

**Graduate  
Research  
Internship  
Scheme 2020  
Evaluation Report**

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	4
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	6
<b>2. Implementing the Graduate Research Internship scheme</b> .....	6
<b>2.1. Recruitment</b> .....	6
<b>2.2. Induction</b> .....	7
<b>2.3. Research projects</b> .....	7
<b>2.4. Monitoring and evaluation – Data collection</b> .....	9
<b>3. Key findings from the evaluation of the GRI scheme</b> .....	9
<b>3.1. The profile of the Graduate Research Interns</b> .....	9
<b>3.2. The interns’ expectations</b> .....	10
<b>3.3. The interns’ experience</b> .....	11
3.3.1. Interns’ research tasks.....	11
3.3.2. Interns’ ‘take-aways’.....	11
3.3.3. Internships - positive internship experiences.....	12
3.3.4. Meeting the internship expectations.....	13
3.3.5. Norland - a ‘nice’ place to work!.....	14
3.3.6. Recommendation!.....	14
<b>3.4. Reflections of the research leads</b> .....	14
3.4.1. A strong foundation for kick-starting the research projects.....	14
3.4.2. Research informing institutional practices.....	15
3.4.3. Mentoring and management skills.....	15
3.4.4. Challenges.....	15
3.4.5. Time zone difference.....	15
<b>3.5. Research project progress</b> .....	15
<b>3.6. What made the Graduate Research Internship scheme work?</b> .....	16
3.6.1. Lead researchers’ commitment.....	16
3.6.2. The recruitment processes and support from HR.....	16
3.6.3. Funding received.....	16
3.6.4. The high calibre of interns recruited.....	17
<b>4. Concluding comments</b> .....	17
<b>4.1. Achieving the GRI objectives and aim</b> .....	17
<b>4.2. Lessons learned – Enhancing the GRI scheme</b> .....	18

<b>4.3. Action Plan for the GRI scheme 2020-2021</b> .....	19
<b>Appendix I - Intern 'Knowledge, Skills and Support required' form</b> .....	20
<b>Appendix II - Timesheet</b> .....	22
<b>Appendix III - Interns' self-report of research knowledge and skills on starting/completing their internship</b> .....	23

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## Executive summary

The graduate research internship (GRI) scheme was introduced at Norland in 2020. The main aim of the scheme is to enhance Norland's research environment and culture in order to meet its research key performance indicators (KPIs). The key objectives of the scheme are twofold: first, to provide additional support to Norland academics/researchers who are conducting research projects; and, second, to enable graduates to practise what they learned about research during their studies and enhance their professional working competencies.

In summer 2020, five interns were employed part-time over eight weeks from July to September. Three of the five interns were international students and two were from the UK. One intern was a Norland graduate, one a psychology graduate and a third a graduate of early childhood studies and psychology. Two interns were completing their Master's degrees. Due to COVID-19, all five interns worked remotely – four from different locations in the UK and one from abroad.

The interns supported five research projects which focused on different aspects of Norland's programmes of study: the curriculum offered, assessment methods, blended learning introduced in response to the COVID-19 situation, the transition from study to work and lifelong learning, and the Norland studentship demographic. The initiation of these projects reflects Norland's commitment to increasing its evidence base in relation to its provision of research-informed and evidence-based qualifications.

As this was the first time that the GRI scheme had operated at Norland, it was important to conduct an internal evaluation in order to:

- explore the extent to which it achieved its objectives and the overall aim
- record lessons learned
- identify improvements required to roll out the scheme in the long term
- have an action plan for implementing the scheme in summer 2021.

Information was collected from the interns, the Norland researchers and other staff involved with the internship scheme (i.e., Human Resources personnel, the librarian and the Research Fellow).

***“Working with Norland made me feel like a valued member of the team, which is not always the case when you join a new workplace, especially for a short amount of time. Thank you” (Intern A)***

The evaluation has shown that the interns brought to the college a wealth of research-specific knowledge and skills, and a range of professional and transferable skills. Practising their existing skills, gaining confidence in using them, working in a professional context and building professional networks were among their key expectations.

On completion of the internship, the feedback received from the interns was positive, highlighting increased confidence in using their research skills, together with enhanced personal and professional skills. They all commented on Norland's positive, collegial and supportive environment and culture.

The feedback received from Norland researchers revealed that having an intern helped them to kick-start and progress with the projects. The interns provided invaluable input by conducting literature and secondary data searches, reviewing and summarising research papers, and contributing to

methodologies and methods of collecting data and drafting research tools. Working with recent graduates on the research projects enabled the researchers to take a more empathetic approach when formulating their research questions and considering their methodologies. The research project and the internship scheme also enabled staff to work in a dual role of mentor and learner. The researchers acknowledged that the internship scheme allowed them to enhance their mentoring skills and work with the interns at the postgraduate level; an introduction to skills at this level of study is pertinent, as Norland is planning to develop a postgraduate qualification.

***“The internship programme has given me much-needed support and kick-started this important project ... This invaluable start has already produced interesting findings and stimulated discussion among the team and further afield as well” (Researcher DBn)***

The launch and successful implementation of the scheme was largely due to the following enabling factors:

- the commitment and determination of the researchers to kick off their research projects; despite the overwhelming situation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the additional demands made on staff as a result, and the fact that summer is reserved for annual leave, lead researchers committed to starting the research projects and supporting the interns
- the responsiveness and organisation of the Human Resources personnel
- the high calibre of the graduate research interns recruited
- the commitment of the Norland leadership to the scheme and the funding received from the Norland Foundation.

In future, the scheme would benefit from:

- regular research training sessions for all interns, beyond the mentoring and support received from the researchers with whom they work
- a series of frequent social events for interns, beyond the contacts which they are making with each other on their own initiative
- regular researchers’ meetings to discuss issues of mentoring and exchange ideas and good practices.

An action plan has been devised to refine and finalise the scheme for its implementation in summer 2021.

## 1. Introduction

The graduate research internship (GRI) scheme was introduced at Norland in 2020 with the main aim of enhancing Norland’s research environment and culture in order to meet its research KPIs. Key objectives of the GRI scheme are (i) to provide additional support to Norland academics/researchers who are conducting research projects, and (ii) to enable graduates to put into practice what they learned about research during their studies.

For Norland, the GRI scheme makes its research visible in the wider academic community, while for the interns it provides opportunities for further insights into the world of research and equips them with a range of transferable skills, such as professional communication, receiving constructive feedback, addressing challenges, teamworking, networking and independence. For both Norland and the interns, the GRI scheme brings together a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience, which can be applied and enhanced in a collaborative and collegial working environment.

***Key objectives of the GRI scheme are to provide additional support to Norland academics/researchers who are conducting research projects, and to enable graduates to put into practice what they learned about research during their studies***

## 2. Implementing the graduate research internship scheme

### 2.1. Recruitment

The GRI scheme has a duration of eight weeks, over the summer, and offers successful applicants the opportunity to work either full-time or part-time on an identified research project. For summer 2020, two calls for applications were advertised. The first call was for Norland graduates. Three applications were received, and all three applicants were interviewed. All three applicants were appointable. One applicant was appointed and started her internship in July. The other two applicants were not offered the internship as they had existing or forthcoming full-time employment which overlapped with the internship. A second call was issued in the wider university community. Nineteen applications were received. Six applicants were shortlisted, and four applicants were appointed.

Shortlisted applicants were interviewed by a panel comprising the Research Fellow; the Head of Department (HoD) of Teaching, Learning and Research and/or a researcher leading a research project; and a member of Human Resources (HR). Applicants were asked to give a short PowerPoint presentation on one of three proposed topics, all of which were related to research projects that they could potentially join.

In total, five interns were employed, part-time (0.5 appointments), over eight weeks from July to September. Three of the five interns were international students and two were from the UK. One intern was a Norland graduate, one a psychology graduate and one a graduate of early childhood studies and psychology. Two interns were completing their Master’s in early childhood. Due to COVID-19, all five interns worked remotely – four in different locations in the UK, and one from abroad.

## 2.2. Induction

All interns were invited to an induction meeting. A shorter version of the induction schedule, used by HR, was developed for this particular purpose. The interns met with the HoD, the Research Fellow and the research leads. The HoD provided general information about Norland, including its structure, systems and policies. The Research Fellow outlined the purpose of the GRI scheme, working expectations as per the job description, and specific requirements. This was an opportunity for all interns to meet each other and to get to know members of the academic team. Individual meetings were arranged between each research lead and the intern who was joining their research project, to discuss the project in detail and set out a schedule of work. The induction aimed at supporting the interns from the start of their time working at Norland to have a positive experience, as well as enabling the college to achieve its intended outcomes and outputs.

***The induction aimed at supporting the interns from the start of their time working at Norland to have a positive experience, as well as enabling the college to achieve its intended outcomes and outputs***

At the start of the internship, the interns were asked to complete:

- the form 'Knowledge, skills, and support required' (Appendix I), so that the lead researchers and the Research Fellow would have an overview of the knowledge and skills which the interns brought to the scheme and the support which they required during their internship
- a timesheet to record their weekly working hours and tasks pursued/accomplished (Appendix II).

On completion of the internships, the interns were asked to:

- complete the form 'Knowledge, skills, and support required' again to establish their progress and learning from the internship and provide further reflections
- present their experience and learning from their internship in the presence of all other interns, research leads and Norland staff
- participate (voluntarily) in an exit interview with HR.

## 2.3. Research projects

Each of the interns joined one of the following five research projects:

- *The Norland studentship demographic*
- *Curriculum mapping*
- *Exploration of a viva as an assessment tool for work-based assessment in early childhood undergraduate studies*
- *More connected, whilst further apart? A reflection and investigation of an HEI's experience of supporting students through blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic*
- *How do students, NQNs and Norlanders apply the professional development module and unit learning outcomes to their practice, and do they use these to inform their lifelong learning?*

The projects above formed sub-projects of the college-wide research project 'A degree with a difference?' This project was conceived in the 'research conversation cafe' (RCC) meetings that were organised in spring 2020. The discussion during one of the RCC meetings focused on Norland's claim that it offers a degree with a difference. While good arguments were put forward to substantiate the

claim that Norland offers a degree with a difference – such as the unique curricula and qualifications offered, the teaching and learning approaches, the proactive and ongoing support provided to students, the identification of student learning needs early on, and the characteristics and demographics of Norland students – the evidence was anecdotal. It was in this context that the research project ‘A degree with a difference?’ started to evolve, with academics/researchers focusing on areas of research that reflected their teaching and learning interests and responsibilities.

The purpose of the research projects was to enhance Norland’s evidence base relating to the uniqueness of the qualifications offered and the distinct teaching and learning environment established. Most importantly, the research evidence was intended to inform the rewrite of the BA degree (scheduled at the time to be validated in 2021), so that the qualification offered is research informed and evidence based.

It is worth noting that the GRI scheme was introduced under the extraordinary situation and demands made on Norland staff and the wider academic community due to COVID-19. From mid-March, all staff had to make changes and adapt to new ways of working overnight. This created additional workload and the need for quick responses to student requests and operational demands. The evolving uncertain and unpredictable COVID-19 situation meant that staff were required to work on contingency plans for the next academic year over the summer. This was the time when most of the staff (if not everyone) expected to have a much-needed break.

Postponing the research projects until the next academic year would potentially have dampened the initial enthusiasm and commitment. Continuing with the research projects unaided at such a demanding time – and over the summer, when staff were looking forward to taking their annual leave – would have been extremely difficult. Thus, assistance was critical in getting the research projects off the ground without losing momentum.

It was in this context that the GRI scheme was launched. All research leads committed to working with the interns during the internship. They relinquished some of their annual leave to support and guide the interns. They met with their interns regularly (at least weekly), and they were available for email queries and clarifications. The Research Fellow was available one day a week, during her annual leave, to support the interns and research leads as requested and/or when needed. The internship scheme was implemented remotely, and all meetings were scheduled via Microsoft Teams.

Appointed interns worked with the research leads on literature and secondary data searches, paper reviews, drafts of research proposals, information and consent letters, and research tools. The key aim of the internship scheme was to kick off the research projects, and expected outputs included initial searches, secondary data-gathering, literature reviews and the drafting of research proposals by the end of September 2020, so that ethics approval could be sought if required.

The working pattern of interns was flexible. They were asked to use a timesheet to record the working dates/times and the tasks accomplished in order to monitor their workload and be accountable and realistic regarding what they could achieve. For Norland, the purpose of the timesheet was to review the workload and establish achievable workload expectations and targets for interns.



## 2.4. Monitoring and evaluation – data collection

As the GRI scheme was being implemented at Norland for the first time, it was decided that it should be monitored and evaluated in order to:

- establish the extent to which its overall aims were achieved
- record lessons learned
- identify improvements required to roll out the scheme in the long term
- have an action plan for implementing the scheme in subsequent years.

This was an internal evaluation based on the information routinely gathered for monitoring the implementation of the scheme, which included:

- information from the interns, including the completion of the ‘Knowledge, skills, and support required’ form at the start and on completion of the internship; presentations and reflections on their learning and experience both during and on completion of the internship; and the exit interviews with HR
- feedback from the research leads regarding their experience on completion of the internship
- the Research Fellow’s reflections on her experience of the process and outcomes of the scheme
- feedback from HR on the process of recruitment and appointment of the interns.

The interns were informed that the information and their reflections would be used to monitor and evaluate the scheme in order to consider further improvements. In this report, pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity.

## 3. Key findings from the evaluation of the GRI scheme

The information collected was analysed to identify emerging key issues related to the introduction of the scheme. The findings are presented under key emerging themes related to the profile of the interns appointed; their expectations and takeaway points on completion of the internship; the impact of the scheme on kick-starting the research projects; the mentoring and management skills of researchers; the training and additional support required for the interns; and the recruitment and induction process.

### 3.1. The profile of the graduate research interns

All five interns completed the ‘Knowledge, skills, and support required’ form at the start of their internship. Their responses showed that collectively they brought to the internship a wealth of research-specific knowledge and skills, including:

- **a wide range of research skills**, such as searching and synthesising literature; undertaking literature reviews and report-writing; using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods; managing and analysing qualitative data; and using SPSS, Qualtrics and JASP for quantitative data analysis
- **familiarity with databases** such as Google Scholar, Academia, ResearchGate, Wiley, PsycNet, ProQuest and the Zotero reference management application

*The interns brought to the GRI scheme a wealth of research knowledge and skills and expected to strengthen and enhance them during the internship, while looking to develop their professional and transferable skills and build professional networks*

- **good knowledge of methods of collecting data**, including questionnaires and surveys/online surveys, experimental designs and controlled experiments, interviews, observations, self-reports and documentation, desktop research, and documentary analysis
- **a wide range of professional and transferable skills**, such as the ability to look at the bigger picture/context, attention to detail, willingness to learn, time management, problem-solving, perseverance, good work ethics, good interpersonal communication skills, good at dealing with stress, and flexible at solving problems.

Reflecting on their work with the interns, the research leads noted the interns' specific traits and characteristics. One research lead stated that the intern *"was methodical, systematic, and well-organised in her work. She produced excellent reviews of papers, including her learning from, and reflections on the reviewed paper. This additional input was useful, as the intern's background was not in early childhood. It provided an external critical view of the topics researched. The intern showed an interest in the research topic itself and engaged in interesting conversations and questions."* Another lead researcher commented that the intern was *"diligent in her research and has played a critical role in situating the research in literature and our discussions were so valuable in finding the right approach to the research"*.

**Crossing cultural barriers can be an enriching professional and learning experience for all those who are involved**

Cultural awareness and learning were also highlighted by another lead researcher, who noted that the intern was *"respectful and kind"*. The lead researcher noted that *"this did at the beginning [prove] to be a barrier to getting a discussion started. We overcame this by reading a shared article which gave us focus and this was a way into sharing our thoughts and ideas."* This feedback illustrates the range of different qualities which the interns brought to the scheme, and the reflexivity and responsiveness required by the researchers to reinterpret professional communication and conduct to create an enabling environment. Crossing cultural barriers can be an enriching professional and learning experience for all those who are involved.

### 3.2. The interns' expectations

The interns' expectations from the scheme were both research-specific and broader in scope, and included:

- **strengthening and enhancing research-specific skills**, e.g. strengthening existing foundations of research knowledge and skills, enhancing academic skills doing literature reviews and writing, improving critical thinking, gaining greater confidence in research design, and gaining knowledge of some cutting-edge research approaches and methodologies
- **developing further professional/transferrable knowledge and skills**, e.g. being proactive and conscientious when working from home, and planning and scheduling tasks appropriately
- **building professional relationships** and gaining experience working with senior academics.

The interns' research development needs included:

- **getting more knowledge and practice** relating to research in general and practising existing skills, e.g. doing desktop research and accessing different databases, besides Google Scholar and Discovery

- **gaining confidence** in academic writing and using Excel, analysing data using relevant software, and focus group discussions.

### 3.3. The interns' experience

On completion of their internship, the interns shared their thoughts on the experience with Norland staff. A half-day event, entitled 'Sharing the Internship Experience', was organised during the last week of the internship. Each intern prepared a PowerPoint presentation, in which they outlined the tasks in which they were involved, their learning about the topic, and their experience and learning from the internship in general. Analysis of their presentations revealed the wide range of tasks in which they were involved, their 'takeaway' learning points and aspects of the experience that they enjoyed the most as well as those that they found challenging, as outlined next.

#### 3.3.1. Interns' research tasks

The **research tasks** that the interns carried out depended on the nature and needs of the projects. The tasks included:

- keyword searching, database and literature searches
- writing summaries of papers and literature reviews
- synthesising literature reviews and identifying emerging key issues
- putting together with the research lead the draft research proposal and/or adding details to existing proposals (e.g., research rationale, data analysis methods)
- drafting of surveys, interview questions and the participant information and consent letters
- undertaking secondary data analysis, e.g. sorting out useful and matching information to the research project, making charts and graphs of useful data
- writing brief reports based on data analysis.

#### 3.3.2. Interns' 'takeaways'

The interns acknowledged that they had practised and improved a range of research and professional/transferable skills and had acquired topic-specific knowledge, as summarised below.

- **Improvements in research-specific knowledge and skills**, including literature searches and literature management; references; improvement of ICT skills, software and programmes (e.g., using Microsoft Teams); use of Excel (e.g., adding filters in an Excel pivot table to sort out target data, being more fluent in making charts and graphs); research ethics; and methods of collecting data.
- **Professional and transferable skills**, e.g. time management, self-motivation, how to work independently and from home, gained new working experience, learned how to work on a 'staff' level with academics, improvement of communication skills.
- **Topic-specific knowledge**, e.g. early years qualifications, the Norland studentship demographic (one intern commented "useful for my future study!"), blended learning, cultural differences on the way technology is viewed and used, learning styles and personality differences, the nanny–parent relationship, and transitions and lifelong learning.
- **Favourite parts** included the first initial group meeting, weekly meetings with research leads and even making their own email signature. The last comment might be seen as a minor

*"I can take forward the skills I have learned through to my masters and also hopefully to a future PhD" (Intern Am)*

point, but it indicates how initial thought and action in treating the interns as professionals can shape their expectations and impact on their experience as professionals who have collegial status.

- **Challenges and tough moments** were part of the experience and had largely to do with interns' own high expectations, which led to, as one intern put it, *“overthinking and worrying what I was doing wasn't enough; worrying I would let the researchers down ... some weeks finding it difficult to fill 17.5 hours, and trusting my own initiative”* (Intern Am). The challenges experienced by the intern were also noted by their research lead, who commented that the intern *“lacked autonomy and would seek specific guidance and reassurance on what to do next”*.

The comments regarding the challenges experienced are a reminder that some interns may need reassurance at the beginning of their internships about their workload and expected outputs and the challenges presented at different stages of a research project. It is known that literature and database searches, at early stages of research projects, often involve doubts about the outputs produced. Literature searches take a lot of effort and time, which is not always evident in the tangible outputs produced. While the timesheet was introduced to enable the interns to monitor their work and set realistic expectations, further guidance and reassurance at the initial stages of the internship are necessary to build confidence and realistic expectations.

### 3.3.3. Internships – positive internship experiences

Overall, the interns' reflections on their internship experience revealed a positive experience, as shown in the following comments:

*“great internship experience, amazing support, interesting topics, good access to resources, new opportunities, positive challenges, valuable work experience”* (Intern Al)

*“great to work along with a more knowledgeable other, overcoming the imposter-syndrome, wanting to see it through to the end”* (Intern Jn)

*“working remotely, and flexible working time”* (Intern Yn)

*“benefiting my future career and gained valuable experience”* (Intern Kn)

*“I can take forward the skills I have learned through to my masters and hopefully to a future PhD”* (Intern Am).

The interns elaborated on some of these comments in the 'Knowledge, skills, and support required' form, which was completed (for a second time) at the end of their internship:

*“what I think I learned is how important it is to work flexibly ... I became much more confident in every aspect of designing a research project! I found it particularly useful to have regular catch-ups with the research lead as it helped me to know that I was on the right track and I always learned a lot about different research methods, just by chatting it through. I also really liked that I could do it remotely, even though I found it a bit difficult to discipline myself to sit down and work because I was at home, however, I quickly became used to it”* (Intern Jn).

***“Working in collaboration with a new graduate facilitated a more empathetic approach to the formulation of research questions and consideration of research methodology”***  
***(Research Lead)***

*“This experience is new and unforgettable. Firstly, it is the first time for me to work in English the whole time, not in my mother tongue. Next, it is the first time for me to work remotely. Then, during this internship, I enhanced skills such as analysing quantitative data analysis, searching information by using keywords, editing Excel pivot table, making charts and tables, writing brief reports, etc. Besides, the colleagues and my research lead are supportive and nice during my internship, I learned something from them” (Intern Kn).*

*“I have significantly improved my skills in Microsoft Excel which was something I was not too confident [in], so I am pleased about this. I believe the skills I have utilised and gained will help me going into my further study of my masters. In addition, the working remotely will also benefit me significantly going forward as my masters are online learning” (Intern Am).*

*“The methods of focus group and digital storytelling to collect data were initially two relatively new methods for me, but I have learned a lot about them now” (Intern Yn).*

***This experience is new and unforgettable” (Intern Kn)***

The sentiments expressed by the interns about their experience were supported by research leads’ feedback, which noted, among other things, that the *“internship was in my mind a success”* and that *“This has been a positive experience for both myself and Norland College.”*

The table in Appendix III supports the improvement of the interns’ research skills. These skills were different for each intern, depending on the requirements of their research projects.

### **3.3.4. Meeting the internship expectations**

All five interns participated in the exit interview with HR. The interview focused on the interns’ induction, training, the experience of remote working and whether their expectations of the internship were met. The emerging key issues from the exit interviews reinforced the fact that interns had enjoyed positive experiences, as is shown below.

***Meeting the internship expectations.*** The interns commented that they knew what to expect from the start of their internship. The internship was a good experience for thinking about doing further studies, e.g. a Master’s. It enhanced their research skills by allowing them to exchange ideas with and get advice from the lead researchers, and it improved specific skills such as Excel skills, working flexibly and literature and secondary data searches.

***The training*** received was mostly informal and through the mentoring of research leads. As one intern noted: *“There was always someone on hand/easy to [get] hold of people, if/when they needed assistance, and the supervisor/lead researcher was helpful.”*

One training session was organised by the Research Fellow, and interns commented that this was helpful. The focus group session was organised at the request of the interns, because this method of collecting data was not among the collective knowledge and skills of the interns. One of the interns noted that data analysis sessions would have been helpful, but she acknowledged that this was not part of the project focus at this stage. It is recommended that in the future implementation of the scheme, a schedule of training sessions is developed after the interns have joined the scheme.

***“There was always someone on hand/easy to [get] hold of people, if/when they needed assistance, and the supervisor/lead researcher was helpful” (Intern Am)***

**Working conditions.** Due to COVID-19, all interns worked remotely, and these arrangements were viewed as being good. The interns mentioned that they would not have been able to do the internship if they hadn't been able to work remotely. Despite the convenience of remote working, interns stated that under different circumstances, face-to-face meetings and learning would be useful.

One intern, however, noted that there was anxiety as to whether the work produced was appropriate for the weekly working hours and acknowledged that working remotely required self-motivation. Some technical issues were mentioned, but these were resolved.

***“Working with Norland made me feel like a valued member of the team, which is not always the case when you join a new workplace, especially for a short amount of time. Thank you” (Intern AI)***

**Induction** was found to be informative and useful. The background information about Norland was particularly useful for the interns, enabling them to understand the college's systems and processes. The interns found the library induction very good and informative. The librarian arranged a Microsoft Teams library induction with all interns, provided them with written guidance on how to use the library's online resources and made a copy of the publication *Cite them Right* available to each of them. Some of the interns approached the librarian for advice and help later on, indicating that this outreach worked well.

### **3.3.5. Norland – a ‘nice’ place to work!**

The interns commented that the internship was a good opportunity and stated that the people at Norland are nice! In an email to HR, one of the interns noted: *“Working with Norland made me feel like a valued member of the team, which is not always the case when you join a new workplace, especially for a short amount of time. Thank you”* (Intern AI).

### **3.3.6. Recommendation**

The intern who was a Norland graduate recommended that the scheme should be advertised early, so that more Norland graduates can apply as they plan for their NQN placement. The same intern expressed her interest in continuing to collaborate on the project, and the Research Lead is fully in support of this.

## **3.4. Reflections of the research leads**

The feedback from the lead researchers revealed a positive experience and outcomes at different levels, as follows.

### **3.4.1. A strong foundation for kick-starting the research projects**

The literature searches and reviews of papers for each research project meant that the findings were catalogued and easy to access. This was also an opportunity for researchers to work on a larger-scale research project and see how this could inform future practice. One of the lead researchers noted: *“The internship programme has given me much-needed support and kick-started this important project. Without the support and focus of the intern and the Research Fellow, this initial work would still be far down on a long list of things to do. This invaluable start has already produced interesting findings and stimulated discussion among the [mentions the department] team and further afield as well... most critically, it has laid the foundations for the rest of this 12-month project.”*

### 3.4.2. Research informing institutional practices

Lead researchers highlighted the importance of having interns to support a research project that will directly inform Norland's higher education practices. One researcher noted: *"Having a research intern allowed the project to progress during the busiest part of the year. Progress is crucial if the data is to be used to inform the rewrite of the degree."* Another researcher commented: *"I found the internship scheme a useful asset for connecting with our target group. Working in collaboration with a new graduate facilitated a more empathetic approach to the formulation of research questions and consideration of research methodology."*

### 3.4.3. Mentoring and management skills

The internship scheme gave lead researchers the opportunity to build mentoring and management skills and to support students at a postgraduate level. The projects were ever evolving due to either initial literature searches or the nature of the focus of some of the projects. Therefore, weekly meetings were vital for discussing findings and how identified key issues could be explored further. One of the research leads highlighted how these skills evolved, stating: *"The intern [name of an intern] and I worked in a collaborative way learning from each other, we shared strategies, discussed ways in which the project might move and considered concepts which the literature was identifying. We analysed reading as a collective and shared way of recording this."* The interns also had a good support network with each other and the Research Fellow.

### 3.4.4. Challenges

Some challenges were noted regarding the timing of the internship, intern autonomy and time zone differences for interns working remotely. The main time that the research leads spent working with the interns was during the usual annual leave window for teaching staff. This meant that staff needed to meet with interns during their annual leave. In addition, this was a very busy summer due to the increased meetings because of the pandemic, which had to take priority. So, this caused researchers to have less time to read through the work produced by the interns and prepare for meetings.

### 3.4.5. Time zone difference

One of the interns (a Master's student) was working remotely from abroad. Due to COVID-19, she was unable to return to the UK. The time difference was a challenge, but the researcher noted that the intern was *"most accommodating, we met regularly with emails to touch base during the week"*.

## 3.5. Research project progress

***The Norland studentship demographic*** – The initial work done with the intern will form the basis of marketing data analysis that will feed into the annual recruitment report in November. The next stage in this project is to complete the data analysis by focusing on more detailed Norland data as well as school and geographic data provided by UCAS. Following this analysis in November, the researcher will consider if there are specific gaps in the existing data that may need to be explored through a survey and/or focus group discussions. If so, an application will be made to the research ethics committee for this additional research.

***Curriculum mapping*** – Some further key reading is required to update and finalise the literature review document. The key findings will be presented and discussed at a lecturing team meeting to consider whether to conduct a follow-up empirical study.

***Exploration of a viva as an assessment tool for work-based assessment in early childhood undergraduate studies*** – The research project proposal was drafted at the end of the internship. This is due to be finalised and submitted for ethics approval.

***More connected, whilst further apart? A reflection and investigation of an HEI's experience of supporting students through blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic*** – Some key papers still need to be read and reviewed by the research team, as the input may be invaluable to the study. The researchers will keep working through the emerging guidance, policies and legislation regarding COVID-19 before finalising the research proposal for ethics approval. As the COVID-19 situation is changing, it is pertinent for the researchers to have a clearer idea of how to proceed with the research project.

***How do students, NQNs and Norlanders apply the professional development module and unit learning outcomes to their practice, and do they use these to inform their lifelong learning?*** – A draft research proposal has been prepared. This is to be finalised so that ethics approval can be sought.

### **3.6. What made the graduate research internship scheme work?**

#### **3.6.1. Lead researchers' commitment**

The call for applications for the GRI for summer 2020 took place during the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19. Yet, it was crucial to go ahead with the scheme as a group of academics and researchers started to develop their ideas about the college-wide research project 'A degree with a difference'. Despite the challenges of COVID-19 and the additional demands the situation had created, colleagues were committed to their research project ideas. They also committed to taking time off during their annual leave to support the interns who joined their research project. This project was possible only because of the collective commitment of the research leads to start their research projects under these extraordinary circumstances and support the interns who joined their projects.

#### **3.6.2. The recruitment processes and support from HR**

The recruitment of the interns took place in a very short timescale with tight deadlines. Under these circumstances, the recruitment was possible because of the responsiveness and organisation of the HR department. Soon after the appointment of the interns, the Research Fellow reviewed the recruitment process with HR. An initial plan was drafted for the implementation of the scheme for the next academic year.

The plan sets out the roles and responsibilities of involved staff, the processes and systems needed to be in place, and deadlines for certain actions. For equity and equal opportunity purposes, HR will issue an internal college-wide call for researchers to express an interest in having an intern attached to their project.

#### **3.6.3. Funding received**

The funding received from the Norland Foundation was a catalyst for the introduction of the GRI scheme. It is hoped that the evaluation report provides the evidence required to establish this initiative as a long-term project.



### 3.6.4. The high calibre of interns recruited

The recruited interns brought to Norland a wealth of research-specific knowledge and skills, strong work ethics, and professional attitudes and engagement. They were keen and eager to contribute to research projects, learn about the topic and enhance their knowledge and skills.

## 4. Concluding comments

The GRI scheme was introduced with the aim of enhancing Norland’s research environment and culture in order to meet its research KPIs. The key objectives of the scheme were (i) to provide additional support to Norland academics/researchers who are conducting research projects, and (ii) to enable graduates to put into practice what they learned about research during their studies. The evaluation of the scheme was intended to:

- explore the extent to which it achieved its objectives and the overall aim
- record lessons learned
- identify improvements required to roll out the scheme in the long term
- help in devising an action plan for implementing the scheme in summer 2021.

### 4.1. Achieving the GRI objectives and aim

The key findings discussed above indicate that the scheme was successfully launched and implemented during summer 2020. Five research projects were supported by five appointed interns. The interns engaged with literature and secondary data searches, produced literature review summaries, explored methodologies and methods of collecting data appropriate for the research projects, and drafted participant information letters and data collection tools. Their input was invaluable in the progress of each research project, as discussed. The internship scheme kicked off a college-wide research project that will enhance the evidence base for decision-making and institutional learning. The research project and the internship scheme also enabled staff to be involved in research in a collegial and supportive environment, working in a dual role of mentor and learner. The research leads acknowledged that the internship scheme allowed them to enhance their mentoring skills and work with the interns at the postgraduate level. An introduction to skills at this level of study is pertinent, as Norland is planning to develop a postgraduate qualification. Importantly, working with recent graduates allowed research leads to take a more empathetic approach when formulating their research questions and considering their methodologies.

#### *Enabling factors*

***Commitment of the researchers; responsiveness from HR; high-calibre interns; Norland leadership commitment; and funding received from the Norland Foundation***

The interns brought to Norland a wide range of research-specific and transferable and professional skills. These skills, interwoven with the expertise of Norland researchers, offered strong foundations for launching the research projects. The interns worked largely independently; they were given autonomy in order to enhance their confidence to make sound judgements and decisions, under the regular supervision and mentoring of the research leads. They were also in regular contact with the Research Fellow for updates and any additional support required. Having international interns and interns who studied other disciplines beyond early childhood provided an external and critical perspective on the topics researched.

The interns' reflections and feedback showed that they had the opportunity to practise and enhance specific skills, depending on the nature and stage of each research project, but they were particularly appreciative of their experience of being treated as accomplished professionals, which is an affirmation of Norland's collegial and supportive culture and environment.

Key enabling factors for the successful launch and implementation of the scheme included:

- the commitment and determination of all research leads to proceed with their research projects, despite the challenges of COVID-19 and the fact that the scheme was implemented during the period when annual leave is taken
- the responsiveness and excellent organisation by HR personnel, who worked under very tight schedules
- the commitment of the Norland leadership to the scheme and the funding received from the Norland Foundation
- the recruitment and employment of high-calibre interns.

#### **4.2. Lessons learned – enhancing the GRI scheme**

**Timing of internships and call for GRI applicants.** Further steps are recommended to be taken as follows:

- lecturers to promote the GRI scheme among Norland students and encourage them to apply
- information about the GRI scheme to be uploaded to Norland's website so that it is visible to the wider academic community
- one call for applications to be issued for both Norland and external graduates in good time for the scheme to be implemented in July and August 2021
- staff applications/request for an intern to be internally advertised by HR in January 2021
- the GRI scheme documentation to be reviewed and revised for use in the implementation of the scheme in summer 2021
- seek and secure funding for the summer 2021 internships.

**Intern induction – remote working.** The induction was short, informative and useful. Remote working did not give the immediacy and collegial atmosphere created when working on-site, but efforts were made to replicate this by having regular and frequent contact with the interns. The time zone of one of the interns meant that they and the research lead needed to take care to arrange meetings at times convenient for them both, and this worked well. Remote working however allowed Norland to recruit interns of high calibre, who were not deterred from applying because of the location of the internship. There were no major issues with remote working, apart from some challenges regarding IT; therefore, IT induction will be included in the induction schedule.

**Training and social interaction of interns.** Research-specific training was mainly informal, via the research leads, and depended on the nature and needs of each research project. There was one scheduled research training session by the Research Fellow on a particular data collection method (focus group discussions) that was not part of the collective knowledge and skills which the interns brought to the scheme.

The interns also had two organised get-together meetings – at the beginning of their internship to meet each other, and at the end of the internship when they shared their experiences. The interns' feedback has indicated that further training and social gathering events would be appreciated. Thus,

- a comprehensive research training programme will be organised for future interns, with fortnightly sessions, chosen and agreed by the interns
- social gatherings will be organised, in agreement with the interns, either on-site or remotely, depending on how the scheme is implemented.

***Intern workload.*** It was evident that flexible remote working raised some anxiety, e.g. over self-motivation and discipline, as well as whether the amount of work produced was appropriate for the weekly working hours contracted. In future, the timesheet which the interns complete may be used for discussion with the research leads about the time spent on different tasks. Doing so weekly may alleviate any anxieties and provide reassurance and guidance in relation to having realistic expectations. Working with literature searches is often time-consuming with limited tangible outcomes to demonstrate, and this may alleviate anxiety.

***Lead researcher mentoring and management support.*** Lead researchers noted the opportunity for mentoring and managing the interns. Sharing experiences of working with the interns will be useful in enhancing such skills further. It is therefore recommended that regular, possibly fortnightly, meetings are organised for the research leads, in which they can exchange ideas and good practices.

#### **4.3. Action plan for the GRI scheme 2020–2021**

An action plan has been developed, which aims to enhance and further improve the scheme for its implementation in summer 2021. This has been approved and shared with involved departments and individuals.



6. State the methods of collecting data you have good knowledge of:

7. State the methods of collecting data you will need support with:

8. Do you know any other applications (e.g. managing references)?

Please comment on any other issues:



## Appendix II – Timesheet

### Timesheet

**Name:**

**Department:**

**Month:**

**Week 1  
commencing:**

	<i>Start time</i>	<i>Lunch break</i>	<i>End time</i>	<i>No. of hours worked</i>	<i>Tasks completed</i>
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					

### Appendix III – Interns’ self-report of research knowledge and skills on starting/completing their internship

Knowledge and skills	Before/after*				
	Jn	Al	Kn	Am	Yn
Library searches	4/5	4/5	4/4	5/5	4/4
Database searches	4/5	2/5	3/3	4/5	4/4
Reading papers	4/5	4/5	4/4	4/5	3/4
Summarising papers	4/5	4/5	4/4	3/5	3/4
Writing an annotated bibliography	3/4	1/3	1/3	3/5	3/3
Writing literature reviews	4/5	2/4	4/4	4/5	3/3
Primary/secondary reference in-text citation	3/4	4/4	3/3	3/3	4/4
References	3/4	4/4***	5/5	5/5	4/4
Research ethics	4/5	4/4	4/4	5/5	4/4
Different methods of collecting data	2/4	3/4	3/4	4/5	3/4
Writing research proposals	2/3	3/4	4/4	4/4	4/4
Confidence in ICT	4/5	4/4	4/4	5/5	3/4
Confidence in using Excel	3/**	4/4	4/4	4/5	3/4
Confidence in PP presentation skills	4/**	4/5	1/4	4/5	3/3

**Green:** rating on completion of the internship

\*rating scale: 1 (low) to 5 (high)

\*\*skill not used

\*\*\* introduced to Harvard referencing, previously used APA

Interns Kn and Yn were doing their Master’s at the time of the internship.

All interns joined Norland College with a good range of research skills. On joining the scheme, they brought skills which were rated at 4 or 5 across the listed skills. All of them improved certain research skills, depending on the focus of the research project.