was then able to devote my full attention to the placement without worrying that I was neglecting my PhD. It was a healthy change to work on something completely different to my thesis, in a completely different environment, and I came back to prepare for my viva feeling refreshed.

I thoroughly enjoyed my internship and I would not hesitate to recommend the scheme to other PhD students.

If you are a Manchester academic or researcher, Policy@Manchester can help advise on finding and applying for policy internships and other placements. Please contact policy@manchester.ac.uk and let us know about your research and policy interests.