

GRADnet Employer Engagement Programme - Guidance for Postgraduate Research Students (PGRs)



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BACKGROUND

Through SEPnet's graduate network (GRADnet) our aim is to offer you an insight into careers beyond academia and a programme of training to develop entrepreneurship and commercial awareness informed by employer engagement with real-world, problem-solving experiences.

Academic research is one of the many options open to PGRs. Research students have highly developed problem-solving skills and fresh ideas which are hugely valuable to industry in a number of sectors. Physics research students, in particular, bring strong analytical and mathematical skills.

GRADnet offers PGRs access to a bank of industrial contacts and a programme of employer engagement opportunities and networking events to help develop your contacts and employability skills.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Whether you intend to pursue a career in academia or industry, participating in the GRADnet Employer Engagement Programme will offer opportunities to:

- Develop and apply your personal, technical skills and knowledge
- Learn new skills e.g. software programming, business awareness, employer engagement
- Improve your project management, presentation, communication and multi-tasking skills
- Enhance your research through wider industry experience
- Find out about career opportunities, develop your entrepreneurship, commercial awareness and networking experience
- This brief article highlights the importance for PGRs of developing their transferable skills and gaining work experience during their PhD to prepare them for their future careers:

[Doctoral students' career expectations principles and responsibilities](#) [11/06/15].

WHAT INDUSTRY EXPERIENCES ARE BEING OFFERED THROUGH GRADnet?

GRADnet offers the following opportunities:

- Site visits, tours and work shadowing opportunities
- Industry networking events
- Employer and alumni mentors for support and advice
- Short placements from 2 weeks to 3 months

See below for further details and FAQs.

When is a good time to gain industry experience?

You can take advantage of these opportunities at any time during your studies, with the support of your supervisor, as it is never too soon to start gaining industry experience and developing career knowledge. However, the best time to consider a placement is probably from your 2nd year onwards. Longer placements (2-3 months) are best avoided in the final year when you will be focused on writing your thesis but are worth considering once you have submitted and are looking for a job.

Can I apply for more than one industry experience or placement?

You can apply for as many industry experiences or placements as you wish provided you are able to manage your time effectively within the PhD registration period. However, if you are suspending your studies you will need to check if there is a limit on the amount of time you can take out during your PhD and within what time period you are expected to write up and submit your thesis.

Can international students apply for employer engagement opportunities?

If you are an international student on a Tier 4 visa you are allowed to work part-time during your studies up to a maximum of 20 hours a week. You may also be able to carry out a short placement that is not integral to your degree during an agreed vacation period with your supervisor's approval (research students are normally allowed a maximum of 8 weeks' vacation per year).

Some universities require you to suspend your studies if you carry out a placement of more than one month whereas some do not require you to suspend your studies if the placement period is less than three months. Normally if international students suspend their studies, they are no longer considered a student during this period and may be required to return home. If you are an international student and wish to carry out a placement beyond your agreed vacation period, you would need to check if a different visa (other than Tier 4) is required to stay in the UK and carry out a placement.

If you are in any doubt whether an opportunity meets your visa requirement please seek advice either from your Careers Service or your International Student Adviser in the Student Advisory Centre.

Will my industry experience be recognised or accredited?

PhD research students registered in SEPnet partner Departments are expected to undertake continuing professional development (CPD) to include a minimum of 40 hours advanced physics training relevant to the broader remit of their PhD and a further 20 hours of professional skills training in each of the first two years of their PhD (this may be integrated over the two years).

Recognised employer engagement activities (site visits, employer talks, placements etc) will be viewed as contributing towards the 20 hours professional skills training at the rate of 2 hours per day up to a maximum of 10 hours per placement (or per hour for employer talks). You should keep a record of the activities you participate in as evidence of CPD achievement.

SITE VISITS, TOURS AND WORK SHADOWING OPPORTUNITIES

A site visit or work shadowing with an organisation is a great way to enable you to learn about career options, develop an understanding of different organisations and what they do, build contacts and find out about opportunities for collaborative research and jobs.

These opportunities are aimed at PGRs either at individual universities or across the partners, depending on location and the number of places available. Visit the GRADnet VRE for a list of opportunities [SEPnet VRE](#)

For industry site visits and tours we will arrange transport for larger groups. Individual students will be expected to make their own travel arrangements but in most cases travel expenses will be covered by SEPnet. Contact your SEPnet Employer Engagement Officer.

INDUSTRY NETWORKING EVENTS

Regional events provide opportunities for PGRs to meet employers, particularly SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) from a range of physics-related industries, to talk about their research and explore business ideas, placements and mentoring opportunities.

A series of regional networking evenings 'Connecting Industry and Researchers in Physics' includes a networking workshop, speed networking session and industry panel to share their thoughts on industry skills' needs and opportunities for physics doctoral graduates. Visit the GRADnet VRE for details of forthcoming events [SEPnet VRE](#)

MENTORING

Industry mentors can be very valuable. They can provide help with developing your career path, advice on how to stand out and improve your employability, tailoring your CV or practising your interviewing skills.

The mentoring relationship can be short or long term and may focus on a particular issue or a range of issues. One-off mentoring may include gaining knowledge from someone about a specialist area, CV advice or interview practice, or the relationship might be ongoing and focus on supporting you with your career plans more generally.

Mentoring relationships can take place by email (e-mentoring), by telephone, Skype or face-to-face. Visit the GRADnet VRE for details of mentoring opportunities and read our mentoring guidelines.

PLACEMENTS

Short placements from 2 weeks to 3 months are advertised through the GRADnet VRE for physics PGRs at individual universities or across the nine SEPnet partners depending on location and availability of places. Placement projects can include data analysis or a project feasibility study, software programming, product testing, upgrading a piece of kit, calibrating a new detector, modelling, website development or science communication. Some projects may be offered on a group consultancy basis. Visit the GRADnet VRE to see the projects advertised [SEPnet VRE](#)

Am I allowed to take a placement during my PhD, and if so, when is a good time?

In most cases you are allowed to take time out for a placement. Most funding bodies understand that students may take a break from studies for various reasons including gaining industry experience. See below for Science & Technology Facilities Council (STFC) and Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) recommendations relating to this.

The best time to consider a placement is probably from your 2nd year onwards. At this stage you will have developed a good level of skills and research experience which you can apply in an industry setting (especially if you have participated in a GRADnet Summer/Winter School!). You are likely to be looking to future possibilities but not yet be heavily involved in finishing your practical work and writing a thesis. Longer placements (2-3 months) are best avoided in the final year when you will be focused on writing your thesis but are worth considering once you have submitted. A placement at this stage could even lead to a job offer!

Do funding bodies support placements?

Studentship awarding bodies are supportive of work experience where it does not interfere with a student's studies. The STFC states: '[s]hort term work placements in companies, whether paid or unpaid, and other collaborative links which will develop a research scientist's industrial awareness are encouraged.' See the [STFC's webpage](#) [11/06/15] and section 'Experience and Casual Work' for information on what type of experience is encouraged.

The EPSRC also recognises that PhD students may wish to gain work experience and supports work-based placements as part of the wider training experience. The EPSRC recommends that '(w)here students have the opportunity to work in a non-academic environment, they should maximise the opportunity by seeking to understand the role of research within the organisation and the wider context.' It also states that '(s)tudents should recognise their responsibility for developing personal career goals during their doctoral training and consider their possible career options, recognising that these may

be outside academe.' Visit [EPSRC](#) [11/06/15] for comprehensive guidance on the expectations for all parties. If your placement is funded by a different funding body, check their guidelines or contact employerengagement@sepnet.ac.uk [11/06/15] for advice.

Do I need to suspend my studies to take up a placement?

University rules vary. Some universities require you to suspend your studies if you carry out a placement of more than one month whereas some do not require you to suspend your studies if the placement period is less than three months. Most universities will allow you to suspend your studies to carry out a longer placement but you will need the approval of your academic supervisor, Head of Department and Faculty Dean to do this and to apply for temporary withdrawal. If you do suspend your studies, your PhD funding will also be suspended for the duration of the placement but you should then receive this money in the following term.

Will placements be funded?

Shorter placements of up to 4 weeks are unlikely to be funded. However, reasonable travel expenses and other costs should be covered by the employer. Placements of 4 weeks or more would be funded at a rate of normally at least £1,000 per month.

Should the placement project relate to my research?

It is natural to want to choose a project which relates to your area of research. However, you should consider any project which interests you and for which you have the right skills as the aim is to broaden your knowledge and experience. If you apply for a project which closely relates to your research, this is not a problem and is likely to be welcomed by the employer. However, you may be asked to sign a contract covering issues related to intellectual property. Whether the project is closely related to your research or not, you may be asked by an employer to sign a confidentiality clause. SEPnet will liaise with you and the employer during this process.

If I want to take a placement do I need to tell my supervisor?

You should let your supervisor know if you are applying for a placement. For longer placements you will need to approach your supervisor to get his/her support and then get approval from your Head of Department and Faculty Dean. Your department is a SEPnet partner and supports GRADnet and its objectives to develop the employability skills of PGRs so you should find staff receptive.

It is a good idea to draft the reasons for your request (possibly in an email) presenting the 'business case' for why you believe the placement would be valuable as this will demonstrate you have thought through your decision carefully. You should then arrange to meet your supervisor to discuss your request. Reasons you might give could include that you will be able to:

- develop and apply particular skills and knowledge in an industry setting to help your professional development,
- learn new skills (eg project management, team-working, leadership, programming) to help your research and be able to share knowledge with your research team,
- gain ideas about applied research and future careers,
- make useful departmental links with a relevant organisation, and
- facilitate future collaborative research and knowledge exchange.

Will I need to produce a report following my placement?

Your employer is likely to want a report on your work. However, you will not need to produce a report for SEPnet. You will, however, be asked to join GRADnet's LinkedIn group and to create a LinkedIn profile and produce a case study about your experience

which can be shared with others. This is a valuable part of the process as it will enable you to reflect on your experience, highlight the skills and knowledge you have gained and will be useful in terms of developing, and raising, your profile with future employers.

Can the report be published?

Yes, with the agreement of the employer although publication is not the primary objective of the scheme.

Can I source my own placement or choose an employer?

GRADnet is keen to build more employer contacts and help you source your own placement opportunities. Let us know which organisations you are keen to engage with and we can get in touch and find out about opportunities for you.

WHAT DO I DO NEXT?

How do I apply for a placement, mentoring or other opportunity?

If you are interested in an employer engagement opportunity, please [register your details](#) [11/06/15].

SEPnet will support you through the application process. You will need to contact Veronica Benson at veronica.benson@sepnet.ac.uk for further details about the opportunities. You will be asked to apply directly to employers for placements or consultancy projects with a CV (maximum 2-pages) and covering letter. You should tailor your CV for each role and use your covering letter to explain, briefly, why you are interested in the role, what you can offer and when you are available to contact. Your CV should include the details of 2 referees, one who should be your academic supervisor (you should seek his/her permission to be put forward as a referee before submitting your CV). You will also be asked to send us a copy of your CV for our records.

Getting advice and support with tailoring my CV and covering email.

If you have not produced a CV for some time, you should visit your Careers Service for advice. There are also a number of websites which provide advice and guidance on CVs and developing your employability skills which are relevant PGRs:

- Visit [SEPnet VRE](#) to view a SEPnet PGR's tips and advice for writing a CV and covering letter. Follow the link to: Training/Student-led-On-line-Learning-Modules/PhD-Day-1:-Thinking-About-Your-Next-Role/
- Visit [Prospects website](#) [11/06/15] for information on graduate job roles and sectors as well as guidance on CV writing and CV examples.
- Vitae helps researchers with their professional and career development. Visit [their website](#) [11/06/15] for advice and examples of CVs for research and non-research roles.
- [This short survey](#) gives an insight into what skills physics PhD students develop during their PhD which could be useful when preparing your CV and for interviews.

WHAT DO POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHERS DO?

The STFC's website provides information on the career paths of some STFC-funded physics PGRs. See the [STFC's website](#) [11/06/15] and read about the career destinations of STFC-funded physics PhD students.

[What do researchers do?](#) [11/06/15] is a series of publications exploring the destinations and career paths of doctoral graduates. Visit the Vitae website for more examples of where postdoctoral researchers go.

Visit ['\(y\)our PhD, what next \(academic jobs\)?'](#) [11/06/15] and ['\(y\)our PhD, what next \(non-academic jobs\)'](#) [11/06/15] for an overview of what PhD graduates can do within and outside academia.

The [Institute of Physics](#) [11/06/15] has valuable information for physics PGRs on managing your own career. The IOP guide ['Moving On: the Physics PhD Student's Guide to Boosting Employability'](#) [11/06/15] describes the benefits of gaining industry experience for those seeking careers in industry or research and includes practical tips on what to do.

[Jobs.ac.uk](#) [11/06/15] offers a Career Planning for PhDs e-book which includes activities and advice to help you explore your options and succeed in a competitive job market. See also their [newly launched page](#) for PhD students thinking about career options in and outside academia.

PLACEMENT CASE STUDIES

Video interviews with 3 PhDs at the Open University and their employers

[Hear from 3 PhD students](#) talk about their experiences, including a physics PhD student, Bartlomiej Barc, who had an internship at Briteyellow.

Read about 3 SEPnet PGRs' placement experiences below and visit

<http://www.sepnet.ac.uk/sepnet-graduate-network/case-studies-and-events/>

- [Ela Poplawska, Queen Mary - Software Programmer – Tranquility Aerospace Ltd](#)
- [Jonathan Keelan, Open University – Researcher – Network Rail](#)
- [Giovanni Pasquino, Royal Holloway – Electronic Testing and Design, Tranquility Aerospace](#)