

## The Life Beyond the PhD 2023 Report by Bethany Chadburn

The Life Beyond the PhD conference, hosted by Cumberland Lodge, was a residential, weeklong event which gave attendees the opportunity to develop their skills, engage with peers from multiple universities and disciplines and, ultimately, put the abilities developed through the week to the test. Skills based sessions pushed us to think outside of the box and, often, go outside of our comfort zones. If developing a 'fake' podcast in pairs explaining your research in a nutshell wasn't hard enough, then perhaps writing your key findings as a haiku would pose a challenge! Some of the activities had clear value in helping develop transferrable skills but I quickly appreciated the value of some of the less obvious activities. Certainly, I feel I can distil my research into pretty much any format and for pretty much any audience now even though my haikus are unlikely to win prizes!

The final task of the week, designing a research mission to Mars and a permanent colony on the planet, proved the biggest challenge. In groups of six or seven, we had to quickly research enough to develop plans and then pitch those plans to a faux business committee. This was a challenge in forming efficient group dynamics under pressure as well as in researching at speed. It was also an exercise in ignoring the call of perfection because, realistically, it would never have been possible to reach perfection and still hit the deadline, a balancing act I think we are all very familiar with. With interdisciplinary skills and research interests ranging from NHS ethics to farming to history to video games, my group was sorely lacking in astrophysicists and rocket scientists... yet, somehow, and not without stress, we managed to work together, identify transferrable skills and relevant knowledge and fulfil the brief on time. With that said, if my group is responsible for future space exploration, I wouldn't expect a successful Martian visit any time soon!

While I have no doubt that the information about various professional paths and the transferrable skills and techniques I have developed over the week will be of use to me going forward, the community that developed has to stand as the most valuable aspect. The PhD experience is, regardless of how rewarding it may be, often characterised as a lonely marathon and this was something that all the attendees felt, especially with most of us in the final or writing up year. Since the event finished, there have been multiple online groups formed, people are checking in with each other and planning to meet up socially, professionally, for specific reasons or just because a bit of co-working is healthy sometimes! In a sense, discrete skills can be gained from many sources, but the formation of a community who can support and challenge each other, that is something quite special and I am truly grateful to have been a part of this event.