

Researcher:

**Olivia Gable – PhD in  
Sociology at the Open  
University**

Business:

**Insight for Good**

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## The project idea

**A**t her induction at the Open University, Olivia heard a presentation about the opportunity for PhD students to do an internship while in the programme. At the time, she immediately thought that it was something to keep in mind. However, as she started to work on her PhD, she began to struggle seeing when she might have been able to take a break from her work to do an internship. Thus, this idea ended up at the back of her mind. It all came back to her suddenly when she went to the Research Degrees Office to hand in a form towards the end of her PhD and she overheard a conversation about internship opportunities. At that point, Olivia was about to submit her dissertation and she realised that this might have been her last chance to do an internship while still being a student.

During her PhD, Olivia would have liked more opportunities for making her work useful for the “real world” and for having interactions outside of academia. As she was approaching the end of the program, she was also not sure whether she would want to pursue a career in academia or not, given the limited amount of places available in her discipline, and she wondered if she was probably less motivated in “doing all it took” than some of her colleagues, who saw academia as their best option for the future. Therefore, she was keen to start building up a CV with transferrable skills and knowledge that could be attractive for both academic and non-academic employers. With these reflections in mind, when she overheard the conversation about internship opportunities, Olivia realised that she could not wait any longer if she wanted to build up some commercial experience before the end of her PhD, so she immediately asked for information about how to apply.

At the beginning, the fact that she was in the UK on a student visa appeared to be a significant obstacle. However, both Olivia and the Open University Research Office were keen to give it a go and went ahead with the applications while starting all the necessary procedures for her to obtain a temporary work visa. This strategy proved to be successful. Olivia met all the deadlines for the application believing that, eventually, the visa would come and she was successful in securing an internship with the social

enterprise Insight for Good. Shortly after the visa arrived, she started to work for them.

Insight for Good is a social enterprise founded in 2017 to support organisations to achieve their desired social impact by empowering them to better measure their impact-related outputs and outcomes. From their inception, they had collaborated with the Open University to provide volunteering opportunities for students who wanted to enhance their CVs. Students – from undergraduates to PhDs – would generally write blogs for Insight for Good and help it to populate its website. At that point in time, however, Insight for Good was ready to scale up and was looking at ways to secure the necessary grants and funds to do so. Meanwhile, it was also hoping to translate its consulting expertise into codified training that could be shared with new clients. Because of these reasons, and of the opportunity that the Open University had to provide three-months paid internships for its students at small and medium enterprises thanks to its partnership with Santander Universities, the founder of Insight for Good decided to create an internship position.

When Olivia saw this opening among the list of internships available, she immediately thought that it was a good fit and authorised the Research Office to forward her CV to Insight for Good. She had already accumulated some work experience by doing an internship with the PRS Foundation during her masters and by keeping on collaborating with them and with other organisations within the music industry during her PhD. However, she felt that the arts world could be small, which might have made it harder to have a reliable career in the future, so she wanted to expand her horizons and gain some work experience in another industry. Working on a social impact project felt like a great way to gain some business experience in a non-commercial context. She was really happy when she heard back from Insight for Good and realised that they saw her profile as exactly what they were looking for.

During the internship, Olivia was officially employed by the Open University and paid by the Santander Universities grant but she had to report and be accountable to the founder of Insight for Good and work for them full-time for the three months covered by the grant. Given that Insight for Good was still a start-up based in the Kings Cross Impact Hub, Olivia mostly worked from home, going to London or to meetings with clients and collaborators only when needed. At the beginning, she was a bit disappointed by this arrangement, because, after working for four years on a solitary project (AKA the PhD), she was looking forward to sharing an office space with colleagues. However, in hindsight, she realised that actually the arrangement made her life-shift from student to employee less traumatic and her routine more flexible, while also

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avoiding her a costly daily commute to London.

At the start, the plan for Olivia was to support Insight for Good in identifying and applying for new grants, in developing their product portfolio by leveraging their proprietary IMPACT methodology and in upgrading their website and realising more content for it. While she ended up contributing to all of these strands of work, their relative priority changed significantly during the time of the internship and new activities added up as opportunities arose and as the founder of Insight for Good understood better Olivia's skills and knowledge. As planned, she looked for available grant opportunities, she edited articles that volunteers had written for the website and searched product development opportunities. However, one of her main projects became the analysis of existing competition and the mapping of the landscape of social impact approaches already available either from academic or from practitioner sources. The output of this work ended up becoming part of the training that Insight for Good is now delivering. Moreover, Olivia was involved in trade-marking the approach to social impact measurement developed by Insight for Good, in conducting a webinar, and in helping the social enterprise to understand how to develop its training program and actionable insights for its clients.

All in all, the internship was very helpful for Olivia to learn more about the social impact world and to understand “value” from a different and more quantitative perspective compared to the one she had used in her PhD when analysing the arts sector. She also discovered her entrepreneurial skills, for example when she had to explore how to trademark Insight for Good's social impact measurement tool, and she understood better the constraints and perspective of organisations looking at being financially self-sustainable through market and business mechanisms. At the beginning she found it a ▶

bit difficult to adopt a business lens but she learnt how to do it along the way and this made her more aware of how research could be of value for businesses.

Olivia completed her PhD successfully and she is now working as a policy analyst for the Work Foundation, a consultancy connected to Lancaster University. Her work focuses on creative industries and, while the internship may not have been the key factor that helped her to secure this job, it provided her with knowledge on impact and its implications that, with time, turned out to be helpful for her role. She is also happy that she kept a very good relationship with the

founder of Insight for Good – a proof that she did a good job there and that she left a good impression. The relationship with the founder and partner of the social enterprise represented a boost in confidence for Olivia, which made her believe she could have thrived in environments outside academia. Because of this, Olivia would encourage any PhD student to try out an internship – they can be great opportunities not only to enhance your CV but also to learn something new, understand yourself better and create new friendships.

## Key benefits & challenges

**A**ccording to Olivia, the main benefit of the collaboration was being exposed to a different sector. She did not have a commercial background when she started her PhD and she was afraid this could reflect in a negative way on her CV in case she wanted to apply for non-academic jobs. More importantly, she thought that the lack of significant business work experience would penalise her during interviews, as she would not have many concrete examples of transferrable skills that companies usually look for and ask about. Her experience with job interviews after the PhD proved her right and she found it extremely beneficial to have fresh examples of her initiative and communication skills thanks to the internship she had just completed.

She also found her success in securing the internship and the founder of Insight for Good's interest in her skills and experience as an incredible confidence boost. She was positively surprised that someone could tell her "your skills are exactly what I need". The fact that during the internship no one ever doubted her capabilities strengthened her belief that she had something valuable to offer. This made it less scary to accept the transition from a PhD to a context where she would not be the expert in the room but someone who would have to learn everything from scratch.

In terms of skills and knowledge, during the three months at Insight for Good, Olivia learnt a lot about social impact, about the methodologies that the government uses to assess it, and she became aware of the many databases available in the social impact world and of how impact measurement valuation works and is being used. She also gained skills in product development and course design,

in writing surveys and editing articles. These knowledge and skills proved valuable in her current job. Her work, in return, was very helpful for Insight for Good to understand better their competitive landscape and to develop their product portfolio.

While there were challenges for Olivia along the way, they were relatively small and she would define her internship experience as fully positive, a thought that is shared by the founder of Insight for Good, with whom Olivia is still in touch. If anything, Olivia wished the internship could have been six-months rather than three-months long given how quickly time flew by.

The main issue she had was understanding what the founder of Insight for Good wanted from her sometimes. In those occasions, she found it a bit hard to have to come up with ideas and plans herself. However, this also proved fun and she enjoyed having to "learn-by-doing" things that she thought she would never have to deal with, such as trademarks or developing a portfolio of products. She just wonders if she might have been even more productive with clearer instructions or if she had been more proactive in asking for clarifications.

Working remotely also made communication challenging at times, due to either technical issues or the waiting time to receive a reply. Leveraging multiple ways of communicating such as emails, Skype and WhatsApp generally managed to compensate for it and, overall, the workflow was never significantly at risk. On the flip side, working remotely lifted some of the pressure that Olivia felt from having to combine a full-time job with the need to deliver in time the corrections to her PhD work.

# Advice for other researchers

Olivia absolutely recommends doing an internship to any PhD student. The experience can be valuable in so many ways that her main suggestion in this sense would be to remain open to do an internship in different fields, as long as they seem vaguely interesting. In fact, any experience could be surprising, lead to valuable skills and knowledge and enhance your confidence by showing you that other people care about what you have to offer skills- and knowledge-wise. In the best case scenario, internships could lead to jobs and powerful networking opportunities, especially if the researcher makes an effort to keep in touch with the company. In the worst case, they might just be a bad experience with no real consequences.

In terms of timing, based on her experience Olivia believes that doing an internship at the end of the PhD, while waiting for the viva or working on corrections, might be an ideal time,

given that there might be less pressures than while in the middle of the PhD course. This said, in order not to miss out opportunities, it is important to remain alert to deadlines and upcoming internships throughout the PhD and to get as much information as possible from administrators from the very beginning.

According to the founder of Insight for Good, in order to make the most of an internship researchers should try to be as adaptable and flexible as possible and to pay attention to how data can be used in a commercial way. For example, if they make an effort to accept that small samples can still be informative, even if not statistically relevant, and to give up some details, during an internship they might have the opportunity to learn how data can be translated into business insights and intuitive decisions.