BioNews Internships – developing researchers in science journalism

The project brief

PGRs were invited and supported to apply for Progress Educational Trust internships, an opportunity for research students interested in science communication to gain practical news writing experience, under expert supervision, through BioNews internships. Following initial training, interns were expected to research and write one BioNews story each week. This was edited by the BioNews staff before publication and detailed written feedback provided.

Key impacts

Participants:
- Intense and valuable training on the skills and techniques of writing for a public audience
- An appreciation of the lifestyle / day-to-day duties and deadlines of a science communicator and a refined career plan
- A foot in the door – experience of writing commissioned pieces and the portfolio of articles as evidence
- Networking opportunity in the industry

BioNews:
- The opportunity to work with TUOS PGRs, which by default raised our graduate profile with that employer.
- An understanding of the time pressure challenges PGRs face and a better understanding of the work patterns of PGRs i.e. don’t advertise over the Christmas break

Project leader:
- An appreciation of the graduate internship landscape and the recent developments in national legislation preventing unpaid internships.
- Generation of ideas about how placements could work remotely.
- An appreciation of the high number of people expressing an interest in such an opportunity and how this translated into a very low number of actual applicants

Outcomes observed

The two students have been engaged to give talks about their experience (e.g. The University’s Coffee & Careers series) to other researchers considering a science communication career. Following the internships both were invited to continue writing for BioNews as volunteers.
The legacy

The project’s outputs have generated learning and ideas for future developments:

- An approach combining face-to-face and distance learning can work in practice, the students appreciated meeting the people in question and also that they were able to complete the work without travelling.
- Articles of high interest could be showcased on the University news pages pertaining to impact/public engagement. This would help departments in raising their external profile as well as providing real life opportunities for researchers to put their learning into practice and build a portfolio of evidence.
- An idea for how this could be achieved internally, using existing expertise at TUOS and free blogging software. After attending the public engagement / science writing / media workshops organised by the Researcher Development Managers, Doctoral Development Programme (DDP) participants could be competitively engaged over several weeks to promote TUoS research news stories. Guidance / feedback on writing style could come from the internal communications teams, faculty communications teams, the media centre or be outsourced.

Enterprise

- Students were proactive in responding to advertised opportunities
- Placements were awarded competitively
- Students organised their own travel / timescales and negotiated with external partners
- Students presented work for the public raising the profile of TUoS PGRs

Innovation

This has informed thinking on how an in-house version could be supported by tapping in to existing expertise at the University of Sheffield.

Quotes and personal experience

"It has given me a much broader insight into job opportunities and the importance of making research findings publically available."

"Along with a colleague, we plan to start a blog for our department containing posts aimed at a lay audience."

"It also taught me to think more about the agenda behind pieces of writing."

"I would definitely recommend this, especially if you are wondering whether to do science journalism."

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