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British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

NAVIGATING POSTDOCTORAL APPLICATIONS IN THE UK: INSIGHTS FROM THE BRISMES GRADUATE SECTION PANEL

*Notes from the BRISMES Graduate Section event
'Navigating Postdoctoral Applications in the UK', held
online on 29 May 2025*



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Introduction

On May 29, the BRISMES Graduate Section hosted a special event titled **“Navigating Postdoctoral Funding and Applications in Middle East Studies.”** The event was organised in response to a survey of graduate members, which highlighted strong interest in understanding the landscape of postdoctoral opportunities in the UK. This session brought together five interdisciplinary scholars at different career stages and from varied disciplinary homes—geography, anthropology, translation studies, social psychology, urban studies, and politics—to share their personal journeys, reflections, and advice on securing postdoctoral positions and fellowships.

The event was structured as a series of short presentations (7–10 minutes each), followed by follow-up questions from the moderators and an open Q&A session with attendees. The conversation was candid, wide-ranging, and deeply grounded in the lived realities of applying to highly competitive UK-based postdoctoral schemes such as the British Academy, Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship, and Junior Research Fellowships (JRFs) at Oxford and Cambridge.

Rather than offering a formulaic guide, the session emphasised the diverse routes scholars take in transitioning from PhD research to independent postdoctoral projects. This document captures the distilled insights from each speaker and the Q&A discussion, with the aim of serving as a practical and honest guide for early career researchers navigating the next step in their academic journey.

Key Insights from the Speakers

Dr. Aya Nassar (Assistant Professor, Durham University)

Fellowship strategy:

- **Fellowships vs. Grants:** Fellowships (e.g., British Academy, Leverhulme) invest in you, not just the project. Your promise as a scholar matters as much as project design.
- **Timing is strategic:** British Academy allows one shot. Build momentum (publications, teaching, networks) before applying. Leverhulme is more flexible—you can apply more than once.

Disciplinary navigation:

- UK academia privileges "mother disciplines" (e.g., Geography, Politics) over area studies. Frame your application in a major discipline strategically.
- Use your regional expertise as a strength: emphasise language fluency, embeddedness in local networks, and prior fieldwork.

Interdisciplinarity:

- Interdisciplinary projects are welcome, especially by Leverhulme and British Academy—lean into it but anchor in a primary discipline.
- Choose your disciplinary framing carefully; it determines who reads your proposal.

Dr. Chihab El Khachab (Associate Professor, University of Oxford)

On Junior Research Fellowships (JRFs):

- JRFs are highly competitive, often perceived as opaque and elitist. However, strong projects and clear fit with the college's intellectual profile can make a real difference.
- Emphasise your unique contribution to the college (as the sole anthropologist, historian, etc.) rather than your publication count.
- You can apply for the JRF before finishing your PhD.
- There is a misconception that the JRF is only for graduates of Oxbridge, this is not correct. It is the case that there are more Oxbridge graduates who get the JRF, but this is likely because they know the ins and outs and 'hidden rules', since they are embedded in the institution.
- If you are not from Oxbridge, it is highly advisable that you contact previous JRF grantees and ask for their advice on the application.

Key Insights from the Speakers

On project framing:

- Write as though your research will shape your field. Confidence in vision is essential.
- Think big: show how your project bridges narrow PhD insights and broader disciplinary debates.
- For the JRF, your project is key, not the number of publications you have. Your application is very focused on your research statement, it is key.

British Academy tips:

- The project matters more than prior metrics. Tailor your “disciplinary home” wisely—reviewers will be drawn from that field.
- Apply to multiple host departments in the first stage if possible; select one in the final application.

Dr. Balsam Mustafa (Lecturer, Cardiff University)

Journey and interdisciplinary leap:

- Shifted from translation studies to politics during PhD research on ISIS narratives and returned to translation with a renewed, interdisciplinary lens.
- Deep personal and regional engagement shaped her research direction.

On rejection and resilience:

- Rejection is part of the process—applications are often unsuccessful at first.
- Don't rely solely on passion; prepare thoroughly, revise, and get feedback.

Leverhulme success tips:

- Theoretical innovation matters more than "impact."
- Mention broader engagement: e.g., Arabic-language non-academic writing, feminist activism, participation in online platforms.
- Seek strong external references—especially if applying from outside the UK.

Dr. Mete Sefa Uysal (Lecturer, University of Exeter)

Persistence and Global South challenges:

- Applied to 25+ postdoc positions before first success. His PhD from Turkey meant additional barriers in proving the relevance and quality of his training.
- Fellowship vs. research post distinction: Fellowships offer autonomy; research posts are more hierarchical, project-led.

Key Insights from the Speakers

Application approach:

- Wrote candidly about his lived experience (repression, academic freedom, protest) even if controversial. This sometimes hurt and sometimes helped—be intentional about risk.
- Choose fellowships or project-based roles depending on your profile and readiness to lead a project.

Mentorship matters:

- You need a strong, committed mentor—especially for fellowships. Don't start without one.

Dr. Kaoutar Ghilani (Abdullah Al-Mubarak Fellow, University of Cambridge)

On application training:

- Repeated applications help refine project clarity and cultivate emotional detachment from rejection.
- Learning to write for non-specialists (e.g., JRFs) is a crucial skill—be clear, jargon-free, and intellectually expansive.

Disciplinary realities:

- Despite working across politics and history, area studies is often the most hospitable disciplinary home.
- Interdisciplinarity is welcomed rhetorically, but disciplinary gatekeeping still shapes outcomes. Frame accordingly.

Portfolio strategy:

- Used postdoc year in Berlin to “play the game” and test competitiveness across multiple themes (revolution, education, sectarianism).
- This helped identify where her profile was strongest and informed later successful applications.

Cross-Cutting Themes & Practical Advice

1. Choosing the Right Fellowship Scheme

- **British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship**
 - Extremely competitive; one application per lifetime unless invited to re-apply.
 - Emphasises *you* as a researcher, your trajectory, and contribution to the field.
 - Apply when your profile is mature: publications, teaching, institutional experience.
- **Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship**
 - More flexible: resubmission is allowed.
 - Prioritises theoretical innovation and interdisciplinary promise over public “impact.”
 - Often requires changing institutions—plan ahead.
- **Junior Research Fellowships (JRFs)**
 - Collegiate posts at Oxford and Cambridge; often perceived as elitist but accessible.
 - Strong fit with the college's existing profile matters more than publication metrics.
 - Project potential and intellectual breadth are key.

2. Fellowship vs. Research Positions

Fellowship (e.g., BA, Leverhulme)	Research Post (e.g., RA in PI-led project)
You lead the project	You assist on an existing project
More autonomy	Less research freedom
Typically no teaching/admin	Often includes teaching & admin
Better long-term CV impact	Good for short-term stability

Choose based on your readiness to design and defend your own project.

Cross-Cutting Themes & Practical Advice

3. Building a Competitive Application

- **Start early.** Application writing is a skill distinct from thesis writing.
- **Anchor in a discipline.** Even if your project is interdisciplinary, pick a primary field strategically—it determines your reviewers.
- **Craft a distinct postdoc project.** It should grow from—but not duplicate—your PhD.
- **Demonstrate long-term vision.** Show how your postdoc work connects to future contributions.

4. The Role of Mentors & Letters of Recommendation

- **Mentors matter.** Especially for fellowships, you'll need someone committed, experienced, and institutionally embedded.
- **Letters are not all equal.**
 - For Leverhulme: letters often shape the review since reviewers are not always specialists.
 - For British Academy: external peer reviewers assess the proposal more directly.
- **Tips:**
 - Diversify recommenders (institution, discipline, relationship).
 - Prioritise those who know your work well and will tailor the letter.

5. Public Engagement and 'Impact'

- Don't get overwhelmed by buzzwords—especially early in your career.
- Impact = public-facing work in most postdoc schemes: writing for non-academic outlets, organising events, podcasts, collaborations with NGOs.
- British Academy cares more about **disciplinary impact**; Leverhulme values **intellectual innovation**.

6. Rejection is Part of the Process

- Nearly all speakers were rejected—often repeatedly—before landing a fellowship.
- Keep writing and revising. Reapply. Use teaching positions and short-term contracts to build momentum.

Cross-Cutting Themes & Practical Advice

7. Practical Tools & Resources

- Successful applications: ask departments or research officers—many have internal samples.
- Use job boards: jobs.ac.uk, [EUME Berlin](https://www.eume-berlin.de), and college JRF pages (Oxford, Cambridge).
Reach out: Many speakers shared contact details and are open to sharing proposals.

Resources Shared During the Event

Throughout the session, participants and speakers shared a number of helpful links, platforms, and points of contact. These are consolidated below:

Fellowship & Job Listings

- **British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship**
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/postdoctoral-fellowships/>
- **Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship**
<https://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/early-career-fellowships>
- **International Fellowship (for applicants based outside the UK)**
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/international-fellowships/>


Junior Research Fellowships (JRFs)

- **Oxford Gazette Jobs (JRF listings)**
<https://gazette.web.ox.ac.uk/current-jobs-and-vacancies#tab-2466851>
- **Cambridge College Jobs**
<https://www.jobs.cam.ac.uk/college/>
- **General JRF Overview – Cambridge**
<https://www.careers.cam.ac.uk/junior-research-fellowships-jrfs>

Other Resources

- **Job Alerts:** <https://www.jobs.ac.uk>
- **Middle East-focused ECR journal:** <https://nmes.pubpub.org/>
- **Sample Proposals:** Ask the research administrator in your target department.
Some departments maintain internal libraries of successful fellowship applications.

Speaker Support

- **Dr. Balsam Mustafa** generously offered to share her successful Leverhulme application:
 mustafab2@cardiff.ac.uk

Closing Remarks

This BRISMES Graduate Section event highlighted not just the mechanics of applying for postdoctoral funding, but also the deeply personal, often nonlinear nature of academic trajectories. From disciplinary switching to transregional engagements, from rejection to resilience, the speakers offered a set of grounded, generous reflections that demystify an often opaque process.

For early career researchers, the key messages are clear:

- **There is no single path.** Scholars come from diverse backgrounds and enter academia through many doors.
- **Persistence is essential.** Almost every speaker experienced multiple rejections before success.
- **Community matters.** Mentorship, peer support, and sharing knowledge collectively make a difference.
- **Your voice and context matter.** Whether through language skills, activist engagement, or interdisciplinarity, bring your full self to the table.

We hope this guide helps you approach your postdoctoral journey with greater clarity and confidence.



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