



Zinc: Doctoral Innovation Placements

Building the Next Generation of Research Innovators

Across the UK, billions are invested in world-leading research, yet too little of that knowledge reaches the people and systems it could help. Many PhD students want to make a difference beyond academia, but lack the routes, skills, and environments to do so.

Urgent challenges in mental health, healthy ageing, and climate resilience demand innovation. Yet the two worlds that can help drive new approaches – research and commercial – remain disconnected. Researchers struggle to navigate entrepreneurial contexts, while early-stage ventures lack access to deep research expertise.

Zinc Innovation Partners (ZIP) bridges these worlds. Through our Doctoral Innovation Placements (DIP) programme, we place PhD students with mission-led startups tackling real challenges. Students are supported through one-to-one mentorship and structured group learning, helping them contribute meaningfully to their host venture while exploring research-based careers beyond academia. Students from any discipline are welcome; no prior commercial experience is required. For funders, this is a powerful way to turn investment in research talent into measurable impact – accelerating innovation and equipping the next generation of researchers to thrive beyond the academy.

Zinc Doctoral Innovation Placements

Our programme connects PhD students with relevant support for industry placements with pioneering, mission-led ventures. PhDs apply their expertise in real-world settings, gain innovation skills, and accelerate R&D on the UK's most urgent health and environmental challenges.

ZIP serves as the bridge, supporting funders to:

- Open credible non-academic career pathways for doctoral researchers
- Develop transferable skills – commercial awareness, entrepreneurial thinking, stakeholder engagement – that strengthen researchers in any context
- Demonstrate public value from doctoral training investment through tangible knowledge exchange with high-impact ventures

How it works

- **Venture Placements:** PhDs join early-stage mission-led ventures (full-time for 3 months), applying their research skills and expertise to solve real problems and advance innovation.
- **Monthly Cohort Days:** PhDs meet at Zinc to learn practical innovation and entrepreneurial skills, share experiences, and strengthen cross-sector networks.
- **Coaching and Mentorship:** Tailored coaching and support from the ZIP team help PhDs navigate new professional environments, set goals, and develop confidence to create value beyond academia.
- **Resources and Network:** PhDs gain access to Zinc's innovation resources, founder network, and investors, creating lasting partnerships across research and industry.

"I enhanced my ability to use findings from literature searches/reviews to inform product development. I also improved my ability to work quickly and dynamically, whilst still adhering to producing high quality and valid work."

Former DIP PhD student; placement at Vira Health

"During my time at Zinc I've worked across a multi-disciplinary team, conducted research in a fast-paced commercial environment, and gained real-world business and R&D experience across market and user research, competitor analysis, business models, and marketing strategies."

Former DIP PhD student; placement at Beanbag Health



Proven Results

- 20 interns placed across ~20 ventures, including Hertility, Assembly, Tangent, and Prorizon.
- 4.5/5 average Intern satisfaction with the programme
- Supported by leading funders including the South West Doctoral Training Partnership (SWDTP) and the Midlands Integrative Biosciences Training Partnership (MIBTP)
- DIP PhDs have developed commercial and entrepreneurial skills, gained credible non-academic career experience, and built professional networks that extend well beyond their doctoral training

“Overall I loved the 3 months working with Willow and Zinc, I loved being in the office and everyone was really nice and helpful so just a thank you!”

Former DIP PhD student; placement at Willow

“Particular skills I took away from the experience were around product development and intellectual property. I also had some insight into the financial planning aspect, which was very new to me. I think being a PhD, it was interesting to see how I could apply my expertise in a new way.”

Former DIP PhD student; placement at Tangent

Why Partner with Zinc

By supporting the ZIP Doctoral Residencies, funders can:

- Multiply the impact of their research investment
- Strengthen the UK's innovation and translational capacity
- Enable PhD students to build commercial and cross-sector skills
- Advance innovation in key challenge areas
- Each partnership is co-designed to align with funder missions, from the selection of venture focus areas to bespoke development content.
- Zinc manages recruitment, venture matching, skill development, coaching, and programme delivery, ensuring funders see measurable outcomes and lasting impact.



Join Us

Partner with ZIP to develop the next generation of research innovators – embedding doctoral talent in mission-led ventures to build skills, open new career pathways, and demonstrate the real-world value of your training investment. For more info or to start planning, contact laura@zinc.vc

Translational and Commercial Skills

DIP PhDs gain hands-on experience in areas rarely accessible in academia — from grant writing and regulation to design thinking and product development.

“I enjoyed taking on a new project, learning about a new area of research, and being welcomed into Vira who made me feel part of the team. It's been a great experience for developing my career path towards a career outside of academia.”

Former DIP PhD student; placement at Vira Health

Confidence and Career Transition

The programme enables researchers and clinicians to navigate the fast-paced world of innovation with clarity and confidence — often transforming their career trajectory.

“Working directly with founders was an amazing experience. I think the approach to new ideas was really surprising, and quite refreshing. I also liked the speed at which things progress, from ideation to implementation.”

Former DIP PhD student; placement at Sterling Bio Machines

Networks and Collaboration

Each cohort becomes a cross-sector community that continues to exchange ideas, collaborate, and open doors long after the programme ends.

“I valued meeting new people, getting to know what a life in industry is like, the extra events and networking socials.”

Former DIP PhD student; placement at Tonus

Case Studies

Naunehal Matharu

Cohort 2: 2022 | Funded by MRC

Naunehal, a Neuroscience PhD at the University of Cambridge, gained hands-on experience supporting Eargym, a digital medtech venture supporting hearing health.

Naunehal went on to work in venture investment, evaluating and backing early-stage deep tech companies. He now leads a healthcare accelerator and associated investor readiness programmes to help researchers and founders translate innovation into investable opportunities.

Katie Calvert

Cohort 2: 2022 | funded by ESRC

Katie, a design and behavioural science PhD, joined Zinc's venture builder for a three-month placement. She worked with a range of startups addressing mental health challenges, conducting user research and translating insights into product decisions.

Following the placement, Katie applied the research skills she developed during her placement in industry, working at Brompton Bicycle as a Product Researcher. She now works at Ffern as a UX/Product Designer, bringing design research and systems thinking into the development of user-focused digital products.

Nina Higson-Sweeney

Cohort 1: 2023 | Funded by: ESRC

Nina, a psychology PhD, undertook a 3-month placement working with two Zinc portfolio companies. With Beanbag Health, she undertook user research, onboarding, competitor analyses, and helped to organise app analytics. With Mosey Digital, she undertook an in-depth literature review focused on the role of digital technology in supporting neurodivergent children with reading for pleasure, and user research with parents of neurodivergent children.

She is now a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Oxford.