DTA3 IMPACT REPORT

2019-2023

UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 801604

INTRODUCTION

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DTA3/COFUND offered funding for international, interdisciplinary and industry-focused research across 15 UK professional and technical universities, connected by an enhanced cohort-based PhD training programme.

The Doctoral Training Alliance has been running since 2015 and is one of the largest multi-partner national doctoral training initiatives in the UK. With the support of a **€6.5 million grant from the Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie PhD Fellowship programme**, the DTA3 programme extended our existing doctoral training, bringing researchers together under an interdisciplinary umbrella programme, specifically in the areas of (i) Applied Biosciences for Health, (ii) Energy, and (iii) Social Policy.

DTA3 aimed to develop independent researchers, with inter-sectoral skills and experience, ensuring they were ready for post-doctorate employment.

To meet this aim, the DTA3 programme had five unique features:

1. **Interdisciplinary** research environment.
2. **Enhanced training** programme e.g., entrepreneurship, communication and employability training.
3. Collaboration with **commercial** organisations.
4. Recruitment of **non-UK residents.**
5. Opportunity to do **international placement/secondment.**

DTA3 developed 71 international fellows, with successful candidates moving to the UK from New Zealand, India, Ethiopia, Brazil, Iran and Iceland to name but a few.

To support fellows' employability and transnational mobility, the DTA3 enhanced training programme included dissemination, commercialisation, and transferable skills training, as well as discipline-specific workshops.

The programme fostered transnational mobility through an extended network of international associate partners across the world to provide recruitment and international placement opportunities.

MARIE SKŁODOWSKA-CURIE/ COFUND

DOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

Overview of grant:

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) are the European Union's reference programme for doctoral education. Co-funding of regional, national and international programmes (COFUND) supports new or existing doctoral programmes.

The aim of the action is to **spread best practices** of the MSCA including **international, inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary training**, as well as international and cross-sectoral mobility of researchers at all stages of their career. For applicants to be eligible for the fellowship, they were required to move to the UK to complete their PhD.

Objectives:

- Train researchers and innovators in academia and beyond.
- Help researchers to grow their networks and share knowledge to carry out cutting-edge research.
- Provide researchers with new knowledge, skills, career development perspectives and employability.
- Boost researchers' creativity and entrepreneurship.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Ethical approval for this research, investigating the impact of the DTA3 doctoral fellowship programme, was sought and approved by Coventry University (P162773). All fellows provided written informed consent prior to participating in any aspect of the research. Participants received a £30 gift card for completing the survey, and a subsequent £30 gift card if they took part in a focus group.

Surveys

A 60-item online survey was sent to all DTA3 fellows (those who finished their doctorates and those who left the programme early). Questions were categorised into 5 groups: research activities, employment, wellbeing, doctoral training experience, and demographics.

A separate 20-item online survey was sent to all supervisors. This collected information on collaborations during the doctoral training, differences of DTA3 training compared to traditional training, and suggestions for improvement.

Lastly, a 18-item online survey was sent to all university programme leads. This sought information on recruitment rates, collaborations, and the impact of the DTA3 programme on the institution.

Focus groups

Focus groups and interviews were conducted by the DTA3 project manager (a trained qualitative researcher). Groups consisted of 2-4 fellows and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Fellows were asked about their favourite and most challenging memories of their doctoral training and the value of having a PhD in 2023. Common themes were identified using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

PhD Fellows:

- 62% survey response rate
- 17 fellows took part in focus groups

Staff:

- 14 Supervisor survey responses
- 25% University programme lead survey responses

DTA3 PROGRAMME

DOCTORAL TRAINING

Throughout the DTA3 programme, four residential events were held annually to bring together all the DTA3 fellows from Energy, Bioscience for Health and Social Policy. Each event focused on a different aspect of doctoral training and was co-organised/delivered with a university partner. Fellows were supported to attend the events using their DTA3 training bursary.

1

SPRING REFRESH (MARCH)

This typically 1-day event has been held in London at the British Academy and the Birmingham City University STEAMhouse. Themes have centred on collaboration, multidisciplinary working, and transferable skill development during the PhD.

2

SUMMER SCHOOL (JULY)

Annual Summer Schools were a 3-day event hosted by different partner Universities, including UCLan, Brighton and Greenwich. Summer School themes included employability, academic writing, and research impact. Each year, fellows were given an opportunity to present and get audience feedback.

3

AUTUMN SCHOOL (NOVEMBER)

These events were typically held over 2-days and were hosted by Coventry and Leeds Beckett. Due to COVID-19, two of the schools were held online. The events focused on researcher connections, the PhD journey, and managing supervisory relationships.

4

WRITING RETREATS

These 2-4 day events were hugely popular as they provided a protected space for fellows to write. Retreat locations included Gladstone's Library, Missenden Abbey, and North Yorkshire. There were optional social activities in the evening. Writing retreats were held online during COVID.

DOCTORAL TRAINING

TRAINING SCHEDULE 2022/23

TITLE	HOST
Writing blogs during your PhD	DTA
Project management for research	Uni Portsmouth
Get Media Savvy	LJMU
Advancing through online collaboration	Skillfluence
Academic writing: reduce anxiety	Dr Catriona Ryan
Introduction to Big Data	Uni Portsmouth
What can I do with a doctorate	Danielle White Coaching
The Resilient Researcher	Skillfluence
Presenting & Storytelling	Kare Sivertsen
Viva Survivor	Dr Nathan Ryder
Engaging with UK Parliament	Parliamentary Office of Science & Tech
What Next? Career Planning for Researchers	Skillfluence
Final Year Focus	Dr Nathan Ryder

TITLE	HOST
Virtual Thesis Bootcamp	Coventry Uni
Enterprise for PGRs: Converting research into a business	Greenwich
Emotional labour in research	SHU
Enhancing public speaking skills using improv	LJMU
Developing a strategic approach to public engagement	Greenwich, National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement
Brining your research to life: planning for impact	LJMU
Intro to Qualitative Research	UWE
Networking with industry	Periscope Programmes
Tackling imposter syndrome	Dr Marc Reid
Social Media for PGRs	Dr Emma Cowley
How to plan your PhD	Hugh Kearns, IThinkWell
Be Visible or Vanish	Thesis Whisperer

MEET THE FELLOWS

DTA3 FELLOWS DEMOGRAPHICS

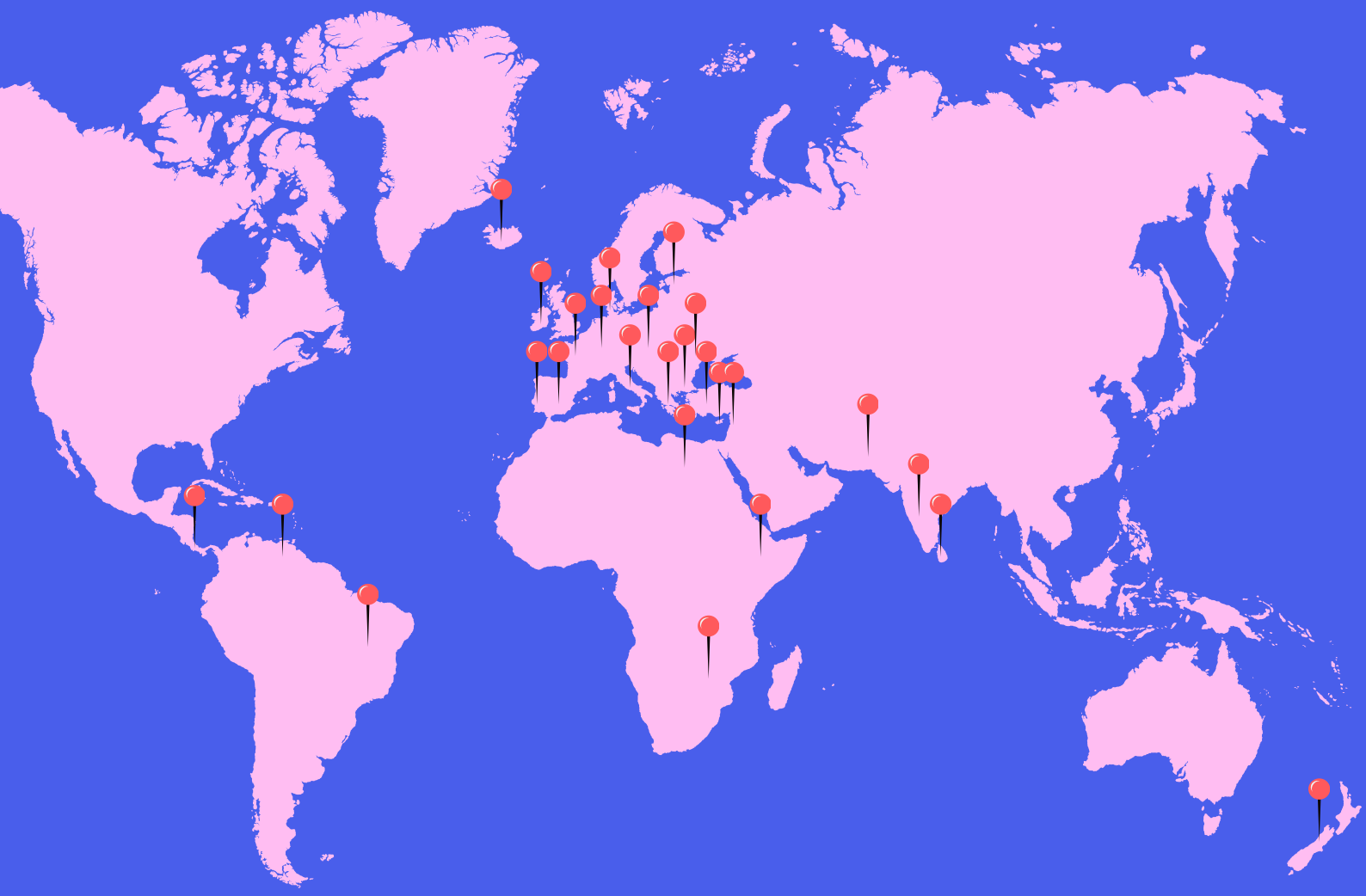
71
Fellows recruited

55%
Fellows are women

26 Y
Average age starting PhD

26
Nationalities

75%
From EU countries



DTA3 FELLOWS

Current snapshot of PhD progress

The below data has been collected from fellows and host universities. We are missing data on 8 fellows. We will continue tracking the cohort for 2 years, our second data collection will take place in Q3 2024.

6/71 fellows left the DTA3 programme prior to completing their PhD.

72% have submitted their PhD thesis, with 43 fellows (66%) having also completed their viva.

86% By Q3 2024, 86% of fellows are expected to have submitted their thesis within their required timeframe.

55% of fellows who are in the final write-up stage or awaiting viva examination are employed.

The 6 fellows who left the DTA3 fellowship programme left early due to:
(i) complications with international visas
(ii) COVID-19 travel restrictions
(iii) the international movement of supervisors
The fellows completed between 6-36 months of the fellowship before leaving.

Two additional fellows finished their fellowship contracts early as they were successful in gaining employment in their given fields. They completed their doctorates during their new employment.

DTA3 FELLOWS
COHORT TRACKING

Of the 46 fellows who have submitted their PhD thesis, we currently have employment data on 30 fellows. This data is presented below.

1st Job

- 2.5 months - average time between finishing PhD and starting first job.
  - 46% of fellows had secured first job before finishing PhD.
- 10 fellows left the UK to return to home country, or relocate to USA or other EU country.

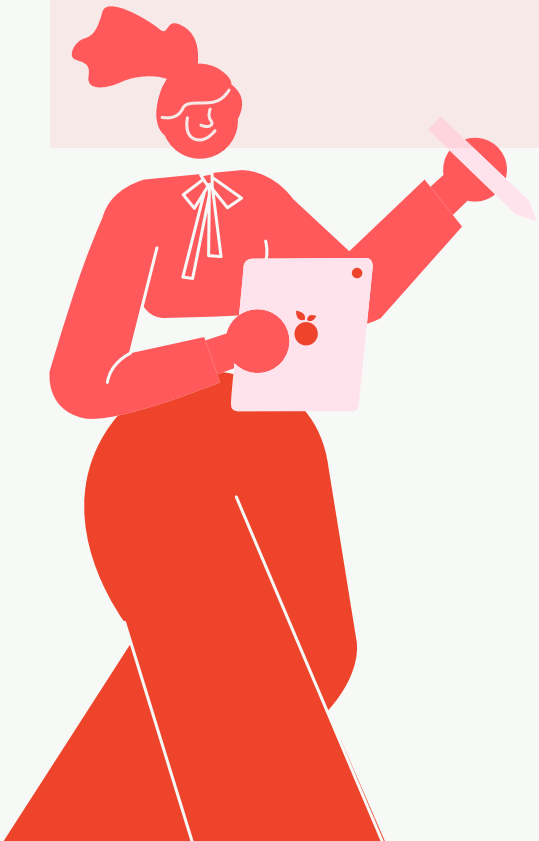
2nd Job

- 13 fellows moved onto a second job.
  - 11 months - average time in first job.
- 70% returned to home country.

Observation

Data suggest fellows enter "bridging" short-term contracts (usually in PhD host university) immediately after finishing their PhD.

The second job seems to be more planned (e.g., postdoc or senior researcher roles) and comes within 1 year of finishing the PhD programme. The majority of these positions are outside the UK, in fellows' home countries.



Emma's Story

"I moved from Ireland to Liverpool in 2019 for my PhD having never even been to the city! I loved studying and living there. The university was incredible, and I built great relationships with my supervisors and fellow PhD students.

Through DTA training and events, I developed my professional skills, including learning how to grow my network. I think this massively helped me secure a postdoc in the States after I finished my PhD. These types of transferable skills are not often taught as part of traditional doctoral training and so I really valued this focus of the DTA.

I also think there is a certain prestige that comes with Marie-Curie funding. Although I didn't appreciate it enough at the time, now working in research I am very proud to be part of the global MSCA alumni community".

Nationality:
Irish

University:
Liverpool John Moores University

Graduation year:
2022

Research area:
Physical activity & Health

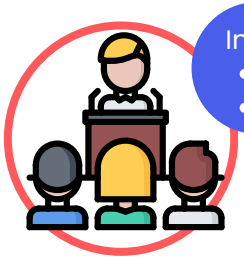
OUTPUTS & METRICS

DTA SUCCESS

Average funded period
40±3
months

Including:
- Nature
- Cells
- Cochrane

157
Published manuscripts



Including:
- Best presentation awards
- International travel bursaries

116
Conference proceedings

- ICFP Youth Trailblazer award
- Inspiring Researcher of the Year
- Beamtime award, Henry Royce Institute

TRANSDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

- 93% **multidisciplinary** supervisory teams.
- 50% **engaged with public/private sector** (e.g., local authorities, industry).
- 16 **placements/collaborations** (e.g., Biocant, EuroMov, Karolinska Institute).

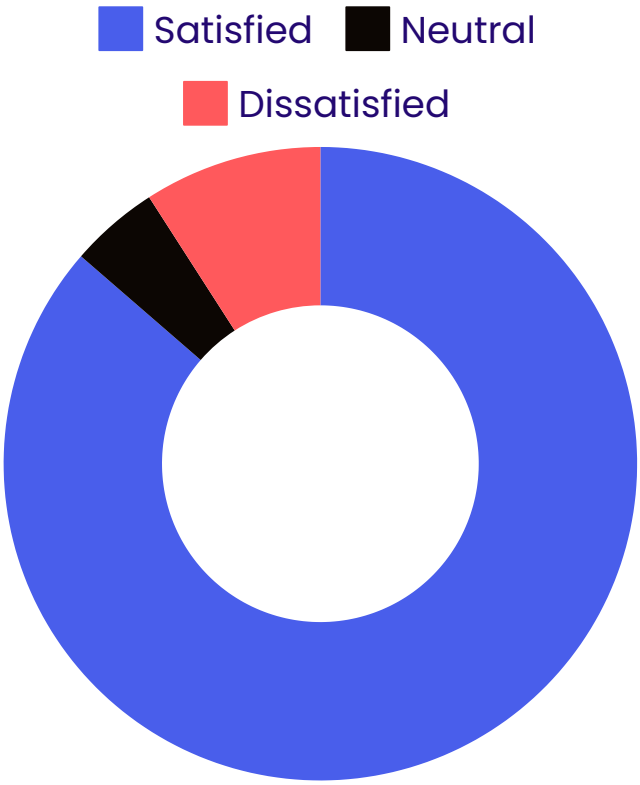
Would engage in a DTA programme again

88%

Supervisors & leads

Top aspects of doctoral training

- Quality of supervision & guidance (*scored - excellent*)
- Personal development opportunities (*scored - very good*)
- Academic experience (*scored - very good*)



How satisfied are you with the doctoral training offered at your university

POST-PHD EMPLOYMENT

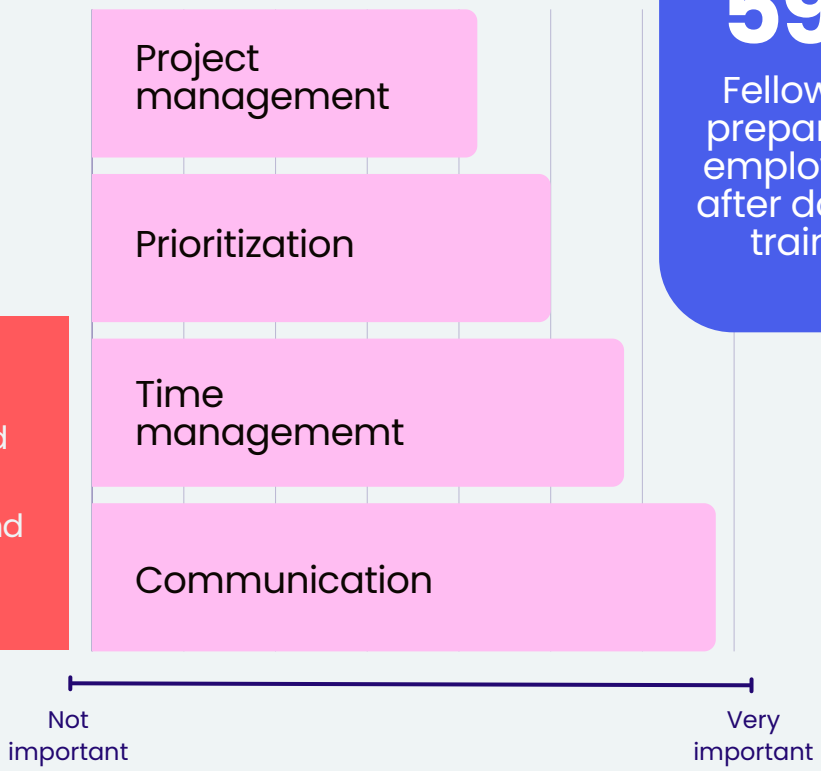
2 months	46%	48%	>£30k
Avg. time between PhD & first job	in industry, gov or non-profit	are / were in/ or considering a postdoc	48% earning £30-60k+

Perceived top quality needed to land first job:

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

59%
Fellows felt prepared for employment after doctoral training

Top 4 transferable skills identified by fellows needed to land first job post-PhD.



BENEFITS OF DTA3 FELLOWS

Community

"DTA played a pivotal role in fostering a **profound sense of belonging** among us. Through initiatives like virtual coffee mornings, it **bridged the physical gap** and provided **valuable connections."**

"Knowing we had the **option to reach out to people beyond our home universities** for assistance offered a **significant source of moral support** throughout our PhD journeys."

Residential events

Key elements of DTA events:

- **Space to network** with other fellows.
- Opportunity to learn from **alumni** of the programme.
- Chance to **present and share ideas** in safe, friendly environment.
- Writing retreats popular because of **shared accountability, focus and motivation.**

Enhanced training

"DTA gave me **access to different workshops/trainings** and the chance to meet students working in **completely different fields** to my own."

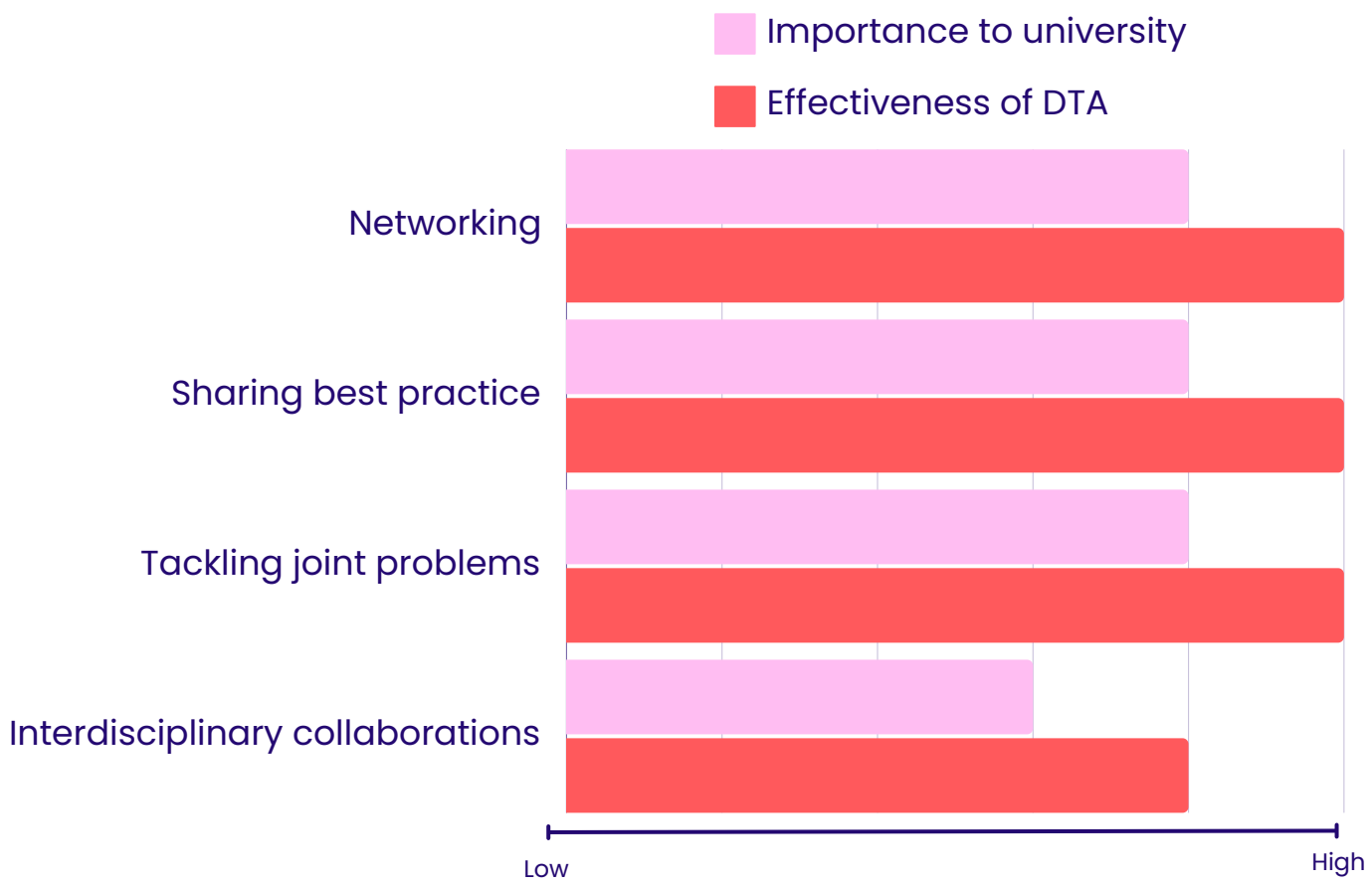
"The organized trainings and readily available support were **invaluable, contributing significantly to my academic and professional development."**

Financial support

"The funding was hugely significant, as it meant I have a reliable income which gave me **stability to focus on my research."**

"The funding made a huge difference to what was achievable and **how many other things I could explore on my PhD journey** because I wasn't tied down to having to work an additional job."

BENEFITS OF DTA3
SUPERVISORS + UNI LEADS



Support for doctoral students

- DTA provided ideas for local training sessions and approaches.
- 67% thought DTA3 increased recruitment rates.
- DTA provided greater emphasis and importance of recruiting to a cohort model.
- "DTA was good for the researchers to have a sense of belonging."

Partner networks + collaboration

- "It's been great to have a network of trusted colleagues in similar roles that can be approached on a range of issues relating to Doctoral Education, not just DTA issues."
- "I have established overlapping areas of interest and have maintained professional relationships with other DTA contributors."

PHD EXPERIENCE

THE PHD EXPERIENCE

Value of a PhD in 2024

- Essential if you want to stay in academia (89% wanted to pursue research).
- Competitive edge for recruitment & progression in non-academic careers.
- Protected time to develop specific skills, knowledge & immerse oneself in research.

IF YOU HAD TO DO YOUR PHD OVER,

61%

WOULD ORGANISE TIME MORE EFFECTIVELY

82% fellows had COVID-related extensions

5 ± 2 months = Average extension

Top 3 reasons fellows don't finish within 3 years

1. Financial barriers (68% - primarily due to COVID-19)
2. Personal issues (57%)
3. Lack of clarity on steps needed to complete the degree (55%)

Reasons for international study

- Fellows perceived there to be more job opportunities post-study with an international PhD (61%).
- Opportunities are limited within home country (56%).
- To experience another culture (43%).

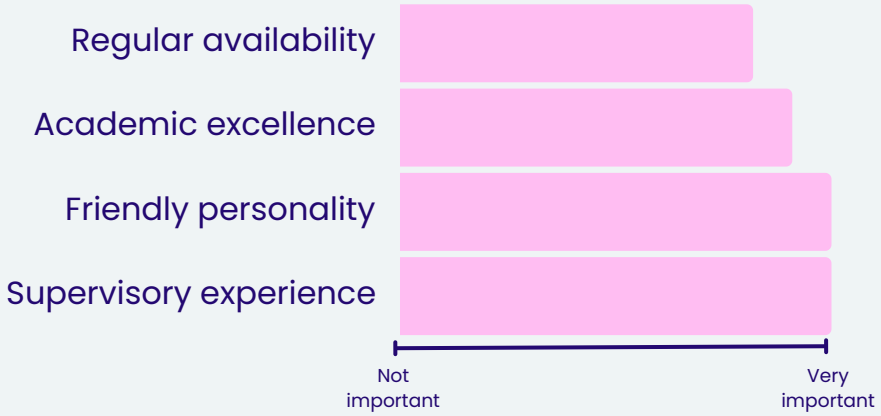
PHD SUPERVISORS

The supervisory team "*makes or breaks*" the doctoral journey.

For many, the Director of Studies was absent & fellows came to rely on their 2nd supervisor or external advisors for support and mentorship.

Supervisors can cause problems for fellows by misguiding them e.g., unrealistic research design, incorrect information about MPhil transfer process.

Top qualities fellows look for in a supervisor



Source of poor fellow/ supervisor relationships

- First PhD student.
- Power imbalance & unclear professional boundaries.
- Cultural differences.
- Lack of training for supervisors.
- Lack of safeguarding for PhD fellows.

THE GOOD

- Regular meetings & timely, constructive feedback.
- Reducing power imbalance by getting to know supervisor as a person.
- A supervisor who advocates for, supports & protects their student.

"I had one supervisor who was **very understanding** and someone I could **go to with concerns,** I'll be forever grateful to that supervisor for the support they offered, it was **well beyond** what I thought a supervisor was for, that supervisor was very **generous with their time."**

THE BAD

"Everything felt like bargaining and I felt I was **working for them rather than working on my project.**"

"If you want a career in this topic, **you better shut up follow what they say**" [when fellow asked for mediation support].

"My supervisor **publicly criticized my work** at an international conference, so it was a very difficult relationship."

"I was **afraid to email my supervisors** because every time I emailed I felt like a fool."

STUDENT WELLBEING

Although there was a high rate of mental health concerns reported by survey respondents, during focus groups and interview, a number of practices were highlighted by fellows as being vital for maintaining positive wellbeing during the doctorate:

Distinct focused working hours. Protecting evenings &weekends.

Having wider community, including non-PhD friends to give perspective.

Having a network (peers/ mentors) who can relate to PhD distress & failures.

Maintaining hobbies outside of research, most notably being active.

55%

sought help for mental health

34%

Took a break from studies due to mental health

46hr+

43% worked more than 46hrs per week

DOING A PHD DURING COVID

- Working 24/7 because many were isolated in bedrooms by themself, not knowing anyone in a new city/university/country.
- Lasting delays even when labs re-opened due to part-time hours, supply chain issues, and staff turn over.
- Relied heavily on DTA, and in some case supervisors, to create online networking opportunities and events.
- Serious issues with international visas; feeling of being stranded and in some cases unable to return to home country due to border closure.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

"What was your favourite part of your PhD?"

- "Interactions literally saved me during the lockdown."
- "The possibility to collaborate with other people was really enriching."
- [During COVID]... "We had 5 o'clock cocktails on Fridays, Halloween fancy dress, table quizzes, birthdays online, celebrated vivas."
- "I started to build a really fantastic community within my neighbourhood, so many cups of tea in the front garden."
- "The DTA is the main thing that made me friends."
- "I loved the [DTA] programme, having the chance to go and meet other PhD students."

> ***We all became really good friends. That's something I'm going to take with me forever because we've been through the same thing and we were there for each other.***

HIGHLIGHTS

1. Multidisciplinary Learning
Valued hearing about other disciplines & universities.

2. Learning the Ropes
Used current students & alumni to learn how things run (e.g., accessing bursary & viva process).

3. Expand Network
Used DTA to learn about now opportunities e.g., jobs and collaborations.

4. Peer Support
Leaned on each other in hard times & celebrated victories.

WHAT NEXT?

DTA3 LEGACY

The sustainability of our fellows

Although the DTA3 programme has ended, it was only the first step in our fellows' career paths, and therefore we intend to follow and support the fellows' future endeavours. We now have a vibrant global network of highly skilled professionals working across the academic, industrial and public sectors. It is a priority of the Doctoral Training Alliance to continue fostering this community through a range of initiatives.

INITIATIVE	DETAILS
DTA3 website profiles	The refurbished DTA website has a designated area for DTA3 fellows. Each fellow has their own profile page outlining their academic path and post-PhD career. It also details fellow highlights e.g., publications and awards.
DTA3 Legacy fund	This fund gives DTA3 alumni an opportunity to spend 2-8 weeks thinking and learning from international experts and innovators, with the aim to use this new knowledge to benefit the health and wellbeing of UK society.
"Lesson Learnt" manuscript	In collaboration with The University of Edinburgh who run a similar COFUND doctoral programme, we are writing a reflective manuscript on implementing and managing an MSCA/COFUND grant. We aim to submit in Summer 2024.
DTA3 Awards	During the annual UA 2024 Awards, the DTA3 alumni will be celebrated through the telling of inspiring fellow stories, information on the sustained success of the programme, and the presentation of the prestigious DTA3 Alumni Award.
DTA3 Alumni network	"DTA Connect" is a global network of DTA fellows. Fellows have opportunities to join local chapters and special interest groups, engage in annual events and training, and contribute to 'Career Spotlight' quarterly news articles.

“WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO SOMEONE THINKING OF APPLYING TO THE DTA?”

Bioscience

“Don’t hesitate for a second!”

Energy

“It is wonderful to be part of the pioneering team for climate change solution, which will greatly serve the needs of society”

Soocial Policy

“It’s one of the greatest opportunities for early researchers”

Energy

“DTA was the perfect choice for me, it provided more than I ever imagined. Look at the alumni statistics, their employability rates are amazing”

Doctoral Training Alliance

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