

University of Leeds

Research Culture Awards 2021-22

Application Form

Please email nominations/self-nominations using this form to Holly Ingram
H.L.Ingram@leeds.ac.uk by Wednesday June 1st, 5pm

Information section

This section covers information about the lead applicant and the team as well as the chosen category of award. Expand the sections as necessary. The maximum number of people in a team is set to 10 for event planning and personal prize budgeting purposes.

1. Select the nomination type
 - Self-nomination

2. Lead applicant and team

Provide details about the applicant and the team (including external partners if applicable), and their contribution to the initiative. The lead applicant will be the contact person for the management of the award application.

Lead applicant name: Francis K. Poitier

Lead applicant contributor role: Co-Organizer

Lead applicant Service or School / Faculty: School of Medicine, Leeds Institute of Health Science (LIHS)

Lead applicant role/post: Postgraduate Researcher / Teaching Fellow

Lead applicant career stage: ECR

Team member name (include lead applicant)	Contributor role	School/Service/external organisation + role/post	If member deserves special mention, state reason (optional)
Francis Poitier	Co-Organizer	School of Medicine, LIHS Postgraduate Researcher	
Anam Ayaz-Shah	Co-Organizer	School of Medicine, LIHS Postgraduate Researcher	
William Goodman	Co-Organizer	School of Medicine, LIHS Postgraduate Researcher	
Nichola Jones	Co-Organizer	School of Medicine, LIHS Postgraduate Researcher	
Maisie Martland	Co-Organizer	School of Medicine, LIHS Postgraduate Researcher	
LIHS PGR Representatives	Co-Organizers	School of Medicine, LIHS Postgraduate Researcher	
Rebecca Beeken	Faculty Support	School of Medicine	

		Lead for Postgraduate Research	
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3. Select the award category that best fits the research culture activity:

- A collegiate and supportive environment

Case for Award

1. Title

PhD Discussion Community (“DISCO”)

2. Summary

PhD DISCOs create a vibrant and bespoke forum for Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) at the Leeds Institute of Health Sciences (LIHS). PGRs lead unique research projects but are often alone to face the challenges that come with conducting innovative research. DISCOs seek to address this issue by providing space for mutual support, skills development, output opportunities and scholarly conversations in a learning environment. DISCOs are organised by PGR Representatives who regularly obtain input from PGRs to ensure topics are responsive to their needs and well-being.

3. Why?

The research culture is a challenge in the LIHS and more widely in the university. DISCOs seek to promote a more positive culture by providing the chance for PGRs to freely explore ideas, make mistakes and learn from them, and share good practices. They have a strong ethos of collaboration and are at the forefront of promoting open research in LIHS. They provide a space for PGRs to come together to learn about and discuss topics relevant to the PGR experience (e.g. conversations on research, thesis examination during a pandemic, etc.).

PGRs lead unique research projects which contribute to knowledge and scholarship. The unique nature of these projects, however, also come with the challenge of feeling alone in problems that arise. These feelings of isolation were exacerbated during lockdowns, due to COVID-19, when PGRs did not have access to the physical campus. Challenges vary and can include administrative questions, methodological challenges, managing supervisors, balancing family life or even trying to figure out how best to name files – and their multiple versions. While there are a wealth of other resources available, oftentimes they are not known, do not address the unique experiences of PGRs or are not explained in ways that can be easily understood. DISCOs address these challenges by giving space to questions – large and small – in a supportive environment of mutual peer support.

4. What?

DISCOs take various forms, depending on the theme of the session. Previous DISCO activities have included presentations from PGRs on their research projects, seminars from early career researchers on their PhD experiences, hands-on skills development – such as learning R and map making, and conversations with examiners about top tips and advice for theses and vivas. Sessions typically last an hour. Most activities are led by PGRs to provide an opportunity for outputs. Some sessions, however, include guests – including those from outside of the University of Leeds.

5. How?

DISCOs nurture a supportive environment where no question is too small. DISCOs have three main objectives: (a) to support PGRs in their personal and professional development; (b) to provide PGRs with a platform to showcase and receive feedback on their research in a supportive environment; (c) to increase the visibility of PGRs and their work to the wider faculty. DISCOs have impacted the research culture in LIHS by incorporating ideas and common questions from current PGRs, which increases its impact and appeal. We hope to build on this success by continuing to organise sessions that are responsive to the emerging challenges of being a PGR (during COVID-19 and otherwise) and reflecting the strengths and innovations of the PGR community.

6. So what?

DISCOs have attracted the attention of early career researchers, PGR Research Leads and senior academics. The initiative has been applauded for improving the PGR experience in the Institute and promoting open research. PGRs remark that DISCOs have been timely and excellently organised. DISCOs are well attended and in demand from PGRs at all stages of their candidature. PGRs relied on DISCOs, especially, during lockdowns to connect with the community. This proved that the concept is both flexible and relevant. They have provided opportunities to interact with not just other PGRs, but the wider academic community, to understand how the university works (e.g. the university finance procedures, and ethics processes). They have also raised the profile of PGRs within LIHS through dynamic sessions that promote current research and innovative solutions to the modern challenges of the postgraduate experience.

7. What next?

DISCOs are bespoke based on the needs of the PGR community at the time. Some sessions (e.g. conversations with examiners), however, have been in demand for multiple years and have proven successful. Plans, therefore, include developing a set of core DISCOs that could take place annually. DISCOs have also proven popular outside of the Institute, with PGRs from other groups also attending. The initiative can therefore be extended to include some activities with other PGR groups in other departments and Schools. These plans require additional resources, recognition and continued support from faculty members. These are especially important during transition periods when the organisers of DISCOs handover responsibility.

8. What challenges did you have in planning/organising/running/evaluating your initiative and how did you overcome these?

There are two main challenges. First, DISCOs are organised by a team of PGRs. The team balances the work that is involved with the organisation, however, the team evolves as PGRs graduate or leave for fieldwork (often in other countries). To address this, the team includes PGRs at various stages to ensure that there is some transition and institutional knowledge. These transitions, while a challenge, help to ensure DISCOs are fresh, creative and relevant to the current cohort. Second, scholars/speakers with specialised knowledge are sometimes needed to respond to PGRs' needs. This requires sharing the purpose of DISCOs with these scholars and balancing their availability. Nonetheless, this also broadens the network of available resources for PGRs.

9. Was there something particularly innovative/creative about your initiative?

PGRs are busy with multiple priorities – which is a challenge to get their buy-in for another responsibility on their calendars. To pre-empt this challenge, DISCOs are bespoke and arise from the needs/wants of the community. Sessions are driven by their input (and outputs) with topics and practical activities that advance their personal and professional development. During COVID-19 lockdowns, DISCOs were quickly able to transition to virtual formats using innovative online tools to engage with PGRs in their various physical locations.

10. What makes your activity a notable example of culture change?

DISCOs have nurtured an environment of mutual support that is now beyond the sessions themselves. PGRs now know about each other's projects and where each other is on their PhD journey. This has created a bubble of support that is altruistic and close-knit. We are especially proud that sessions are always well attended and in demand.