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Speaker 1 [00:00:03] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:00:22] Hello. Welcome to the post-graduate podcast at the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture. I'm Dr. Suk-Jun Kim, school director of the postgraduate research at the University of Aberdeen. So this is our very first episode of the PGR podcast, and I am excited to start our series by inviting Matthew Lee and Samuel Weaver to the programme. Hi, both.

Matthew Lee [00:00:49] Hi, Jun.

Samuel Weaver [00:00:50] Hello.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:00:51] So I guess you two must be so important that you are the first guests to our series. Could you perhaps introduce to us who you are and what your role is our PGR community?

Samuel Weaver [00:01:07] Well, Matthew, I think you have seniority over me, so I'll let you go first.

Matthew Lee [00:01:13] I'm not sure if anybody is a senior to anyone else, but go for more an egalitarian approach, but anyway. I'm Matthew. I'm a fourth year PhD student now and the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture and being a postgraduate Rep for about a year. And basically in that role, I am kind of a first port of call if students want to raise an issue that they've got and they feel that we could flag up with our teaching staff and also help to run and organise the postgraduate forum, which is basically just an informal space, both literal and figurative. And the students to come together and socialise and share research and just kind of build that community.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:01:59] Excellent, So, Samuel, you are starting your role as the PGE rep from this academic year, right?

Samuel Weaver [00:02:11] Yes, This is my third year of my Ph.D. and I'm an English Ph.D., studying in particular Renaissance literature, and I want to reiterate what Matthew said. I'm eager to engage in a very supportive role for PGR students because I have actually used the support structure here at the university and benefited from reps and students for myself. And I want to enable other students to use that if they need it and if it benefits them in their course.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:03:11] Excellent. So. Before we get into the details of, you know, the PGA representatives' role and the PGA community and or other a bunch of other questions and topics that we will discuss. I think, it's good to know a little bit more about yourself. So who are you? And maybe a bit of a background about yourself before you started your journey to your study? I don't know. Maybe, Matthew, you can go first.

Matthew Lee [00:03:45] Yes, so one of the things I realised about the journey towards doing and finishing it is that no two journeys are the same. And I there's a diversity in terms of the paths that people take to becoming a PhD student. For my part, I mean, I went to University of Strathclyde in 2006 to 2010 for a history degree and started working for MPs and MSPs in 2012. I went to London and worked in House of Commons. And then after that, I got involved in the private sector doing public affairs roles. Got to about five

years into living in London and realised that it was starting to wear a little bit thin and had a bit of an itch that I'd wanted to scratch about doing a Phd, a kind of started making some steps towards it sort of finish my undergrad, but decided against it in the end. But as I say, I had this edge that I kept wanting to scratch, and one day I just kind of decided that I don't do it now. I'm never going to do it at all. So I moved back home in February 2017, back to Glasgow, and then September 2017 started a master's course in Scottish History University of Glasgow with the view with a view to doing a PhD and kind of wasn't totally sure about what I would focus on, but I knew I wanted to stay and just happened to be in a seminar one day and we were talking about the Scottish Enlightenment. Towards the end of the seminar, we started talking about new research in the Enlightenment and different views on spatial with it in terms of its relationship to colonialism and race and things like that. And I got interested in it just sounded like a fascinating topic and delved into the whole world of Scotland in the slave trade. And then from there, I've not really stopped, and I've been researching Scotland's historic connections to the slave trade and slavery in the Caribbean ever since. And that's kind of what I'm doing my PhD on, looking at the literary aspects of that relationship. So I suppose again, just to reiterate, there's no one straightforward path to becoming a Ph.D. student. I think one of the strengths of our school is that the student body is diverse and brings a whole different range of experiences and perspectives.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:05:55] Wow, that's amazing. So you have had a kind of a completely different life before you started your PhD life, I guess.

Matthew Lee [00:06:06] Yeah, I suppose you're right about that. I kind of have a pre and post life, if you like. And but I think actually and this is something that prospective students should think about as we're always going to. What shows do you have already to fit into the Ph.D.? So I'd already been working as a researcher and things like that, so I can add basic research and communication skills under my belt. I've also developed them as I've been on the PhD journey to actually, I was able to do with take professional skills and life skills from my life. So I think there's also so great connections and things like that, and these are kind of mutually supporting you

Suk-Jun Kim [00:06:51] So, Samuel, how about you? Do you have, like, interesting pre-PGR life before you joined us?

Samuel Weaver [00:07:02] Yeah, I actually very much agree with Matthew that there's so many different paths to take and it's not actually necessary to go, you know, to university and do your undergrad and then your, you know, MA or however it's done and then your Ph.D. because I didn't I did that straight out of college. I took a gap year and then I went to university to do Classics. And then I actually dropped out halfway through the first year and went to work in primary health care. And so I worked in the NHS for a few years.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:07:50] Oh, really? I didn't know that.

Samuel Weaver [00:07:52] And then I worked. I did some social care. And then after I wound some of that, I I said kind of like Matthew said about, if I don't do it now, I'm never going to do it. But I said that about my undergraduate years and I did well in my undergraduate years. And then I went on to do my M.A. and then I actually took another year out and I was actually doing a house-sit up here randomly in Aberdeenshire. And I came to I decided to research who was interested in the subject I was interested in at Aberdeen University, and I found someone, my primary supervisor and I decided to visit

her whilst I was here. And everything just evolved from then. And so what I would say is that it's for anyone. So I came as a mature student, it's really never too late

Suk-Jun Kim [00:08:55] That is quite interesting. So I guess, that makes three of us kind of similar, although, you know, each of us has had a different path, but I, myself and I may have mentioned this to you in another occasion. But I also started my Ph.D. quite at a later stage. So I think that this kind of journey and I think both of you kind of highlighted that, often many PDR students, they start to do this study not directly from, say, undergraduate and masters' study. I have seen some who do that, but often how many students have taken a year or two years for doing something different? And then perhaps the during those times, you can regain your passion, I guess, or maybe find something that takes you and then that

Samuel Weaver [00:09:55] you might think, as Matthew said, he had a lot of experience in, you know, sort of politics and sort of, you know, high level stuff. And it gives you that sort of, a little bit level of life experience and maturity to bring something to whatever your research interest is. And that's not to take anything away from people that go straight through every year. And just I'm just saying that it's fascinating to see how many people can become involved with studies and producing and original knowledge and from levels of experience they gain from having had jobs and roles in the world before they before.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:10:55] yes, I agree. It's so good to hear your background just before you start your journey. AND I believe you two are kind of the final stage of your PhD study, aren't you? I know that, Matthew, you are in your third and final year and same goes Samuel for you as well?

Samuel Weaver [00:11:22] I am a third year.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:11:23] you are the third year and Matthew, you are also the third year, isn't it?

Matthew Lee [00:11:28] I've slipped into a fourth year and because part of my funding involves doing what placements, so it was always going to be three years, six months and then this thing called the top end, so I can be finished by next spring or summer.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:11:46] Let's talk about the journey to the postgraduate research and along the way, you know, this peculiar life called the PGR Life,

Matthew Lee [00:11:59] I suppose before I got to start the Ph.D., there was the application process, which is maybe worth thinking about as well. I suppose they can have a normal in inverted commas route into an arts or humanities funded PhD is that person gets a jam of an idea but are talking that interest. Then they kind of go off and they find some prospective supervisor as they talk to them, they work up a funding proposal they submitted to funding body like the Arts and Humanities Research Council. And you go through all the various internal competitions and then, you know, the external bit of the competition and you either get or don't get funding, maybe the slightly back to front. And that, although funded by the AHRC, is a collaboration between the university and the National Library of Scotland. So my supervisors, both at the university and the analysis, had already devised the project about Scottish trade and slavery and then an not looking for someone. So I was kind of presented with a pre-packaged project and interviewed and succeeded. So in some respects that the cart was before the horse. I suppose that goes back to the point that Samuel and I made earlier, that there was no one path towards

doing a Ph.D. and actually this kind of collaborative where it is becoming more common in terms of the actual journey itself. Going on day one, certainly, I got beat by a kind of blank page dread because you're kind of sitting here and going, I need to write 80,000 to 100,000 words, how on earth am I going to do this? I think actually it's the kind of all that easier, but had an elephant piece by piece and to some extent, you just have to start somewhere. And in conversation with my supervisor, I was kind of expecting to do, you know, have to go over and read and read and read for six months, at eight months or something like that and absolutely bash myself and every last thought and comma. But the more we were talking, the more we decided, let's just start. Just pick a text that you want to talk about and just read it can read around it. You start writing about it. So actually, my journey has been kind of iterative. I've kind of learnt by doing learnt on the way so I can start at the beginning and it's kind of developed a draught and then going back over it. So it kind of took me, you know, two or three years to get to a point where I had more or less of my draft chapter done. And no, really. And the fourth year is just about refining it. But, you know, in terms of the twists and turns along this path, there's always going to be there's always going to be and kind of challenges, intellectual challenges, logistical challenges, having to move around or not. Be quite sure how to move the project on. And sometimes it feels like, oh my feeling that they're somehow doing it properly. But again, I actually tend to find that when you talk to people, everybody experiences those things and you're not alone in that experience. And there is a kind of support of network at the University of Aberdeen to help you with that. So again, just to reiterate, I think we all know what by doing and learning on the job. And I've kind of enjoyed that kind of process. And I feel that in over the last three or four years, my work has also improved and I've definitely noticed myself develop intellectually and in other ways as well. So the PGR experience for me has been on the whole point.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:15:11] Yeah. What about you, Samuel?

Samuel Weaver [00:15:14] On the last point now, I think it's been a mainly positive experience, but again, back to the different pathways. I actually applied for the AHRC and didn't get it, but based on my application, I was offered another studentship that was through the university, so I found that very beneficial. It's very bizarre how you can come to different ways of making sort of your life viable at different times. But I think one of the key things I want to say again is that I think the University of Aberdeen, of all the universities you know I've been to has been to, probably one of the best us making sure that, and especially with the pandemic, that you are sort of supported while you're here. And if there's any difficulties that you might face, whether financially or you have health or anything like that, they've been absolutely great. So I encourage anyone who's considering getting a PGR course here to do it. And because you know that there's always going to be that support for you. In terms of my journey, it was quite difficult over the period of the of the pandemic, because I moved up to Aberdeen just as the pandemic happened and I thought I was going to move up here, I'm going to move up here and become a greater part of the PGR community. That's why I moved up really, and that's why I want to take on this role to help other people become a part of that and have a greater and much greater sort of role with Societies and things and things like that. But it was just we were just unable. Everyone was unable to do it. And I find that sort of very difficult over the past 18 months. But if I can in any way through this role, help other people to have a very successful time here and enjoyable time, then that's what I want to do. You know,

Suk-Jun Kim [00:17:51] I try to pick up on what Matthew mentioned that the process of a PGA research project. So it's never a step by step process, isn't it? So because although I from the university point of view and or all of those six months monitoring process and

annual review process, all of these the review process kind of promoting the students to continue their PGR research project, going step by step, you know, but in many cases, it's not. It's not working that way. So you know, as you Matthew mentioned, like the writing of the first chapter at satisfactory level, you had to wait and do and you are very vigilant and then persistent for a year or two years finally to get there, isn't it, so that the sense of iteration? And you know, in maybe believing in yourself and believing in the project and also believing in your supervisors and their feedback?

Samuel Weaver [00:19:14] I actually think that it takes two years to get that first chapter one rather than sorry, rather than one year. Yeah, because you've got to have that back and forth with your supervisor and establish that relationship. And I think that's really important to have a really good relationship with your supervisor.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:19:38] So speaking which, because that's actually set a nice backdrop for the next question. So we all know that even though those who are thinking about doing a Ph.D., they also know that building a good relationship with your supervisor is the most important. But how can one do it? How do you how build a good relationship with your supervisor? How have you done from your end?

Samuel Weaver [00:20:12] Matthew, you go first.

Matthew Lee [00:20:15] Sorry.

Samuel Weaver [00:20:16] and so obviously

Matthew Lee [00:20:18] I mentioned, there were I didn't know my supervisors before I started my journey. I responded to effectively a job advert and went for an interview with people from the national library and from the university on the panel. And so I can have for the horse because they kind of normal way of doing it. Inverted commas as you go and saying, yeah, you should provide and you build up a rapport that way. So I suppose I was coming out little bit cold when I started. I think what you have to do is just, speak to them with an open mind. Try to take on the feedback that they give you. Bear in mind that they're not necessarily your boss, per se, that they're there to advise you and to help you, but definitely to take on board what they see and try to solve and reap the rewards or reap the benefits of their experience, given that they have done it. They have written books, articles, so on. So I think that's the first step. So just trusting that your supervisors got the experience and the knowledge and expertise to help you. I think also just being enthusiastic and trying to be proactive and develop that rapport. If you see something that they think they might be interested in. Reading just dropped my quick email and say, I saw this and thought of you the way all things that we do to build up relationships in any walk of life and be a job, be in a kind of social context. And I bet by the PhD itself, I think that relationship with the supervisor is iterative. And my own experience, I have actually got four supervisors in total because of the way the funding is set up. I've got two university supervisors and two library supervisors, so I've actually kind of benefited from that and that these four people have got quite different experiences. So I've got a literature specialist, someone who's actually historian by trade, but it is in our school on the library side, someone who has a Ph.D., a kind of interdisciplinary history and in Scottish literature, who's a manuscript curator by trade and another supervisor who's an expert in rare books. So I've actually been able to kind of lean on different people at different times and use their experiences so that that's been really positive for me. And I think that's in some extent quite unusual in that often a secondary supervisor, if you can just be there for bureaucratic purposes or maybe will drop in occasionally and offer some different

perspectives. But I've been quite lucky in that my two university supervisors can have worked with me in tandem and I feel really strengthened the work overall.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:22:53] Yeah, that's actually very good advice you gave us. Also in your case, it's somewhat peculiar and different from maybe many other PGR students, especially in the arts and humanities, unlike in the science disciplines, where projects are already set and the funding is already implemented and they are looking for the doctoral students who can work with their already developed the project. So io your case was something like that, isn't it? So they already had a project. They already set up the whole supervisory teams and partners. And you're being interviewed, being part of the project that that has already been said. That's a quite interesting way to start the study, and I'm sure that working with the four different, you said, four supervisors, you know, to take stock of their feedback. Sometimes their feedback might be coherent and in other times it might be slightly different. So, you know, negotiating and then fully understanding their feedback from their context that must be quite difficult thing to do.

Matthew Lee [00:24:16] I have been lucky overall. There's not been any massive disagreement between one set of supervisors and the other or one particular supervisor and the other. Everybody kind of works quite coherently as a team, and we do have to make sure that we have meetings kind of once or twice a year with everybody there so that we can kind of just take stock and work out where we're at. And so I think it is a kind of an interesting and sometimes it can be a little bit challenging trying to kind of reconcile slightly different pieces of feedback. But I think also if you think about making yourself ready for the job market, and I don't just mean necessarily the academic job market, but job market generally, if you can go to a prospective employer and say, I've got a great team working skills, here's an example I've had four different PhD supervisors made to negotiate those different relationships, then that's a really tangible example of how you can deal with people on a day to day basis. So again, I think there's kind of mutually reinforcing aspects between a PGR journey and potentially a journey outside of academia and employment. And because just as there's no one path into a PGR, there's no one destination after you've finished doing your Ph.D.. So I think it's important to bear in mind that you're building up skills that can be applied in lots of different domains.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:25:37] So what about you, Samuel, do you have any advice for the PDR students who are starting?

Samuel Weaver [00:25:43] Definitely, I think, speak to them regularly, of course, just in general, even if you haven't produced any work, just. Engage with them and then sort of think of reasons why you're struggling with the proposal that you produced, but my greatest error mistake that I regret from it, that I always continue to work on is this I very much value the opinion of my supervisors very highly. And so sometimes I wouldn't turn things every two weeks because I didn't want them to judge me for what I thought of myself as being poor material. And so I would say to myself, I'm not going to do this and I'm going to do another two weeks on it and then try and turn it in after that. And they both actually they didn't care about that. It was I who was caring about that as much. And if you do that, you end up getting yourself into a situation where you're not getting you might not be getting enough feedback or going in the right direction. And that's quite an open way of putting it. But genuinely, that's how I feel that it was. It's a mistake not to do that, and I still do worry about and feel embarrassed about the material that I produce. But if you don't turn anything in regularly and get that negative feedback so you can improve on it, then you're never going to get anywhere. So the one thing I would say to people coming in the

first year is just turn something in because they don't care. They if it's good or bad, they just want to show you how to improve.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:27:49] Yes, that doesn't necessarily mean that they don't care, but they care. Of course,

Samuel Weaver [00:27:53] That's right. I didn't mean that. Yes, I mean, they'd want you to try to go through the process and carry on doing it.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:28:05] But yes, but I think there were some you mentioned are extremely important. The most frustrating things that I had experienced from my students is when they don't communicate. All the supervisors have been through that process. So we all and they all understand how one can be self-critical and how that can be really hurting themselves. So, you know, but if the persons, if they do not communicate, even just saying simply, you know, email me, and saying that I'm struggling and I think I'm struggling in this and this and this, even if those are what you can say like stupid things to say. Having a conversation is way better than not having any. So they're leaving, leaving supervisors in the dark.

Samuel Weaver [00:29:06] Well, Jun, that's why I said it and that's why I'm trying to be so open in this conversation, is because that was part of the mistake I made in my first year and I'm getting much, much better at it, at it over the years. But it would be the thing that I would say to a new Ph.D. student come in feeling maybe a little bit anxious about the work is just talk to your supervisor. I feel very, very lucky to have two of the best supervisors who will always communicate with me. So, you know, I feel very, very lucky.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:29:41] OK, the next question is what was the most difficult part of and also what was the most satisfying part of being a postgraduate student?

Matthew Lee [00:29:54] I think the most difficult part of it is probably for me anyway is probably how self-starting you have to, to make a Ph.D. work. Ultimately, the only person who's going to finish writing the thesis is the student themselves, that requires to iron their discipline to, nobody can back you to do it really to every get up and at least do something towards the PhD. It doesn't have to be that you sit and write 2000 words every day. Might be that you read a journal article. It may be that you respond to some pressing emails, but whatever happens to be, I think that kind of long weary of having to everyday kind of see what we're doing today, do anything get done and then going and doing it and can be quite trying at times. And so I think it's important that people are willing to give themselves a break occasionally to take a bit of time off, take a bit of stock, replenish the batteries and then go again because it's not unlike, say, a masters, for example, or taught masters specifically in the UK where you are doing it in one year. That's about a very intense spread just getting through it and just kind of wading through that. A huge amount of work. Whereas PhD is much more like a marathon. And it's that kind of slow burn and it's been able to motivate yourself over that long three or four, maybe even five years to get yourself to a point where you're ready to submit and to complete. In terms of what's more satisfying. I think just seeing that the development and myself in terms of my intellectual skills, my communication skills, my writing skills, the relationships that I managed to develop with other students, especially members of staff in the department and other parts of the university and kind of coming in from scratch kind of thing, not knowing anybody from either monotony, knowing me and being able to develop a kind of a network and throughout relationships with people, that has been really gratifying. I've definitely made

some friends along the way and found people that I would consider kind of mentors and things like that. So that's been a really satisfying aspect so far.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:32:20] Right. So I think I met you mentioned the, you know, some you know, this one: be disciplined and there's some kind of some kind of a work habit that you listed below that work habit and just go hand in hand with the habit of resting yourself, take a good rest as well. So I think there's a quite important element.

Samuel Weaver [00:32:41] I've often felt that I lack that discipline or I've worked for. An excessive amount of hours, one week and then not done enough. The other week over the the lockdown period and it hasn't been as structured as I would have liked it to have been. And I think that can be difficult because it's very much a sort of an up and down kind of mentality situation. And I don't think it's necessarily always conducive to being successful. So and that's why I think having a rapport, having this PGR society is good because it can help in creating that little bit of structure just to make sure that you get things done in a structured way, that is not detrimental because I think there are some ways to work that are positive, but there are some ways to work that they can be quite destructive.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:33:56] Yeah, yeah. So I think that you know, having a really good relationship with your supervisors and getting the best support from your supervisor, that's really important. But that's not the only thing that you need, that you actually need a community to get right to the PGR community where you can get help and support. I think in that regard. You know, the role of postgraduate representatives might be quite important. So currently, what are your plans for our PGR community to help promote their own, you know, successful life as PDR students?

Matthew Lee [00:34:42] I mean, in terms of how the forum has worked in the past, when I first started there at the university, it was very focussed on research papers. People would come along and share what they've been doing and the past, and people would ask them questions, and it tended to come start in there. More recently, the previous PG reps had changed things a little bit and made it much more informal and a bit more social, I would say. And obviously, the pandemic curtailed the work that so last year we hosted everything on teams and really they were just informal get togethers. So I think in broad terms, the basic plan is to try and do as much in-person stuff as we can to try and make it social as we can and to try to make it as interesting and varied as we can. But ultimately, as students want us to do something else, then you know they are both effectively. We are there to reflect what their priorities are and what their views are. So it's up to the students themselves to try this thing and we'll do as we ask.

Suk-Jun Kim [00:35:46] Lovely. Thanks, Matthew, and so many for taking your time to talk to us. So this concludes our first episode of the PGR podcast. We'll come back with another episode in due course. See you then. Bye!

Speaker 1 [00:36:19] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.