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Supporting Future PhD Students: My Experience as a Widening Participation Fellow

Introduction: Why I Took On the Role

Hi everyone. I'm Lucy, and I'm currently in the second year of my NWCDTP-funded PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Salford. I'm also one of two Widening Participation Fellows for the NWCDTP (2024-2025).

I went to school in an area with low progression into further education. When I applied to my PhD, I had the support of academics from my BA and MA, as I was applying to the same institution. If that had not been the case, I would have had no one to ask for guidance. I know this is a common barrier many people from underrepresented groups. So I applied for the role as Widening Participation because I wanted to create materials that could help people who are thinking about applying for a PhD but don't know who to ask for help.

In this blog, I'll share the highlights of my year as Widening Participation Fellow and signpost you to where you can access the materials I've created.

Why Widening Participation in PhDs Matters

Widening Participation is a huge topic. It isn't possible in a short blog to cover all the systematic barriers that prevent people from accessing education. I will focus on the context of doctoral study, specifically in PhD applications.

If you're from an underrepresented group, as I said in the introduction, you might not have access to anyone who can help you in the application process. This is a huge problem, especially if you're hoping to secure funding. Funding is indeed very competitive, and if you don't have anyone to ask, you might not know what to write on the application form. This can be especially challenging if you've been out of education for a long time. It can be difficult to know how to translate the skills you've learnt outside of academia into a PhD application.

As someone who went to a school in an area with low progression into higher education, I've seen how it isn't just about bureaucratic hurdles. There are often silent challenges that don't get discussed. There are countless times where you question if you 'belong' in academic spaces. This is a personal note, based on anecdotal evidence, and not supported by any statistics, but I feel there likely are far more people who want to apply to funding like the NWCDTP, but simply don't. That might be because they aren't sure where to begin, or feel they don't 'belong'.

Developing the Podcast - 'PhD Application Stories'

As part of my Fellowship, I decided to create a podcast series. Based on my experienced applying for my PhD, I knew that a struggle for students from underrepresented groups was a lack of access to mentors in the application process. I thought that interviewing current PhD students on their application journeys would be a valuable source of information for people considering applying for a PhD. They could hear first-hand accounts of the application journey, as well as discover a bit more about the 'life' of PhD students before the PhD.

To create the podcasts, I recruited participants from institutions across the Northwest. I created questions designed to gear discussions on choosing a research topic, selecting a supervisor, different kinds of funding sources, and handling imposter syndrome. I wanted the tone of the conversations to be relatable, ensuring that any jargon be explained to listeners.

Creating and Publishing the Podcasts

Creating the podcasts was a lot more work than expected, but it was exciting! I would say the highlight of the podcast production was getting to work inside the studio in Media City (thanks to the University of Salford for letting me use the facilities). It was a great experience to have the podcasts recorded in a professional setting. It was a great help to have a studio manager to rely on recording and editing the podcast, ensuring I could focus on introducing the guests.

I don't have any acting or performing experience, and I must admit it's much harder than it seems to be interviewing people! Even though it wasn't recorded live, I felt a little nervous. Of course, there's also the question of getting used to the equipment, but overall, I'm pleased with the results.

One thing that did really stand out to me was listening to some of the guests discuss how they worked on their project with their prospective supervisors. It really shows that having a mentor or a guide can really help in this process. I hope that academics thinking of taking on PhD students also benefit from the recording, it could be a good thing for them to share with potential students before an initial meeting. There are plenty of other podcasts available too, such as the [PhD Life Raft](#) and the [PhD Life Coach](#).

Further Insights...

During my Fellowship, I had the opportunity to host a creative writing workshop. I enjoyed setting this up as it allowed me to think about how Widening Participation materials can be shared via different mediums. I'd love to continue building on this work in the future.

I also attended a UK wide AHRC EDI conference in February 2025. This was a wonderful learning event. I co-wrote a blog on this event titled '[Event wrap-up: AHRC wide PhD EDI conference and networking](#)'.

Finally, I'm looking forward to be attending the neurodiversity training the NWCDTP is offering to its students. I'm looking to deepen my understanding of different learning styles and needs. I believe this will help me create more inclusive resources in the future.

Where to Access the Podcasts?

If you'd like to access the podcasts, you can do so on the [University of Salford's Figshare repository](#).

['PhD Application Stories' - Listen to Marta's PhD application story](#)

Marta is a NWCDTP PhD student in Archaeology at the University of Manchester. She is from Italy; she did her BA and MA in Ancient Near East Archaeology at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza'.

Afterwards, she moved to Manchester in September 2021 to start her PhD. Her project aims to reconstruct the organization of pottery production during the third millennium in southern Mesopotamia (Iraq) with a focus on identifying recurrent gestures that characterize the production of specific standard vessel shapes and/or distinguish between production set-ups over time.

The research applies an interdisciplinary approach that combines macroscopic, radiographic, and experimental analyses. Furthermore, she has been working in southern Iraq since 2015 and this has allowed her to personally collect ceramic material for her research.

During her PhD, she has been teaching to undergraduate students which really contributed to develop her academic skills and enhance her experience in academia.

['PhD Application Stories' - Listen to Robin's PhD application story](#)

Robin Ramsey is currently in her second year of a PhD in English Literature at the University of Salford. Her research for her thesis is examining the role of metatextuality and self-referential fiction in detective stories produced in Britain between the First and Second World Wars, with a special interest in the lives and works of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Anthony Berkeley.

['PhD Application Stories' - Listen to Ethan's PhD application story](#)

Ethan is a PhD candidate in Classics and Ancient History at the University of Liverpool. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, his research examines the nature of land warfare in ancient Ionia and Lycia (two case study regions in modern day Türkiye) to

offer a cross comparison with the popular hoplite infantryman of ancient Greece, thereby joining a new academic movement which seeks to situate the origin and development of hoplite warfare within its broader Mediterranean context. He is also a member of the Milesian Tales research group, a student representative for the NWCDTP, and has recently completed work with the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds.

['PhD Application Stories' - Listen to Lauren's PhD application story.](#)

Lauren is a self-funded PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Salford. She comes from a low-income background and an area where participation in higher education is low. She achieved a BA (Hons) in English Literature from the University of Salford as a mature and first-generation student. She then earned an MA in English Literature and American Studies from the University of Manchester, a Russell Group university. Lauren is a mother, neurodivergent, and has a complex disability, which all impact her ability to maintain a normal schedule; she studies for her PhD on a full-time but flexible basis which works for her. Her PhD explores intersections between women's religious writing and the activities of radical Puritan sects in the mid-seventeenth century. She has spoken at Harvard Divinity School on seventeenth-century poetry and sermons in manuscript and has written on antinomianism, metatheatricality, and proto-sentimentalism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature.

Lucy, Widening Participation Fellow (2024-2025)
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