

University of Liverpool

PGR-Postdoc Buddy

Scheme – 2nd Round

Autumn 2024



Introduction

Following the success of the first round of the PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme in 2023 (itself based on the extremely successful RSA Buddy Scheme), the second round was launched by Researcher Development and Culture team in The Academy in September 2024.

The innovative PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme helps to enhance the experience of the University's postgraduate researchers (PGRs) by providing an opportunity for small groups of PGRs to meet each other and a postdoctoral researcher in an informal setting. By creating an inclusive research environment, the scheme helps to build a culture where all PGRs can reach their full potential and postdoctoral researchers can gain valuable skills for their career development and give back to the community.

The scheme enables University of Liverpool PGRs to meet their peers, engage in discussions about their doctoral programme and enrich their experience of the University's research culture in an informal setting. PGRs meet peers across all three faculties, build connections outside of their research teams and enhance their professional network. By being paired with a postdoc, insights of working as a researcher at University of Liverpool and how to make the most of their time here could be provided in an accessible and peer-friendly way.

For research staff the PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme provides an opportunity for self-reflection and to develop their own active listening and leadership skills. The scheme also provides research staff with evidence of supporting others, valuable for reporting in narrative CVs and during annual PDRs (logging the activity against Categories 1 'Supporting people' and 3b 'Supporting PGRs' using the University's new [Contributions Framework](#)).

The Process

The second round of the PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme was launched on Wednesday 11th September 2024, with the sign-up period lasting until Friday 27th September 2024.

Communications

Information about the scheme was provided on the Researcher Hub webpages in the PGR Development Network area: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/researcher/pgr-development-network/pgr-rsa-buddy-scheme/>. To raise awareness of the scheme a [staff news article](#) was published and a comms kit containing suggested email, newsletter and social media content was created and shared with communications and research-related staff in all three faculties and centrally. Calls of interest were also circulated in the RSA weekly e-bulletin, relaunched PGR DevNet emails and on the X accounts run by the Researcher Development and Culture team, RSA and PGR DevNet.

Registration and matching

Interested PGRs and postdocs were required to complete an application form consisting of information about their role and discipline, alongside a question about what they hoped to get out of the scheme. Both PGRs and postdocs were asked about their preferences: to be grouped with individuals from the same or different discipline, same or different stage of their PhD studies and whether they'd prefer to meet online or in-person.

Following the closing date, all registered PGRs and staff were checked for eligibility (3 prospective staff were ineligible as their roles were lecturer or above). Registered individuals were then assigned groups based first on their meeting format preference (online or in-person) and then based on their requests for same/different discipline and PhD stage, where possible.

All registered individuals were notified of their buddy groups on the 4th October 2024. The lead postdoc buddies were also provided with specific guidance for organising and leading the meetings at this point. Groups had three weeks to arrange and attend a 1-hour meeting.

The Participants

Seventy-two PGRs and 29 postdocs (plus 3 ineligible academics) applied to take part in round two of the PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme. This resulted in 19 in-person and 5 online buddy groups. Groups generally consisted of 3 PGRs and 1 postdoc, although 5 groups (4 in-person and 1 online) had 2 co-lead postdoc buddies.

Approximately half the participating PGRs were based in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (54%), with the rest evenly spread between the Faculties of Health and Life Sciences (24%) and Science and Engineering (22%; Table 1). In contrast, most postdoc participants were from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences (58%), with the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences and Science and Engineering represented by 14% and 28% of the postdoc participants respectively (Table 1).

The majority of PGR participants (40) self-assigned as being in the early stages of their studies (first year full time or second year part time), with participation reducing with stage (Table 1).

Table 1: Numbers of PGR and Postdoc participants in the 2024 PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme, split by Faculty and PhD stage (for PGRs).

Faculty	PhD Stage	Number of PGR Participants	Number of Postdoc Participants
Health and Life Sciences	Total	17	17
	Early Stage	12	
	Mid Stage	4	
	Late Stage	1	
Humanities and Social Sciences	Total	39	4
	Early Stage	18	
	Mid Stage	13	

	Late Stage	8	
Science and Engineering	Total	16	8
	Early Stage	10	
	Mid Stage	5	
	Late Stage	1	
Total		72	29

Most PGR participants expressed a preference for the PGRs they'd want to be grouped with (73%). Of those, 15% wanted to be grouped with a PGR from a different discipline and 85% with a PGR of the same discipline, whilst 29% wanted to be grouped with a PGR at a different stage of research as themselves and 71% with a PGR at the same stage of research as themselves. In contrast, 59% of postdocs didn't express a preference for being grouped with PGRs of the same or different discipline, whilst the remaining 41% asked to be grouped with a PGR related to their own discipline.

A minority of PGR participants (17%) were part of Doctoral Training Centre or Doctoral Training Partnership. 83% of the PGR participants were new to the PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme, whilst 17% took part in Round 1 in 2023. Similar trends were seen with the postdoc buddies, with 90% of the postdocs new to the scheme and 10% of the postdocs having acted as lead buddies in the Round 1.

Evaluation

On the 28th October, after a window of 3 weeks for the groups to meet, a brief evaluation form was sent to all participants to capture their experiences and feedback on the scheme for completion by 8th November. Only 13 PGRs responded (18% of the total number of PGR participants) compared to 15 postdocs who responded (51% of the total number of postdocs who took part).

Of the 28 individuals who responded, only 2 didn't meet with their buddy group in the allocated window of time. In both cases this was due to not being able to find a suitable time in the 3-week window that everyone could attend. Anecdotally, a few participants have reported that they subsequently met after the formal deadline of the 28th October. Of the meetings that were reported taking place, only 42% were reported as including all the group members. In two instances, multiple meetings were organised to include all members of the groups.

When meetings took place, 81% of the respondents reported that they met in-person, 15% reported that they met online and 1 respondent reported that their meeting had been hybrid to accommodate a PGR who wasn't on campus at the time. Meetings were predominantly arranged by either email (38%), polling programmes such as Doodle (15%) or a mixture of the two (38%). The remaining respondents reported their meetings being arranged via Teams and WhatsApp.

All the PGRs who reported meeting with their buddy groups rated the buddy scheme as 'Good' or 'Very Good', whilst postdoc ratings were spread between 'Fair', 'Good' and 'Very

Good’ (Figure 1). None of the respondent reported that their experience was ‘Poor’ or ‘Very Poor’.

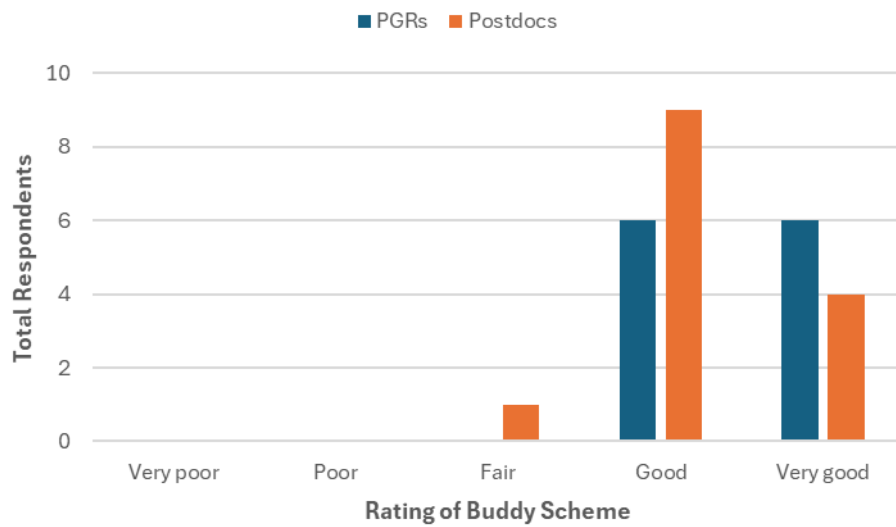


Figure 1: Ratings of PGR and Postdoc participants for the PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme 2024.

PGRs reported the benefits of being able to meet and chat with other PGRs and the helpful conversations they had with their postdoc lead buddies. For many PGRs their highlight was meeting with others outside of their field and with different experiences, which they felt was “fun and refreshing” to hear about different perspectives and experiences. Several PGRs mentioned continuing relationships beyond the scheme and creating a new network at the University.

Postdocs reported finding the meetings and discussions with PGRs to be enriching and inspirational, they enjoyed reflecting on their own experiences of studying for their doctorates, and reported getting positive feedback from PGRs after the meeting. Many of the postdocs specifically reported that the highlight of the scheme for them was being able to help PGRs by offering advice, reassurance and signposting to existing support services.

Both PGRs and postdocs reported having difficulties arranging their meetings in the allotted time window and expressed disappointment that not all group members were able to attend their meeting. Both PGRs and postdocs felt the scheme could be improved by having more than one meeting.

One of the postdoc lead buddies reported that their group being from different fields made it “harder for me as a lead buddy to offer proper guidance”. Another postdoc reported that two of the PGRs in their group had only just started their studies and therefore felt that the meeting was “too superficial and without significant help for them” (the timings of the buddy scheme application window was designed specifically to be before the majority of PGRs start their studies to avoid this, however it can’t be completely avoided since PGRs can start at different times).

The majority of both the PGR and postdoc respondents who attended a buddy group meeting intend to have a follow up group meeting (75% PGR respondents, 79% postdoc respondents), with the remainder unsure but open to the idea (25% PGR respondents, 21% postdoc respondents).

Two PGRs reported having two postdoc co-lead buddies in their groups and felt that the experience was positive (“it was nice, amazing, valuable”). Six of the postdoc respondents reported being in a group with a second postdoc co-lead buddy. Almost all of these postdocs reported the experience to be a positive one (“excellent idea”, “enjoyed working with them”, “nice balance... lots of time to discuss”). One postdoc felt that it “makes more sense to have just one lead-buddy”.

The majority of PGR and postdoc participants felt that their experience of the buddy scheme was what they expected (77% PGRs, 67% postdocs). One PGR reported that they were hoping for more interaction whilst the three postdocs who didn’t feel that the scheme met their expectations reported that they had expected more structure to the scheme, the scheme to be longer than one meeting and to be matched with PGRs in their field.

Only 1 PGR and 1 postdoc reported that they wouldn’t be interested in taking part in another. Of the respondents who would be interested in taking part in future buddy schemes, 9% of PGR respondents would be interested in PGR-only schemes, 50% of postdoc respondents would be interested in postdoc-only schemes, and 91% of PGRs and 50% of postdocs would be interested in participating in both types of buddy scheme.

The majority of the PGR respondents didn’t feel that a briefing session before the scheme would have been useful. The three respondents who did raised the points that a briefing session would have given PGRs things to think about in advance of their meeting and therefore could have helped them to make the most of their meetings. In contrast – and indicating the different responsibilities between the two buddy roles – two-thirds of the postdoc respondents felt like a briefing session would have been useful (%) and all except one found the resource sheet provided to them in advance of the scheme to be useful.

Looking ahead to Round 3 of the scheme in 2025, the main suggestions from respondents for improving the scheme include:

- Having more than one buddy group meeting, ideally at different times of the academic year
- Discussion topics and agendas for meetings provided in advance of meetings
- Some degree of accountability for PGRs who signed up to the scheme to then actually participate in the scheme
- Groups arranged to have individuals from the same discipline
- Other roles of staff leading the meetings (lecturers, professors, etc.) to provide a variety of experiences
- The registration form including questions about availability during the weeks when meetings are expected to take place
- Having a longer period of time for the meetings to take place in, 3 weeks was felt to be too short by some

Building an inclusive culture

Overall, the feedback about Round 2 of the PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme has been positive. Whilst there have been some suggestions for how to improve the scheme, almost all the participants reported their experiences being positive, confirmed by most of them being interested in participating in buddy schemes in the future. In particular, many participants mentioned benefiting from the diverse range of experiences that other PGRs and postdocs had, suggesting that the scheme helps create an inclusive culture at the University where different backgrounds are valued. Round 3 of the scheme is planned for autumn 2025 and the thoughtful comments and suggestions of those who took the time to complete the evaluation survey will be taken into consideration for next time.