

Working in Policy: Panel Event with University of York Alumni (June 2025)

The panel was chaired by [Dr Sara Gracey](#) (Head of Engagement for the Darlington Economic Campus, HM Treasury). Before working for the Civil Service, Sara was a Senior Lecturer in the Management Department at Birmingham City University.

The panellists were:

- [Mati Caldwell](#), Outpatient Strategy and Policy, NHS England (BA English and History)
- [Tom Howes](#), Advisor, Green Transition and Market Regulation, DG Energy, European Commission (MSc Economics, York)
- [Dr Joshua Ravenhill](#), Head of Cell-Cultivated Product Sandbox, Food Standards Agency (PhD History, York)

[Watch the panel event on YouTube](#)

What did you learn from postgraduate study that you use in your day job?

Sara emphasises **research skills**. When she reads a document, she appreciates it but then begins to ask questions: who is the author? What is its purpose? What's the underpinning evidence base?

Sara and Tom cite the ability to **translate complicated ideas into accessible communications** and produce **clear, quick, succinct writing**, whether that's for a policy briefing for ministers or producing an analytical piece of work.

Mati speaks about **mindset** and being **open and inquisitive** about opportunities and experiences, especially when you start out in policy and do not yet have much expertise in your line of work.

Mati and Joshua reiterate the importance of **synthesising complex findings and data in a fast-changing environment**. They also discuss developing the ability to **respond to competing demands and priorities** and **reframe information for different audiences**. Mati gives the example of having two hours to digest a report from The King's Fund on demographic changes in England and turn this into a policy proposal, which balances or aligns with the government's long-term priorities for delivering care.

Joshua also speaks about the importance of **storytelling** in policy work. He explains that you solve problems by telling stories. You begin by devising an initial narrative for your solution, then you solicit feedback from internal and external stakeholders on your characterisation of the problem to develop your story even further. Finally, you present your story to the Minister or CEO (depending on the kind of organisation that you work for in the Civil Service) to find out if they agree that this is the right approach to take to solve the problem.

What do you value most about working in policy?

Joshua discusses the **motivation** behind what he is doing: the work on cell-cultivated meats that he leads on is vital for thinking through the **challenges** that our **food system** faces with regards to the climate crisis. He also finds the **intersection** between **government regulation** and **private investment** fascinating.

Tom relishes being an **efficient cog in a machine**: driving the policy forward, delivering it, and (hopefully) making things better. He also enjoys using his **analytical skills** to produce effective publications, deliver projects, run workshops, and promote good practice in his field of economics.

Mati loves that her role enables her to **think deeply and strategically about meaningful problems**. She is driven by the fact that her work on reforming elective care is not an abstract issue: these are questions that directly affect people's lives. She also touches on the **intellectual satisfaction**: she finds it **energising** to work alongside many people with **brilliant minds** in **shaping a solution** that doesn't yet exist.

What do recruiters look for in candidates?

Mati emphasises **curiosity, clarity of communication**, and the **ability to navigate complexity**, irrespective of your disciplinary background as a postgraduate researcher. Instead, it's about **how you think**, **how you work with people**, and **how you convey this effectively**.

In terms of key skills, Mati breaks these down as:

- Analytical and critical thinking
- Research and evidence gathering
- Writing in a clear and concise way for a variety of audiences
- Time management and project management
- Collaboration

Sara observes how **similar these skills are** to the **behaviours** that the **Civil Service** uses to recruit for all of their roles. For more guidance on these, see the [Civil Service Behaviour Helper](#), which groups together all of the recruitment criteria and breaks these down according to the grade level of the job.

How do you advise PGRs to prepare for job applications and interviews?

Passion projects

Tom suggests doing your research so that you have a **passion project** to speak about in interview scenarios. This could take the form of **researching** the **key interests** of the **organisation** that you're interviewing for, an **issue** that is **pertinent** to the sector right now, or a **worked example from your thesis** that is relevant to the position you're applying for.

Sara agrees that having a **passion project** was critical to her interview preparation. At the interview for her present role, she was able to talk through her last **knowledge exchange project**.

Framing your academic study as work experience

Mati emphasises that there are **many aspects of your academic work as PGRs** that you can **draw on**. For example, you can demonstrate an **awareness of managing risks** by explaining how you **mitigated any factors** that **threatened your ability to deliver your thesis on time**.

As a PGR, you can also demonstrate the ability to **grapple with high-end concepts** and **reach an evidenced conclusion**, while **factoring in non-negotiables**, such as **delivering work in a timely manner**.

Echoing Mati, Tom underscores the value of **having your own examples to demonstrate a particular skill**. It's **much more credible to draw on a real life example and explain how that meets the requirement** (e.g. manage your workload) rather than form a hypothetical.