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Reflections on the ESRC internship scheme for postgraduates

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ABSTRACT

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK is one of the main sources of funding for postgraduate study in human geography. For some years now, the ESRC has offered funded students the opportunity to apply to undertake a short internship in a government department or with a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). This paper provides a collective reflection from the perspective of four former postgraduates who completed different ESRC supported internships in the UK. We discuss the enhancement of writing skills for diverse audiences, the advancement of knowledge in diverse subject areas, and the opening up of employment opportunities as key benefits of participating in the ESRC internship scheme.

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Postgraduate; internship;
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reflexivity

Background

A major source of funding for postgraduate study in human geography in the UK is the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), part of Research Councils UK (RCUK). For a number of years they offered CASE (Co-operative Award in Science and Engineering) studentships, which involved the student conducting their doctoral studies collaboratively with an outside organization such as a local government department or Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) (who made a small financial contribution to the studentship). These studentships helped RCUK to meet its objectives around knowledge transfer (Demeritt & Lees, 2005) or knowledge exchange (Munro, 2016) between universities and external organizations. Different models of CASE studentships emerged, one being the collaborative studentship between the ESRC and the Scottish Government where broad topics were advertised and potential supervisors had to apply to become the supervisor of the project upon which, they would then recruit a student to take the project forward for their doctoral studies (see Reid & McCormick, 2010). These studentships often involved annual one-month placements in a Scottish Government department where students were offered the opportunity to see the research and policy process in operation. As the ESRC have devolved much of the responsibility for doctoral funding to Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) – which have recently been recommissioned into Doctoral Training Partnerships

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(DTPs) – different models of collaborative studentships are now available as each DTC/DTP has operated these in slightly different ways.

For a number of years now, the ESRC have offered internship opportunities to ESRC funded students, and the number of internships available to students increased substantially in the last few years. It is not entirely clear why the ESRC increased their portfolio of internships to the extent that they had although this is probably connected to the significance now given to “impact” and the desire for research to have benefits beyond academia; as Pain, Kesby, and Askins (2011, p. 184) note:

a proportion of government funding that it distributes for research will be allocated on the bases of the “demonstrable benefits [of research] to the wider economy and society” (HEFCR, 2009, np). Currently this proportion of proposed at 25 per cent.

This broader reorientation of research funding is argued to be symptomatic of the increasing neoliberal transformation of the university where pressures are placed on high productivity and the instrumentalization of research overseen by metric-orientated regimes (c.f. Mountz et al., 2015). Whilst this continues to be a hot topic of conversation in academia, perhaps less documented are the implications or significance this has on current and recently completed postgraduates. Four of the five co-authors were completing their PhDs in the context of these wider shifts coupled with the increasing employment competition and uncertainty within academia.

Taking this into consideration, the ESRC internship scheme offered a means of experiencing employment opportunities beyond academia. Here, ESRC funded doctoral students are given the chance to spend a period of time working on policy or practice-related issues in a non-academic organization, such as a government department or in a voluntary, community or private sector organization. The ESRC notes that students benefit from networking within the policy arena, transferable skills and knowledge, time management skills and report writing skills (see <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/student-internship-scheme/>). In addition to these benefits, students also received an extension to their studentship funding (for the duration of the internship up to a maximum of 6 months) as well as travel and accommodation costs (up to £3000 based on a three-month internship including up to £700 per month for rent). Although a minority of ESRC funded students participate in an internship, students are required to complete an application form to be considered for a place and some are also interviewed. In this paper, we focus specifically on the advantages of the internship scheme, drawing out common benefits across our experiences of participating in different internship opportunities whilst also reflecting upon some of the ways in which the scheme – and postgraduate training more broadly – could be improved. Throughout the article, we also consider how our reflections about the internship scheme dovetail with considerations of the focus of our postgraduate training more broadly.

Although not explicitly structured as such, the opportunities permitted by these internships have opened pathways to impact for the authors in different ways: greater public engagement; increased policy relevance; and enhanced communication of research. This article therefore also responds to a recent call for more critical attention to be paid to informal knowledge exchange (KE) or what Munro (2016, p. 44) has called “the often-mundane activities that constitute the practice of KE”.

Aims and approach

This paper provides a reflection of the ESRC Internship Scheme. The discussion provided in the paper is not based on the collection of new data per se and it is not auto-ethnographic either; indeed, using the internship as a means to conduct research for broader dissemination was against the conditions of the scheme itself and was only permitted in very specific circumstances and after prior permission had been granted. Moreover, the paper does not offer an extensive survey of postgraduate interns' experiences, rather it offers a narrower, yet in-depth set of reflections based on the experiences of the co-authors after the completion of their respective internships. In doing so, this paper aims to reflect on the relative benefits of this specific internship scheme and contribute more broadly to discussions on internships – which are increasingly becoming a rite of passage into the job market. While there has been a growing interest in the role of internship schemes within the discipline of geography (see Blanchard, Carter, Kent, & Badurek, 2013; Craig & Wikle, 2016; Simiyu, Okaka, & Omondi, 2015), there has been little acknowledgment of schemes offered to postgraduate students and the significance these have on employability within – and beyond – academia.

The five authors of this paper include four recently-completed ESRC funded PhD students who have participated in the ESRC internship scheme and one academic supervisor of ESRC funded students. Of the four internships, three were in government departments and one was with an NGO; two of these internships lasted three months with a further two lasting six months, and all internships required a period of relocation to participate in the internship. The nature of the internships varied between placements and while there were common themes in the skills acquired, such as report writing, policy development and public dissemination, the knowledge and sector-specific work varied widely.

By means of a brief overview, Jenny worked within an NGO where she researched and developed resources to be used to raise awareness of human rights issues. This research formed the basis of short films and learning resources that were disseminated at public events across the UK and internationally. The core project that Robin worked on during his internship was an examination of the economic and social characteristics of certain segments of British society and it was primarily underpinned by a quantitative analysis of large data-sets and census statistics. Michael's work coincided with some significant government legislation which was passed through Parliament during the time of his internship. Before the law was passed, Michael's research was desk based and primarily involved reviewing literature across academia, the media, social media and popular press. During the latter stages of the internship however, Michael was required to work more closely with the policy team in assessing community impacts of the new law. Daniel's internship involved the consideration of possible future environmental and political matters and their implications towards governmental policy-making. This largely involved desk-based research, in addition to the planning and undertaking of events.

Our collaborative and reflexive approach has used everyday formal and informal conversations – or what Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) refer to as “everyday talk” – to reflect on our experiences of engaging with the internship scheme and to consider the relative benefits and drawbacks in doing so. Although collaborative and reflexive, our approach differs from that of Mackenzie et al. (2013) who maintained journals of their experiences and then shared these with their co-researchers. As noted above, we were not permitted to use the internship

scheme to collect “data” in any form, including in the form of diary entries. Our “everyday talk” included meetings with all authors of the paper, a series of email discussions about our experiences of the internship scheme, and commentary on each other’s written reflections about our experiences. We therefore build upon – and contribute to – long-standing debates in both pedagogical literatures and in feminist geography about the value of adopting a reflexive approach to research (e.g. Faria & Mollett, 2016). Our discussions also reflected on the proposed purposes and benefits of the internship scheme as outlined by the ESRC (see <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/student-internship-scheme/>) which will be considered and reviewed under the headings of: transferable and generic skills; employability and practical issues; and application of research.

Transferable and generic skills

In an increasingly competitive job market the pressure for doctoral students to develop transferable or generic skills, i.e. skills which are applicable outside of university, is now considered an integral aspect of the doctoral process (Saunders, 2010). However, despite attention drawn to the onus for undergraduate students to gain and demonstrate an array of industry relevant skills upon graduation (Burke, Jones, & Doherty, 2005), less attention has focused on the opportunities for doctoral students to do so. It has also been suggested that doctoral education is to a certain extent, incompatible with the accumulation of such generic skills (Gilbert, Balatti, Turner, & Whitehouse, 2004), those necessary to the pursuit of careers beyond academia (which the majority of doctoral students do upon completion of their studies). We have all been engaged throughout our doctoral studies with research training programmes aimed “to support and develop world class researchers” both within and outside of Higher Education (HE) (ESRC, 2009, p. 4). However, through the process of completing our internships we found that we developed, and were able to evidence, an array of skills outside of those we had gained during our studies. In the following section, we use our reflections to consider some of these skills and the way that the internship scheme enabled us to develop them.

Developing writing skills

Developing and enhancing writing skills is a key focus of pedagogic literatures about the experience of being a doctoral student or postgraduate researcher. This has included calls for giving greater pedagogic attention to writing for doctoral students, including the role of co-authorship (Kamler, 2008), as well as drawing attention to the ways in which postgraduates develop a sense of identity as writers (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009). Much of the literature about writing skills focuses on the benefits of using seminars and workshops to develop the writing skills of doctoral students (Aitchison, 2009; Burgoine, Hopkins, Rech, & Zapata, 2011; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Cuthbert, Spark, & Burke, 2009; Delyser, 2003; Ferguson, 2009). Learning more about academic writing skills, sharing experiences of (and struggles with) writing, gaining confidence as an author, and developing a more positive approach to writing are just some of the benefits that are demonstrated in this work. Broadening out the focus from the enhancement of writing skills, consideration has also been given to the benefits of residential advanced training (Gwanzura-Ottemoeller, Hopkins, Lorimer, & Philip, 2005) and the enhancement of discursive skills through the use

of master classes (Baerenholdt, Gregson, Everts, & Healey, 2010). Throughout the doctoral process, much emphasis is placed – understandably so – on written communication skills and the need for students to be able to effectively communicate ideas through academic articles, conference papers, reports and ultimately their doctoral thesis (Ferguson, 2009).

Despite this, much (if not all) of this emphasis is directed towards the ability to communicate to academic audiences. However, outside of academia, we found that such styles are often unsuitable and need to be adapted to accommodate to the specific work environment (Craswell, 2007). During our internships, all four authors encountered problems with writing and on many occasions were asked to re-phrase or re-work their writing when it was considered “too academic”. This is explained by Robin:

It was made clear to me that an academic writing style would not be suitable for government publications. Therefore, I had to adapt my writing style to one that was suitable for a wide range of readers. As a result I feel I have broadened my writing style which will be greatly beneficial when applying for jobs.

For Robin, the quantitative analysis of data-sets, a common approach in government research, contrasted from the qualitative methodology utilized in his PhD research, and was another reason he believes he had to develop his writing style. Rather than the frequently more in-depth and expansive techniques of qualitative analysis, he had to primarily interpret numbers and write in a more concise and less theoretically engaged manner. Therefore, in addition to adapting writing styles for new audiences, the quantitative approach also required Robin to develop and change his techniques of written data analysis.

As a result of our internships, all four authors feel they have gained substantial experience in writing for different audiences, and in particular the ability to write concisely. In particular, we learnt that it was important to avoid overly complex or complicated language or terminology and to use shorter sentences. Writing concisely is an important skill, which we will ultimately benefit from when applying for jobs – both within and outside of academia (Owen, 2001). We all agree that engaging with these different styles of writing has improved our writing skills, enhanced our confidence when it comes to writing and enabled us to use different forms of writing in our doctoral work.

The importance of teamwork is often recognized as an essential skill and accommodated for within undergraduate degree programs (Haigh & Kilmartin, 1999). However, the writing of a thesis is ultimately a solitary process. The internship schemes required us to write and edit work collaboratively. For all of us this meant learning to take criticism and to develop our writing to reflect the desires and needs of numerous colleagues and other stakeholders who we were working with. It also brought home to all of us the importance of writing clearly and concisely in a way that could be understood by a lay audience. Jenny found that despite the initial concerns that this criticism raised, ultimately her writing and confidence developed over the course of the internship. All authors agree that writing as part of a team has many benefits: producing work in a timely manner; editing and writing concisely; receiving constructive criticism; and we all found that this often makes it a more enjoyable and pleasurable process. All of these skills have aided us in the writing of this collaborative article. Moreover, we feel that our experience of writing collaboratively has helped us to see the process of writing a doctoral thesis as a collaborative process between student and supervisors; this has enabled us to use the feedback from our supervisors more constructively to improve the quality of our written work.

Advancement of knowledge in diverse subject areas

In addition to developing our writing skills, the internships enabled us to advance our knowledge into different subject areas and provided us with the experience of adapting to work in diverse environments. For Michael, Daniel and Robin – who were working in government departments – the internships allowed them to gain insight into how geographical topics, such as migration, citizenship and geopolitics, are researched in the government sector. Additionally, all three of us learnt about how this feeds into policy formation and the knowledge and competencies required to pursue such a career. Jenny gained experience of how researchers, politicians and NGOs can work together and the importance of such collaborations in advancing issues of social justice. For all of us, seeing how our research can make a significant impact to the lives of others was an incredibly rewarding process. At times, during our doctoral studies we have questioned the relevance of our own work and its impact outside of academia, particularly due to the emphasis placed on the need to demonstrate economic and social impacts through academic publications (Pain et al., 2011). The internships have given us the confidence and insight to see the significance that our research skills have and the experience necessary to pursue this further on completion of our studies.

In addition, despite completing Masters training in both quantitative and qualitative research methods (as part of – or in order to secure – our ESRC funded studentships), all the authors' doctoral work predominately uses qualitative methods, and as such we feel less confident in employing quantitative approaches. Both Robin and Daniel found that through the internships their competence and ability to use a variety of research methods developed as they learnt and practiced managing large data-sets, utilizing appropriate statistics software, and producing charts, graphs and maps. Robin's primary project involved sourcing and analysing multivariable sets of census data, helping him gain a great deal of knowledge about the varied types of data collected by central and local governments and where and it can be accessed online. These skills will undoubtedly enhance their career prospects, particularly in a climate where quantitative research and statistics are so highly valued and regarded as being in shortage in the UK.

Ultimately, the internships can be seen to have enhanced many skills which can be transferred to careers both within and outside of academia. In addition to the skills discussed above the authors have developed a range of other skills including: public-speaking and presenting; report writing; teamwork; organization and management; working in a context where confidentiality is important; and professionalism. It is hoped that such skills will enhance our career prospects both within and outside of academia.

Employability and practical issues

Current postgraduate training is orientated towards furthering skills and knowledge to develop as an academic with little discussion or advice concerning careers beyond academia. This is worrying considering the current state of the academic job market and the realities that most PhD graduates will not pursue an academic career. What has become increasingly evident is the competitive nature of the job market with figures from 2010 suggesting that “only 19 per cent of UK PhD holders were working in higher education research roles three and a half years after obtaining their doctorate” (Else, 2014, np). The

ESRC internship scheme presents a practical response to this issue in highlighting other possible career opportunities for postgraduates. It also demonstrated how the skills we have acquired during our doctoral studies could be applied beyond academia.

Opening up different routes to employment

Considering the current academic job market, the ability to continue an academic career after completing the PhD process is “no longer a realistic training path for a significant percentage of geography postgraduates” (Gillen, Ziegler, Friess, & Wasson, 2015, p. 429). The internship scheme offered a way for us to gain an insight into different possible sectors of employment. While we all recognized the current job market situation, our motives for undertaking the internship scheme were multiple and included: extending our PhD funding; gaining new experiences and skills; seeing other work opportunities; improving our CVs; deciding whether or not we would choose to work in these areas in the future; and seeing how our research skills can be applied in different areas.

While we all aspired to follow an academic career, the scheme allowed us to see how our skills and knowledge developed during our PhDs can be applicable beyond academia. We were all encouraged by the ways our PhD and research skills were regarded and transferable to these different professional settings. In the civil service, for example, there were a number of employees who had completed PhDs in the discipline of Geography. This demonstrated to us the applicability of geography and how such skills are actively sought after in the civil service.

In all of the roles we felt we were given high-levels of responsibility and a range of important tasks. These tasks and responsibilities ranged from designing a research project, to report writing, presenting at meetings and event organization. This increased our appreciation of the applicability and transferability of our postgraduate skillsets, as Robin suggests:

Although this responsibility was challenging, I gained great confidence in the trust the managers had in my ability and skills to successfully complete the report. I felt that, although I was an intern, there was a lot of respect for the skills and knowledge I could offer.

The scheme allowed us to see how our skills could be transferred into other professional roles and this increased our confidence in our abilities and in considering potential opportunities beyond university.

The internship scheme also had a positive impact in providing experience and skills applicable and beneficial in pursuing an academic career. We often found during our studies that it was difficult to see how research projects could extend beyond the university. The scheme allowed us to gain first-hand experience of participating in and leading policy and practice-based research. Jenny states:

Despite having a keen academic interest in “social justice”, I’ve often struggled to see the impact of my research. Throughout the internship I saw tangible benefits of the work I was doing and the ways it was important in ensuring social justice for all.

Similarly, working in the civil service provided opportunities to observe how research is applied and used in the formulation of policies which would have direct impact on society. The scheme also enhanced knowledge of the links between academia and the host institutions. In many cases we maintained contact with the institutes which has led to further interactions and collaborations; for example Michael felt that his internship experience

helped equip him for the requirements of a later role as a research assistant on a government funded project (Goodall et al., 2015) and upon completing her PhD, Jenny accepted a job working for an NGO in the same sector as her internship before returning to work as a researcher in the academic sector.

The internship scheme opened up a number of possibilities to careers beyond academia yet we felt the experience was also valuable and beneficial to furthering the skills, knowledge and competencies required for an academic career, and in particular, an academic career where impact is now high on the agenda (Phillips, 2010). Furthermore, our internship experiences also demonstrated to us the limited context in which some non-academic organizations operate in terms of the kinds of work they are able to conduct and the arguments they feel permitted to make based on their research. This led some of us to recognize the relative freedom that exists in academia to conduct research on a diverse range of topics of interest to the researcher without being narrowly confined by specific institutional or organizational agendas.

Practical issues

The majority of the internships offered by the ESRC were located in major cities within the UK. In this respect the spatial distribution of the internship opportunities on offer were geographically uneven with a number of schemes centred in London, and other key cities where central governmental institutes and NGOs are based. For all of us the internship required moving to different cities including Edinburgh, London and Bristol which resulted in us needing to find appropriate accommodation. This meant finding short-term rental options which are more difficult to find compared to longer term rental agreements. While the ESRC offered a reasonable stipend, the rental and transportation costs varied depending on the location of the placement.

It is important to note that we all had relative flexibility in terms of being able to freely move. Therefore the scheme might only be applicable and feasible for people that are without families, or other dependents, or for those living in close proximity to the location of the placement. Moreover, these opportunities are limited to ESRC funded students.

The length of the scheme varied between the placements. While both Jenny and Robin schemes lasted 6 months, Michael and Daniel's scheme both had a shorter duration of 3 months. This had implications on the overall experience and the ability to adapt to the new workplace environment. For instance, Daniel was unable to oversee the completion of a number of organized events which were planned to take place after the completion of his internship. In another example, Michael was working on particular legislation which was being passed through Parliament during his internship. The significance of the new laws which were subsequently passed was the focus of much of his work during the internship. He felt an involvement in the policy process was interesting and engaging, yet once the law had passed some of the momentum for the project had (unavoidably) dissipated. Ultimately the relatively short duration of the scheme meant that Michael and Daniel felt they were unable to gain the full benefits of the internship (Craig & Wikle, 2016). For Daniel, his responsibilities and workload began to diminish as it was deemed unsuitable for him to begin on new projects towards the final weeks of the internship. A longer duration would have allowed more time to adjust to the new role, to become fully integrated into

the workplace environment and to oversee the completion of the research and projects undertaken. This would not only be beneficial for the individuals' experience but also in terms of the organization gaining the most value out of their interns.

The transition back to working on our PhDs was not straightforward. It presented a number of practical issues one of which was the process of relocating and finding appropriate accommodation again. The scheme also meant coming back to the PhD after a considerable time away. On the one hand, this was seen positively as it allowed a period of time away from writing and from being fully immersed in the research process (Garey, Hertz, & Nelson, 2014). As most of us had begun writing up our theses by the time we participated in the internship scheme, this absence allowed us to step-back and it gave us time to reflect and to come back to the writing process afresh. However, it is worth acknowledging that we did feel upon returning that it was difficult to engage with the research straightaway and it took a period of time to transition back to the differing demands of academia. The absence also meant having to miss courses, events and conferences that were of relevance to our own research areas. These are practical issues that require consideration. Keeping up-to-date with research developments, maintaining contact with supervisors and planning your return from the internship scheme are recommended in order to alleviate some of these potential issues.

Application of research

A major objective of the ESRC is to fund research that has a degree of impact. The RCUK defines research impact as “the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to the society and the economy” (ESRC, 2014a). For the ESRC (2014b), the impact agenda is considered important as it endorses research that has clear benefits for society, demonstrating the importance of social science research. Moreover, impactful research is considered to have a number of benefits for the researcher. In order to achieve impact objectives – and as we note in our introduction – the ESRC and RCUK have previously offered CASE studentships (Demeritt & Lees, 2005). Students on these are exposed to the planning and application of research in both academic and a non-academic sectors, providing them with a potentially wider research skill set and impact profile than those not on collaborative schemes. As we have already outlined, postgraduates who are not on collaborative studentships often work on their projects alone, building narrower skill sets (Boyle, Foote, & Gilmartin, 2014) and do not necessarily see any impact from their research (Turner, 2014); notwithstanding efforts that are being made to address some of these concerns (Richardson, 2015). Furthermore, the ESRC internship scheme provides another route for postgraduates to experience, first hand, how research is applied in non-academic sectors. Here, we want to reflect on our experiences of producing and applying research in our respective internships. We are aware of Munro's (2016, p. 50) critique that:

We have arrived at a point where there is little room for a frank discussion of KE, because at a time of increasing pressure on academics to capture grant funding and to demonstrate success at KE and impact, the overwhelming tendency is to report back “success stories”.

Instead we have aimed to discuss the challenges as well as the rewards that arose from our internships and from our collective reflections on these experiences.

The speed and application of policy research

The process of writing a PhD thesis is often carried out over a relatively long time period, resulting in a lengthy approach to producing and applying research. For example, ESRC funded postgraduates generally have 3 years of funding and a 4-year time limit to submit their final thesis (ESRC, 2014c). Our transition, then, from PhD research to public and NGO research involved a temporal adjustment to our style and speed of work. The faster pace of the planning and production of research, compared to that in an academic setting, was noted by all of us. The expectation to execute research under very strict time frames was noticeably different to what we were used to in our academic environments. This was initially challenging, requiring a different style of working. However, over time, this transition to a faster style of research was also rewarding, as Robin suggests:

I found the speed of government research initially challenging. The planning, analysis and writing was carried out at far quicker pace than I was used to at University, but over time I found this to be both satisfying and rewarding. I feel it made me work more efficiently, and gave me more confidence in the work I was producing.

This sense of becoming more efficient and productive as a result of the demands of the internships was expressed by all of us. Moreover, seeing the outcomes and application of our work in relatively short time periods was especially rewarding and satisfying, as highlighted by Jenny:

At first it was hard to adapt to this pace, often wanting to write several drafts of work. However, over the duration the internship I enjoyed being able turn around work quicker, allowing me to have confidence in my own ability and seeing fruits of my labour.

The outcomes and application of our research ranged from published government reports, resources that are used by the police, social workers and the general public, and internal reports that fed into new policies. Seeing these outcomes, especially in relatively short periods, was not only satisfying, but also enhanced our confidence to produce high quality work in short time frames. This mode of written dissemination runs counter to recent calls within academia to undertake “slow scholarship” as an act of resistance to the pressurized demands of the neoliberal university (Mountz et al., 2015). While we do appreciate the sentiments that “good scholarship requires time” in the academic setting (Mountz et al., 2015 p3), the internship offered an insight into the realities of other settings where speed, efficiency and clarity were prioritized in written communication. We all feel that this has helped us to be more efficient and effective in the process of writing and at producing work to fixed deadlines as well as benefiting us in terms of how we approached writing up our PhD theses.

New avenues for the dissemination and application of research

Although the “impact agenda” endorses and promotes the dissemination of knowledge to diverse audiences (Pain et al., 2011), we all feel that prior to undertaking the internships our personal dissemination of research to non-academic audiences was fairly limited (although, for an exception, see Richardson, 2015). The internships, however, allowed us to experience new forms of research dissemination, impact and multi-sector networking. For Jenny, this was especially pertinent, as her role in an NGO involved working with a variety of sectors and disseminating research through multiple forms. For example, Jenny states:

I found that the internship enabled me to see the multiple ways that research can be disseminated. At times during my PhD I feel frustrated that academic research is often disseminated through conference papers and academic articles rather than reaching out beyond academia. However, the internship allowed me to see the range of ways that research can be disseminated: producing training resources, hosting public talks and helping to make short films.

Therefore, learning about new forms of dissemination, which aimed to reach a far wider audience than she was used to in academia, was an extremely positive aspect of Jenny's internship. Michael also had positive and rewarding experiences of working with new sectors and communities, as he asserted:

I gained more experience in working with people outside of the academic institutions and into the communities themselves. I have carried this aspect of my work into my personal research interests and teaching commitments.

Although Robin did not have direct contact with communities and sectors outside his internship, his work resulted in a published government report. As the report was aimed at many different sectors, he feels his research had a wide ranging impact which he found especially satisfying.

Ultimately, we all experienced a level of research "impact" that we had not experienced beforehand, demonstrating that research outside of academia is often produced at a faster pace and dissemination is often less institutionalized and accesses wider audiences. The impacts of this were very positive, engendering pride in our work and a sense that it was actually making an impact on society, which is something we often do not see with our academic research.

Conclusion

Our varied experiences of the ESRC internship scheme have facilitated shared skills enhancements and more specifically, a boost to our verbal, written and other communication skills that has enabled us to communicate effectively with diverse audiences. We contend that the collaborative and reflexive engagements we participated in as part of the process of writing this article have enabled us to provide a rich insight into our experiences of the internship scheme and the benefits of participating in it. Employing "everyday talk" (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) to reflect on experiences could usefully be employed by others in order to improve learning, teaching and research – and our participation in each of these – in human geography.

Participating in the ESRC internship scheme has enabled us to address issues which were missing – or only covered briefly – in current doctoral training provision. These opportunities have led to greater levels of engagement amongst all of us with research, policy and practice, and the relationships between these. We feel more engaged as researchers relative to our areas of expertise and to different stakeholders (our publics, policies and communities). We see our engagements as enabling us to develop new audiences and as publicly funded researchers we feel these are worthy and important pursuits. The internships have improved our sense of our research as more impactful and have demonstrated the significance of our research for society at large. Ultimately, our experiences of the internship scheme have also benefitted how we engage with and view our academic work and see the relationships between academic research and diverse non-academic audiences.

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