

Daniel Parkes – PhD Geography

At the end of the 3rd year of my PhD studying climate change during the hottest summer recorded, I had the absolute pleasure of attending Cumberland Lodge's "*Life Beyond the PhD*" Conference. Every year, the conference brings together PhD students from across the country to a multi-disciplinary conference to share their experiences, develop transferable skills, and answer the hardest question about their research "*So what?*".

I'll reflect on "*So what?*" later on and start with my thoughts going into the conference. What do I get out of this? Some communication skills, navigating the job market *etc.* That's what you think of when you read the term "*Transferable skills*". Standard buzz-term. When I walked into Cumberland Lodge I was met with an exquisite ex-royal residence which, on the face of it, embodied everything I believe to be wrong with academia. A "*Rich old white boys club*". Even knowing the ethos of the lodge, it's hard not to have doubts when you're faced with multiple grand pianos. **I could not have been more wrong.**

I entered one of the most diverse spaces I have ever seen in academia. Diverse in age, gender, discipline, ethnicity, *etc.* If we are the future of academia, then the "*Rich old white boys club*" is finally coming to an end. I don't think I've ever felt so comfortable in an academic space. **What a great start.**

On to the week. We started with excellent keynotes that set the scene of what we could do with our PhDs. As a self-declared political geek, you can imagine my excitement when Dr Patricia O'Lynn, MLA for North Antrim, stepped onto the stage to tell us how research skills transfer into evaluating policy (often to the irritation of her colleagues!). Given the political turmoil of the last few years, **wouldn't it be better if we had some more MPs with PhDs?**

The days that followed met the high expectations set on the first. We worked on presentation, written, and digital communication skills. I was over the moon when I was told I'd make a great podcast host (*I styled myself on the fantastically queer Jonathan Van Ness – can you believe?*). In the final task, I then found myself in the role I was born to play: in charge of WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for those unfamiliar) in a humanitarian challenge. Given I had given an impassioned 2-minute presentation on why I love cleaning as part of the week, it felt like a natural fit. **What a success!**

So let's come back to that question: "*So what?*". Well, in this week I felt a renewal. I spent the week talking to people doing such a diverse set of research. I know I love climate research but this week I was reminded that when asked "*So what?*", we all had the same cheesy answer: **to make people's lives better.** I want to thank the organisers for bringing me back to that and would whole-heartedly recommend this week to any researcher. No regrets.

