Transcript PAF 6

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
I’m Rajiv Prabhakar. I’m at the Open University and I'm doing a parliamentary academic fellowship for the Knowledge Exchange Unit. I contacted you because you were former PAF. And the whole idea is to look at how could the scheme be improved.

And then also I'll be doing interviews with former parliamentary host. And the transcript will be deposited. All identifying marks will be removed, so they'll be no names or locations of host offices where you can identify someone.

My plan is probably to send you the transcript if I can before and then if there's anything you want cut out then I'll do that. No problem.

PAF 6  
That's fine, no problem.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
So it involves three stages. A couple of questions about what happened while you were a PAF. And then the post PAF period.

Casting your mind back. Can you remember what the process was like in applying for the fellowship?

PAF 6  
Yeah, I think It felt unusual for my circumstances because I was sort of putting in an open suggestion of what the fellowship, my fellowship could be. So rather than rather than focusing on potential POSTnote that I could work on, I was suggesting some form of research focused on the outputs of POST.

Um, not unlike what you're doing. Looking like analysing the outputs and providing some insights. So sort of unclear of how best to frame it. It didn't stress me out or anything, I just thought well, I'll write you know what I think is a good idea for some research there might be helpful for POST and is part of a fellowship and put that forward.

My director of the centre where I was working as a post doc suggested that and was very supportive. So she encouraged me to. Although I wasn't certain about certain aspects of, you know, the application process. I didn't find it stressful because I figured it was just sort of an opportunity to explain yourself and why you thought it would be a good idea and that's why I did, yeah.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
And just a quick follow up, did you actually find the actual process itself, I mean, I mean the application form the interview easy to understand?

PAF 6  
Yeah, I think so. But particularly I think because POST was very open to discussing it, so I had a conversation with XXX, who went on to be my POST supervisor before during the application process where she said here are some of the things that we're interested in as well, and there's a way that this your proposal could meet these. So I sort of reframed my application and throughout the process, based on their feedback, and that was really useful.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
So once you actually started. An embedded question, a question within a question. Um, how useful was the induction plan? And obviously that presumes there wasn't induction plan, right? So I guess was it an induction plan? And if so, how useful was it?

PAF 6  
I mean this is a couple of years ago now. So from memory there was a lot of documentation to read. So they sent through, you know, a handbook for the PAFs handbook and so on. And I had a conversation with my POST supervisor.

Um and there were some meetings, like an introductory zoom meetings. This is the happening in the thick of lockdowns, which is probably is probably going to be a theme that comes up through this interview.

Um, so yes, I guess again because I wasn't writing a POSTnote it was a little bit unclear to me which elements of that induction process applied to me and which didn't. So it just took a lot more reading of things that were very much focused on the fellows who were writing POSTnotes.

You know about that process and the practises involved and that which was useful for me because my work was going to focus on their output. So it's useful to see what they were being told, but it was less clear what applied to me and what didn't. I mean it just took more reading. It just meant I read things that sort of thought oh that doesn't actually apply to me but.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Yeah, just picking up on something. You mentioned about lockdown and Covid. Did you actually visit the estate at any point?

PAF 6  
No, unfortunately.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Was that, was that? Well, were you hoping to visit?

PAF 6  
Yeah, I would have really liked that, but completely understood the circumstances that prevented that. And they may have. So towards the end of my fellowship, there might have been an opportunity if I'd made the time. So I was in Cambridge and if I had wanted to travel to London, I probably could have to visit but it didn't really during the bulk of the time I was there, probably wasn't possible.

Um, they did have an event, I think later in 2022 where people who were unable to have visited Parliament during their fellowships were able to come and actually, you know, have an event on site …I'm not sure if it actually happened, but um, yeah, and I just recognise that that was part of the circumstances. I don't feel that POST let me down.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
We'll come back to that a bit later on, maybe we'll pick up on how important do you think do you think it might be, you know the kind of blend between online and face to face a little bit later on.

Is there anything that should be included in an induction at the start?

PAF 6  
No, probably just. I mean, if anything there was, there was a lot of information to read through with all the hand books and things.

Which you know, even if I had been sort of a the following, the usual sort of PAF path of writing a POSTnote. So a lot to take on from memory.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
I'm OK just picking up on from the kind of support because you did all yours online.

PAF 6  
Well, yes. No, it was all online.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
And just thinking about in the future. Oh, avoided the word going forwards, by the way.

PAF 6  
Well done.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Do you have any thoughts about the best way of supporting fellows? In terms of face to face working catch ups online.

PAF 6  
Look, I mean so with my POST supervisor, we had regular meetings and I found those very valuable.

And they were consistent. So I quite appreciated that. So it wasn't sort of like I have to, you know, we'll have a meeting if an issue comes up. But there were just we'd have meetings and maybe talk about different aspects of what I was doing, but also. those were a great opportunity where I learned a lot more about parliamentary processes, and should often sort of discuss how things happen in certain spaces, and she talked about some of the POSTnotes that they were working on particularly in relation to what I was looking at.

Yeah. And so I found those meetings really useful, mainly probably just because her approach to them, you know.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
And what about face to face? How important do you think that would be for our PAFs?

PAF 6  
Yeah, I personally I appreciate in person meetings more than over zoom or teams and so on. I would have, it would have been good to have meet with the POST team in person and to sort of visited Parliament and had some of the typical experiences pre Covid where you sort of go around and talk to MPs and things that would have been good. Yeah. So I do feel like I missed, I feel like I missed out on there. But you know that was just the nature of the situation.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Did you as an academic just thinking about, you know, with the academic hat on and your work in Parliament? And did you think impartiality was understood differently?

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Between you as an academic and you as a parliamentary researcher, or did it occur to all I mean the need for impartiality or not.

PAF 6  
I probably didn't put up again. It didn't occur to me in the sense of what I was working on

But that was because of the sort of somewhat neutral or broad nature of what I was looking at … so I wasn't working on a particular partisan views or you know, controversy or debate.

But if there had been, I’d probably quite mindful of it. Um, I didn't feel like. I could see and from having read a lot of POST material, that impartiality was really important to POST given the, you know history of being around for so long as an impartial provider of evidence.

Um, I don't feel that that was at odds with an academic perspective on that, perhaps.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Ask your question. Do you have a Twitter? Do you have a Twitter account?

PAF 6  
Yeah.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
And did you ever feel when you were tweeting that there were certain things he shouldn't be tweeting about, or should be tweeting about while in POST. Did it occur to you?

PAF 6  
Just thinking. Yeah, I there was something in the materials that I read about there, I'm pretty sure.

Um, but I tend to avoid like even political topics on Twitter it, but it wouldn't have crossed my mind directly, so I had seen something, you know, that I disagreed with and it would have been a somewhat impartial perspective of mine. You know, I'd say politically I’m probably left. It probably wouldn't have occurred to me at the time.

Oh, you know, I should be careful about what I say on the basis of my affiliation to POST.   
Though I do, now that you're talking about it, think they're probably was mentioned of that in the induction materials and probably wouldn't have occurred to me. If I'm being honest, at the time of tweeting.

But as an individual, I tend to steer clear quite political topics on Twitter anyway, Although it occasionally when it comes into the sort of areas where my research sits, I might tweak things that could be considered by some audiences. As you know, sitting on one side of a fence.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Would you have any advice to academics, you know, with the academic hat on and when they're working in Parliament on, I mean it seems to me you were saying that you avoid politically contentious things anyway

PAF 6  
Yeah, but you know, I did tweet about vaccination during the pandemic as a, as a general point, which was I don't think politically contentious, but maybe socially.

So prior to my work in academia, I did work for a separate kind of NGO where, you know, I had to be somewhat mindful of my public profile. And again, that just meant, you know, it was probably more along the lines of not bringing the organisation into disrepute by doing something terrible on Twitter rather than, you know, being strictly neutral on everything.

However, so to take that one step further, I think things like attending protests where maybe I agree with the views of those of protesters, I probably wouldn't purely because of my even now as an academic because it might be seen to be colouring or, creating a perception of bias that this person receives research funding, and they're also, you know, an advocate of some kind.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
We’re rattling through these questions.

PAF 6  
That's alright. I have to say I am thinking about all the things I tweeted now and thinking like don't think but maybe so yeah.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
No, but that in itself I'm not making any judgement about this. I mean that in itself is useful information.

PAF 6  
I mean, and in terms of impartiality, I guess I would always argue that as an academic, I was sort of arguing for evidence and for me that sort of peer reviewed research and something that I came to appreciate as part of the Post fellowship was that.

Parliamentarians don't always think in those terms, and so their idea of what evidence constitutes is different, let's say, and that they take on board.

You know, they'll put weight on anecdotal evidence and, you know, if someone in your constituency has a strong narrative or story that they feel supports a certain policy position, they'll use that as, quote, unquote, evidence, just as academics would. And so as an academic coming into that environment, it's sort of hard to think a bit more about the reframing of what constitutes evidence.

And that that, yeah, that was something that that just took an adjustment. But I can also see the reasoning why that, you know, politicians work in a different space of negotiation and perceptions, whereas scientists, by and large try to stick to only things that have passed the muster of peer review and that can be sort of considered robust claims about the nature of reality.

Um, you know, and there's a bit of a gap there perhaps and the thinking between those two groups. I'm sort of I'm oversimplifying it. I'm sure there are plenty of MPs who have very evidence based and the academic sense of the word.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Just thinking about the post POST period and your outputs from POST.

Um, do you know of any outcomes or impacts that came from those?

PAF 6  
Yes. Yeah,   
so there was like, there's a couple of things. I write a sort of two summary documents for POST one, which focused on so, so I analysed the text of a selected number of POSTNotes and briefings …

I gave a presentation to the team and there was discussion about possibly publishing it as a peer reviewed article, but I didn't. I wasn't sure that there was really enough content there to make a full article.

And I'm not sure how keen POST where to push forward on that either.   
But the results of that discussion led to several of the points I made being taken on board and incorporated into POST processes. So there was sort of that internal impact. One thing in particular I think was adding information to the instructions given to peer reviewers for POSTnotes that explicitly asked them to consider the.

After the presentation I gave so that felt like some concrete outcome from the work that I've done and I felt it's been useful for them and practically helpful.

And the other thing I gave a presentation to the senior specialists, I think it was called senior specialist lunchtime seminar or a group of people who were connected with post parliamentary workers about XXX and that was where I received as well.

So I hope that there was some nuggets of information taken on board by that group.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
And since you've left the fellowship. Have you heard anything? Oh, are you aware of any further impacts from what you did?

PAF 6  
Oh, I also wrote with the very strong encouragement of my supervisor. She suggested I contact the magazine, science and Parliament and write a short of short summary of the work that I did as my fellowship and that was published in science and Parliament, which is a magazine that's published by one of the All Party Parliamentary Groups.

Yeah, and then I got some emails off the back of that from one, from the scientist and one from an MP just saying, oh, that was really interesting … And we had a short e-mail conversation. So again that was sort of a chance to disseminate those findings more widely. But I don't know. Depends how you defining impact.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Has the fellowship had any impact on your career or your academic work, do you think?

PAF 6  
Yeah, I mean, I could, I could cut that into several sort of layers. So in terms of the work that I did part of the.

PAF 6  
The practical doing of the research built some skills help me develop some skills that I've been wanting to work on, so some text analysis and some qualitative analysis that I was a bit weak on was an opportunity for me to spend time learning a bit more about those techniques and add them to my repertoire of methods.

Definitely in terms of the job that I work in now, the experience within a policy environment, having that interaction with government and Parliament was useful for the job that I have now where I.

I'm in the university, my role as an academic one. I'm a senior research fellow, but the work that I deal with the centre where I work is involved in communicating XXX and a key target group there is policymakers.

So having a slightly deeper understanding through my work at POST has been really useful. There's probably useful to me and getting the job as well.

Yeah. So, in terms of my current role, I do research a bit and I do communicating of research a bit. And that that is a constant tension of how he's been my time. I think that I have various demands on sort of producing material that goes out and to a non expert audience versus doing research on communicating evidence. So that's kind of where I'm at the moment.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Would you change anything about the fellowship if you went back and went to do it again? And is there anything you do differently?

PAF 6  
Given the circumstances, no, but it's hard to say. You know, in terms of visiting the estate and possibly sitting in on or shadowing a specialist in a in a Select Committee or something like that. You know, there were certain element of seeing how it plays out in practise that I missed out on.  
Yeah, those would have been nice to have had the chance to sort of experience, I guess, but that that wasn't.

I can't comment on the aspects that I didn't, you know some parts of the POST experience that I missed out on.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Okay, did you have a debrief meeting at the end?

PAF 6  
Yeah, yeah.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
OK. And that was with your Parliamentary supervisor?

PAF 6  
Yes. Yeah. And then because of some of the things ongoing. So I think I could providing the final report in writing that article for science and Parliament, I had several further conversations with XXX after the fact. So we sort of had a, you know, a little bit more correspondence afterwards as well.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Did you have links with many other PAFs when you were there?

PAF 6  
Yes, uh, I had two zoom calls with other PAFs who it looked like they were doing interesting work and I contacted just to have a chat with. Yeah, yeah, which was nice to feel, at least that there was a community there. And I attended some of the like group zooms for the PAFs as well.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
And were those useful?

PAF 6  
Yes, I'm struggling to remember what they were about. Some of them I might have gone into one of the training ones just to see how the POSTnote process was communicated to the to the fellows as part of my research. So just seeing how it's described to the people who end up writing them and then I think there was another one that was there was a couple of speakers maybe that they had and they invited PAFs to come and listen to as well. Online.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
And one final question. Do, you have any suggestions about how the scheme might be improved?

PAF 6  
Hmm, let me let me think on that for a moment. No, I mean it's very hard to imagine. So there's a couple of things that one is that I feel like my fellowship was a little bit unorthodox given the work I was doing that I wasn't part of this sort of separate cohort of the other parliamentary fellows who were all worked well in my mind, at least a lot of them were working on specific POSTnotes or possibly involved in providing evidence for select committees or something like that.

I felt that what I was doing was just slightly different from them which wasn't a bad thing. I didn't feel that I was excluded from anything on that basis, but it's just harder to sort of make suggestions when my when, when I feel like my particular experience was a little bit unorthodox just because of the nature of the proposal I put in, really.

And so it's hard to say. Oh things should be done differently on my on their basis, but I mean very, very positive experience overall and I credit a lot of that to my supervisor who gave the time to sort of make sure that I was getting out of it what I wanted to get out of it.