



Demystifying the PhD: SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO PURSUE DOCTORAL STUDY



EMILY ROGERS, Careers Consultant for Researchers and MAISHA ISLAM, Doctoral College Research Culture Lead for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - and final year doctoral student - at the University of Southampton, outline how they are working collaboratively with students and staff to improve access and participation into doctoral study through their new Demystifying the PhD information series.

Whilst access into HE has widened to include a diverse range of students, recent policy shifts have emphasised the need to build a stronger pipeline into postgraduate research (PGR), particularly for under-represented and minoritised students. As Careers, Employability and Student Enterprise (CESE) and Doctoral College colleagues, we are responsible for ensuring that students have information, advice, and guidance to support their decision-making into PGR.

From experience, we recognise that considering doctoral study is challenging. There is lacking representation of diverse 'real models' and often limited experiential knowledge of PGR study routes within personal networks. From a career consultant perspective, Emily identified that students attending one-to-one careers guidance are often confused about what a PhD entails or how to take the first steps into doctoral study.

Acknowledging the elusive nature of doctoral degrees, we created Demystifying the PhD – a four-part, weekly information series launched in 2024, supporting students to find out about doctoral study. The programme seeks to encourage more equitable access into PhD study, provide insight into the PhD process and raise awareness of the career options a doctoral degree brings.

Demystifying the PhD was designed by staff from the Doctoral College and CESE team. It is grounded in internal research and student consultation exploring under-represented students' aspirations towards doctoral study and research-related careers. As Maisha identifies as a British-Bangladeshi Muslim woman, belonging to a minoritised background provided a personal motivation to ensure that the series served similar under-represented student groups, particularly where our work revealed students were lacking access to information, advice and guidance.

FOUR PART SERIES

The series is structured in a logical pattern with no mandatory requirements, allowing students to attend sessions most suited to where they are in their career journey:

- 1 - What are doctorates and are they for me?
- 2 - Process for applying to PhD programmes
- 3 - Day in the life of a PhD student
- 4 - Career prospects beyond the PhD

Session 1 introduces students to doctoral study and challenges the stereotypes around who should undertake a PhD. Students take part in interactive 'true and false' surveys and start their career planning process by questioning their thoughts on doctoral study using a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis tool.

The inclusion of SWOT was inspired by Emily's coaching work with undergraduate students, where she finds that involving students in reflection activities helps them to feel more invested in their career plans.

In Session 2, a detailed step-by-step PhD application process is explored, with email templates for students wishing to contact supervisors about PhD proposals, a list of Southampton-specific funding streams and tips on preparing for PhD interviews. In Session 3, current PhD students detail their experiences of doctoral study. This session prioritises participant Q&A, aiming to ensure students feel inspired and empowered about their future by getting insight into the tasks and lifestyles associated with doctoral study.

The final session of the programme explores career options beyond the PhD, so students can identify why a PhD could be a worthwhile prospect. We invite a staff member to detail their post-PhD experiences and secure academics with broad career trajectories, including work in industry and academia, to showcase the diverse career prospects and employability skills a doctoral degree can bring.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In total, 40 students attended sessions across the programme, with over half completing a post-session evaluation form. These responses have been overwhelmingly positive: 100% of students said they were likely to find out more about PhD study and 88% reported an increase in confidence levels on the workshop topics. Four students sought further careers guidance and two applied for research internships within one month of attending a session. As an inaugural programme, we are delighted to see this feedback which further supported our need to better enhance institutional guidance related to doctoral study.

We are looking to expand the reach of the series through an interactive online course, featuring videos of current PhD students, short quizzes about PhD myths, and signposting advice on applying for programmes. We will therefore continue to ensure that future provision is embedded within the university calendar as part of our 'business-as-usual'.



M.Islam@soton.ac.uk

Emily.Rogers@soton.ac.uk



[Connect with Emily on LinkedIn](#)

[Connect with Maisha on LinkedIn](#)