**Transcript PAF 9**

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
I’m an academic at the Open University and I'm doing a Parliamentary Academic Fellowship at the Knowledge Exchange Unit where when reviewing the Parliament Academic Fellowship scheme and So what I've been doing, I've been interviewing former PAFs.

All transcripts will be deposited at the OU and all identifying marks are going to be removed. So basically that means names, offices. And I'll probably send you a transcript in advance from MS teams and if there's anything else you want struck out, just let me know and I will do it.

PAF 9  
Yeah, that's fine. Yeah. Understood.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Yes, this is basically to ask about your experience of the fellowship, and it's kind of split into three different sections. The pre fellowship period, the actual fellowship itself, and then just a few follow follow-ups. Um on the actual what's happened since.

Just start with them. Why did you apply for the Parliament Academic Fellowship?

PAF 9  
My the impetus for me to reply actually came out of COVID because I had a period of research leave coming to me at the institution, like work at cause we're all entitled to apply for research, leave every few years, and mine was coming up and I have plans to go to XXX to do some research over there. And then COVID came along and so my plans to travel to XXX were somewhat scuppered. And I suddenly thought, what else can I do?

And actually, I think the nature of my research … is very outward facing. There's a lot of scope for impact and engagement. Then it's the sort of work that I enjoy doing. So I was aware that there was potential reform of XXX on the cards. I was aware of the impacts of COVID on XXX, and I thought this is going be a bit of an issue in Parliament, I suspect. And for the government to have to handle. So I thought I would have a look at the fellowship. And I saw the details for an open call which I responded to at the time.

That came out in the summer and then I kind of sent my application off so it was kind of what else can I do for my research leave? But also given the nature of my research and what was kind of happening in XXX, I decided it would be a good opportunity and that obviously something I could do while being based in the UK and of course because I was on research leave, it meant that I didn't have the same pull to teach and do all the other admin that normally you would have that would impact on availability.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Did you apply to in lockdown then? One of the lockdowns?

PAF 9  
I applied. No, it was. I'm trying to think. When did I apply? I was trying to think about this and I didn't have a chance to look it all up before we spoke it. It wasn't during lockdown, but I'm if I look at my emails, I can probably see my folder and it'll show.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Actually one question then, did you did you come on to the estate?

PAF 9  
Yes, I did. I did. I was fortunate, but only because my fellowship was extended during the period it was initially for six months and it was initially from January 2021 through to June 2021. So actually, yes, I did apply, didn't I during COVID because I would have applied the summer before then, I guess so, yeah. So that whole year I was meant to be on research leave and I ended up doing the fellowship instead. And that was 2021.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
The first part of it was, what online.

PAF 9  
Online. Yeah, all of it was online. I think they flipped very quickly and quite well to online working and. But yeah, all the team meetings were online. All my training was online. And yeah, I mean it. It wasn't quite what I imagined and hoped really. Cause I did really want to immerse myself in, in, in Parliament and get the most of the opportunities to, you know, listen to select committees go and visit PMQs and that kind of stuff. So it wasn't quite what I imagined, but it worked okay.

And I felt well supported throughout that process because everything had gone online and but I was very fortunate that my fellowship was extended by a further period of 12 months… And that meant that I could then come on to the estate and actually work with people in person.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
It's just useful for context, that's all. Um, I don't know if you can cast your mind back.  
The process of actually applying. Was that how was that? Was that easy? Hard?

PAF 9  
Um, I think we get a lot of support at the institution. I work for policy related work and my colleagues had also been involved in the scheme in the past, so one of them in particular sort of, who was involved in a research support role in in the school at the time, gave me a bit of advice and some pointers. I also got support from the department in the university that supports researchers to do impact and engagement work, so that was incredibly helpful, and because the form because I was responding to an open call at the time, which I don't think I've seen those since I think they're directed calls now, aren't they for specific areas of research, I found the open nature of it quite challenging to work out how to phrase my application, what projects to work on. Because I realised that a lot of the work in the section I was working in was driven by parliamentary demand and need.

And you can't always anticipate what that’s going to be. So for me, the open nature of the call made it more challenging to know quite how to pitch it so that that was a problem. So I kept it quite broad, deliberately broad as a consequence. So that then there could be some flexibility around what I exactly I did.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Okay that's useful to know. Um, when you started. Can you remember if you hadn't induction plan?

PAF 9  
I definitely had a very clear sort of support around what I needed to do. We met to agree what I would do initially, which of course you know could shift because the nature of the department I work for.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Was that you and your parliamentary supervisor?

PAF 9  
Yes, the person that sort of worked with me. Um, so that was that was helpful. That was all online, but it kind of we had a meeting where we agreed what I would be working on in terms of specific projects and there's an element of kind of planned stuff in, in the role I did, but there was also an element of a kind of reactive role because I was working in the House of Commons library.

So that meant that, you know, the day-to-day work sometimes is determined by what enquiries come in and what parliamentarians want to know. So I was able to get involved with that work as well. So there was some diversity in what I did as well as support for agreeing planned outputs that I worked on.

And yeah, so I would say the initially despite the fact that it was remote, I felt very well supported and they were clear discussions around expectations of what I would be doing. The training I needed to do and you know involvement in team meetings and that kind of stuff.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
If can you remember your agreed work plan? Did it bear any relation to your application?

PAF 9  
Yes, it was very similar in the sense that, um, I had proposed a particular briefing on XXX.

PAF 9  
That was something that that was definitely wanted and needed in in the department, so that did materialise, but I did more than that, so I ended up, you know taking advantage of the position I was in to sort of publish a little bit more, um and I was also asked if I my expertise could be used for other publications where it could be useful. And I was also able to do other things like respond to enquiries, which was something I haven't put on my application cause I didn't know if that was something that that, you know, I would be able to do. So I suggested an output or outputs and those were those were actually accepted and we agreed on those with a little bit of sort of tweaking to adjust to what the department might want. But I did a little bit more than that as well. So I think I did more than I set out to do.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Were there any things that you're suggest would be that should be in for an induction for anything you want to flag for new PAFs what you found useful?

PAF 9  
Um, so for me, you know, I guess my experience isn't typical of what would happen now because it was that remote nature of the working during COVID. So that probably does impact a little bit I guess. But you know I did a lot of training quite early on, but it was quite intense and all the remote. So there was a lot to take on board, I would say very early on to get me off to speed and initially on a six month one day a week fellowship, which is what I suggested doing, which actually worked for me and worked for the library.

I found it took a lot of time to get, get, get to grips with all of that and it wasn't always that flexible in terms of when I could have the training. So I had to give up other bits of my time to do that because it wasn't always on the day that I was available. So I think there's things like that that perhaps might impact on the kind of working pattern of a fellow where you have to be available for certain days to do certain training and that kind of thing. So I think that's probably something to factor in for the future.

I found it useful talking to other fellows and the knowledge exchange unit put in place the sort of support network and some sessions where they talked us through a bits about Parliament, how it works, bits about the support available. And I thought that was incredibly helpful. So I think those sorts of things are really important. I think. I think just having an opportunity to come in and talk to people in the knowledge exchange unit to know what supports there, what's expected of you, um, that kind of stuff would be very useful.

And certainly it was all online for me, but it would have been nice to been able to do all that in in person. I think having an initial session maybe and you know a morning session where what new fellows come in and you know, get talked through various aspects of the different bits of Parliament because one of the positive things about the fellowship for me was not just the work I did in the department I worked in, but the exposure it gave me to a whole range of other areas of Parliament and the workings of Parliament, you know, opportunities to feed into Select Committee inquiries, opportunities to give behind the scenes advice to other fellows or researchers and I think for me, my host department was really good at trying to facilitate all that. And I think it helped that my fellowship was extended because it helped me to develop a good relationship with the host team and who are all very keen, you know, to get me involved and to work with me and very friendly and open and supportive, but I'm not sure that that's the experience of all fellows. And I think that might very much depend on individuals you work with, how receptive they are to the work you do, your approach and how well you get on if that makes sense.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Um, did you have connections? Were you linked up with any other PAFs?

PAF 9  
Yeah.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
I know you mentioned PAFs at the knowledge exchange unit, but I'm on about more generally.

PAF 9  
So what do you mean by PAFs? Do you mean people doing the same sort of stuff but in a different capacity? Yeah. So I ended up speaking because XXX was quite sort of topical for a while during my fellowship, so that was great because there was a big sort of um scrutiny or Select Committee review of XXX at the time, and I hooked up with one of the fellows who was working on that. I also hooked up with other researchers working in post who were working on POSTnotes and helped to feed into the work that they were doing. And that was incredibly helpful both, you know, professionally but also in that context, but also more widely in my professional context because I've kept in touch with them and we have similar research interests.

So those networks are really important. So, you know, people supporting select committees, for example, who come in, I did hook up with some of those both researchers and Phd's and academics at different levels. So yeah, the exposure I had to various other offices and people like myself working in them was really good, I would say. But I would say that was a lot better once I was there .. the remote nature made it more challenging to do that.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Just picking up on that point, then how important do you think first to face is?

PAF 9  
Really important essential I would say.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
And why?

PAF 9  
Because I think it gives you an opportunity to build relationships in a way that online doesn't but and also an opportunity for you as a fellow to observe how the office works, the interactions of people, what's expected of them which I think you don't get when you're working remotely because you're not sitting alongside people in an office and seeing how they work and interact, and certainly in in the office I was in, which was the library, it was obviously hybrid model of working when I was there because things were just getting back to sort of post Covid.

So it wasn't quite, but I really enjoyed being able to go in when most people in the office for team meetings and to, you know, really understand how things worked and to go for coffees with people because often it's those informal interactions as well that are really important where you can talk about interests and what you can bring and get to know people in a different way. And but that's that might be to do with me. You know I'm interested in people as well as what's going on and how they work. And so you know I really benefited from those informal and social interactions as well as all the sort of more formal stuff.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Did you have a sense that impartiality was understood differently within Parliament than in your normal academic work?

PAF 9  
Well, I guess in academic work we're not, we're not in partial, are we? Because the whole point is that we're, you know, being critical commentators and analysing and for me XXX and taking a particular view and particularly normatively, you know what, what should XXX look like? So I was very aware when I applied both in the documentation I was provided with as part of the interview process that my role in the library, particularly because of the nature of the work I did in the library to serve all parliamentarians I have to be impartial and I was aware, looking at the publications that come out of the library, that you have to be impartial in how you present the information so, you know, not particularly a particular party line. So I was very aware that I had to wear a different hat during my time in Parliament and the work I was doing and that came through very strongly in the interview. And I think I understood that when I was writing my briefing.

So I would say I wrote a few words in the briefing. Yep, the person I was working with took out because they felt it was if I was expressing a particular view about or giving the impression of expressing a view about whether something was a good or a bad thing. So, um, you know, perhaps saying things like um, unfortunately these proposals were left out. You know, that kind of thing a couple of times I did that and the publication was reviewed by the person I was working with and said actually probably best taking this out because it might sound, you know, come across wrongly. So I wouldn't say I was under the impression that impartiality was understood differently. I think I would say I was probably on a similar page in terms of what was needed for me in the role and how I presented information in the job I did.

Um, yeah, I wouldn't say that there was a difference in understanding. I think it's something that is that comes through very strongly as part of the application process. And actually if I mean if I can just sort of elaborate a bit, I think that that did prove a bit of a challenge at one point. So I was in the role for 18 months in total, which was fantastic because I mean, I would say it's been high point of my career. I really enjoyed the work I did and I felt fortunate to be able to participate in the sort of activities I was doing, the opportunities it gave me as well as to work with the sorts of people I work with. They were a great team and you know I really enjoyed it. So I I'm always very supportive about the fellowship scheme.

But it gave me the opportunity to feed into some inquiries from select committees and at one point there was some concern amongst one of the inquiries as to whether I would be able to give evidence, given that I was also working in Parliament.

I think that tension between, you know, providing a service in in an office in Parliament and then giving expert evidence, you know, to a Select Committee where you are expected to express the kind of view one way or the other. I think that did perhaps cause a little bit of concern. I mean in the end, I was allowed to do it because it was made very clear that, you know, I do have this other job where I'm a [expert] and you know that I would be giving evidence in that capacity. So as long as that was made clear. But I think that's something perhaps that needs to be thought through a bit. Um, I guess if there is any potential for conflict there when somebody is a fellow and how they're perceived and the work that they do.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Just picking up on that about conflict. A lot of academics have social media Twitter accounts, this sort of thing And would you have any advice to people coming in and how they manage that boundary between the person as an academic and the person doing a fellowship.

PAF 9  
And I think it probably does relate to the point I've just made. Doesn't exist about that kind of conflict between your role as an academic, where you're expected to take a view and be critical. And this job where you're not expected to take of you, at least not in terms of the work that you produce and the work that you do while you're there. So I'm not into social media, so I don't have a Twitter account. I have a private Facebook account that that's a personal account.

I have written blogs so actually one of the things I did do was send in my blogs is example of how I can communicate my research in an accessible way because that's obviously something that's important for the work I was doing and you know they would I would say in in my blogs there's a view expressed about policy that might be critical that didn't stand in the way of me getting the fellowship as long as I could make it very clear in my interview that I understood that whilst I was producing or working in Parliament on the day that I was doing that work and producing those outputs, I wasn't able to express that view.

But I think if you are coming to Parliament, I mean, I do know that you know employees who work in Parliament, you know, they have to tread very carefully around that sort of stuff, don't they? So I think you've got to be aware, aware that if you want to engage in this kind of way, you have to be careful and perhaps how critical you are whilst you're doing the fellowship?

I don't think it stops you beforehand. It certainly shouldn't stand in your way beforehand as long as you can make it clear during the process. And whilst you're doing the fellowship that you might step away a bit so that you don't link what you do academically with your fellowship. But I think I think it is. It is something you know that does raise some ethical challenges, doesn't it, particularly if there are people who are very vocal and very strongly opposed to the government.

And I think you just have to make sure that you leave that at the door when you go into Parliament.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
OK, we're rattling through these questions and which is good. I want to think about the kind of post period, if you like. Do you know any out outcomes are impacts of the work that you did when you in Parliament?

PAF 9  
Okay so my work in Parliament, I produced some briefings, some research briefings and that that were there to inform parliamentarians about different aspects of XXX. So I know that they were picked up by the Select Committee that was looking at the XXX bill and used to help inform the thinking of committee members. I know that the output from that briefing, I then worked into a more academic piece, so that was one of the things I suggested I would do in my proposal. I would produce a briefing, which obviously was designed for parliamentarians as an impartial summary of the bill and the legislative process.

But then I wrote a more critical piece related to that research that went into an academic journal and I was very keen to say that I wrote some of the research for this was done while I was on my fellowship as a way of spreading the word about the fellowship and knowledge dissemination. And I mean, I don't know beyond that what you I've had a few emails from people saying oh I read your briefing, you know, and I found it really helpful.

So there has been a sort of evidence of that sort of engagement, I guess with these various different publications. Suddenly enough, I had an e-mail the other day from some researchers in London who'd read one of the insights I'd written about XXX which was again something I was quite interested in writing about. Um, and they wanted to talk to me about that as part of their research. So I think I think the publications that I've been involved with and you know, have my name on them are having some impact in terms of people reading them and then picking up on some of the issues and using them in their work in different ways.

But, actually related to that, it's perhaps worth mentioning this and it may be something that doesn't come up in your interviews with other fellows, but whilst I was in Parliament for my fellowship, a paper came to be discussed as part of the team that came through from the research sort of department in Parliament, and it was about the names that go on to briefings that are produced in Parliament and because often they have lots of different contributors from the library, and usually there's one lead person, and then there's various other people who contribute different bits and I think I was responsible for pulling together the briefing on XXX. So that was the piece that I promised to deliver and I did. And what they decided to do was that obviously one name got on. There was no point keeping my name on it because I wouldn't be the contact. The whole point of these briefings is that people in Parliament then know who to contact in the library, who's the research specialists with that subject expertise and that there would be some sort of reference to the fact that I've contributed to it in, in, in the briefing somewhere else so that you could see that.

But I guess for academics who are engaging with Parliament and who want to demonstrate that their research is impactful, that's a challenge. I mean, I did raise this at the time because obviously I actually put together that briefing, but now my name doesn't appear on it even though I wrote the bulk of the briefing.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Does it appear on it all now?

PAF 9  
It does appear on it, but as a sort of contribution to, which doesn't I don't think reflect the amount of work I put into it because actually I drafted that from scratch. So it's been taken on by others to sort of be updated but not. So I think I did feedback at the time that I think they'd have to be very careful with that because part of what we need to demonstrate as academics is that kind of impact of our research and track it through.

And if our details are taken off and not attributed correctly, the extent to which we've contributed, then you know it might deter people from actually wanting to do the stuff in the first place in terms of that kind of work. I mean, obviously I had lots of other opportunities that were fantastic, but I guess that's something to bear in mind. You know, just in terms of the nature of the work I did and how that's reflected in future.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
Has the experience of the fellowship had any impacts on your own work on your career?

PAF 9  
Um, I mean, I guess it's been a good thing for me to put down on my CV … to get a pay rise, I have to put the stuff that I'm doing down and demonstrate that I'm making an impact across all different areas of my activity. So I would say it's certainly enhanced my research profile. Um, I'm seen as somebody in the institution who actively engages with, you know, impact and engagement type work. I've delivered a seminar to colleagues on, you know, the benefits of doing this type of work.

I've been engaged with advising colleagues as well who've done this type of work in Parliament and I think profile raising generally of what's going on in Parliament and the opportunities for academics to engage, which was an important part of what I wanted to try and do. So I wrote a blog about my experience of working in Parliament. And, you know, I've tried to, to disseminate and share my experience for the benefit of other academics. And so hopefully that's benefited other academics.

They arranged and a seminar for my colleagues with one of the people I worked with in in, in the office, in Parliament, and they came over to XXX and we actually did, did a joint session so that you had a view from the outside, which was me. And then a view from the inside, which was then talking about the benefits of working together and what they're looking for when fellows apply. And I've been fortunate. I was invited to a couple of events by POST. I couldn't make it actually to one by the knowledge exchange because of a train strike. But you know, I think I think I've really enjoyed the fact that and valued the fact that I've kept those contacts going and been able to feed into different various bits of work.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
It might seem like an odd question and would you identify any shortcomings with the fellowship?

PAF 9  
Um, let me think. For me it was a very positive experience overall, you know, and I do speak very highly of it. I really enjoyed it and I felt quite sad leaving the team because they made me feel very welcome and they really embraced me and I think a lot of that relates to the quality of the relationships that you build during the fellowship and how much you get out of it is how much also you put into it.

Um, I suspect that people I know I spoke to with a fellows who, you know were there for shorter periods of time, particularly during the early COVID periods where their experience probably wasn't as positive in the sense that that, you know, they were, it's a fleeting and they perhaps felt a bit detached.

I guess the shortcomings are the sort of intensity of the training early on. So that means I think you have to probably think about how much time you can devote and it's best to have a longer period of time there rather than a short term or intense period of time because I think that training was quite intense and getting used to different systems of, you know, particularly in the library. I have to get used to their inquiries database, you know the way to things. The way to set things up. And I think that that was, that was intense, but it was also useful because it also helped me to reflect on my writing a bit as well.

I was made to feel very welcome and very much part of the team, but that could be very much dependent on the team I joined and I'm not sure if other fellows experienced that same level of support. I couldn't speak for other people. I did meet a few fellows and I think the experience is variable, but I think if you can have a good conversation at the start to, you know, talk about what you can bring and then your partner tells you what they want you to bring and then you can kind of agree on a plan that then helps to iron out any issues. But I did find out had regular meetings, you know, with the people I was working with. So if I had any concerns. we could air them and we could sort of talk about that.

PRABHAKAR, Rajiv  
One final question. Is there anything else you'd like to add on with that the fellowship might be improved. If you're going to suggest any improvements.

PAF 9  
When I guess, I guess the application process was quite long and cumbersome. You know in the sense that there was an initial call, then there was a sort of follow up then and sort of more detailed submission of information for me. And I don't know whether things have changed since I responded and it may be because it was the nature of an open call, but I had to sort of send in an initial sort of, I don't know, interest … And then I understand from my partners that I was working with that that that internally the process was quite cumbersome as well and I don't know again this is anecdotal because you know I'm talking as somebody who's speaking about their experience but certainly conversations I had after I joined suggested that the process was cumbersome and it almost put people off internally wanting to go through it. And it may be that something needs to be changed there in terms of trying to encourage people internally in Parliament to engage more with an external partners, I think it I don't know to what extent the knowledge exchange unit work closely with colleagues in Parliament to give them training or sessions on the benefits of utilising academic expertise, because I would say that a conversation I had which was a very kind of you know off the cuff comment that I had from one of the colleagues I worked and said, you know, that their perception of academics, that they were a bit sort of in ivory towers and out of touch with the real world and they were quite surprised when I appeared because I actually am somebody who wants to engage and was able to communicate at that kind of level that was needed in an accessible way. So I think there may be a perception of academics in certain parts of Parliament. It may be that things have changed. But I think I wonder if that's something that needs to be addressed so that there is a more kind of open way of engaging with academia and with researchers who've got expertise.

And because, you know, I I've got skills and knowledge that hopefully were, you know, were benefited, that the department I was with and the people I was working with and they were very open to wanting me to stay on. And I think that that was a positive for me that when one of the people was going on mat leave, I was able to say, look, my research leaves been extended a bit because of COVID. And I can offer my expertise a bit longer and that was a very easy bit of the process, I think to sort of just tweak, tweak it so that I stayed for longer. And I think that for me was incredibly positive because it meant that I could actually come into Parliament and meet people, work much more closely with them alongside them, see how Parliament works and actually enjoy, enjoy Parliament, you know, the sort of buzz in the place to see what happens on the ground and also, you know, to enjoy some very nice cheap food that that's provided in the parliamentary cafes.