Who are the New Generation Thinkers?

Career evolution

A day in the research life
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Nurturing ambassadors for the arts and humanities

The New Generation Thinkers scheme is an incredible partnership that benefits the BBC, the AHRC arts and humanities researchers, but most importantly the general public. For us, the scheme helps nurture the next generation of ambassadors for the arts and humanities by helping researchers communicate their ideas in ways the public will understand. New Generation Thinkers – or NGTs as we call them – don’t just learn about voice projection, or how to make the most of social media: they get direct experience of how to see the big picture in what they do, how they can distil this into its fundamental essence and how to present it directly to an audience, whether this is via the Radio 3 airwaves or talking to directly to member of the public at a festival or event.

If we are going to make the case for the arts and humanities to a potentially sceptical public, we have to make an investment in these bright early career scholars who will help explain and question everything from people’s personal histories, their place in society and their health, to the role in our world for culture, religion and belief. Because of this huge potential, the AHRC is working to make more of the fabulous resource we have in the ever-increasing numbers of New Generation Thinkers. In addition to the opportunities they gain to work with the media, we are developing ways for them to work with the public, especially those who have little contact with academics. We are formalising the links the NGTs have with the Being Human Festival, including offering public engagement training, and piloting a project for them to work with GCSE students in state schools.

And for the NGTs themselves, the scheme is not just a great career move that will keep paying dividends well into the future. It is also an opportunity for them to develop themselves as thinkers and take advantage of a hugely supportive network of other academics from beyond their own discipline. Over the years our NGTs have made the most of the opportunities that have been presented to them, and those they seek out for themselves through the contacts they have made, and long may this continue.

It is a superb scheme – with an exciting future ahead of it.

ABOUT OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH RADIO 3

Our partnership with BBC Radio 3 is the backbone of New Generation Thinkers: it offers a unique opportunity for early career researchers to work with an expert team of programme makers. Their experience means they take talented, but raw, scholars and turn them into excellent broadcasters. We have been working together since November 2010 when the competition was launched at Radio 3’s Free Thinking Festival of Ideas. Since then, more than 100 academics from across the UK have presented documentaries on Radio 3, the BBC World Service and BBC Four.
It has been running since 2011 and 80 researchers now have the privilege of being able to call themselves an AHRC/BBC Radio 3 New Generation Thinker. Many of them have found the experience transformative, not just making them better communicators, but better academics.

The scheme is a chance for early career researchers to cultivate the skills to communicate their research findings to those outside the academic community. Each year, up to 60 successful applicants have a chance to develop their media skills, including programme-making ideas with experienced BBC producers at a series of dedicated workshops.

Of these, up to 10 will become BBC Radio 3’s resident New Generation Thinkers and benefit from a series of unique opportunities, such as media and public engagement training with the AHRC. There will also be the possibility of working with BBC TV, putting on events for the Being Human Festival and the chance to become a regular blogger.

Applicants need to be conducting excellent research that demonstrates impact, as well exhibit an ability to explain it in clear and simple terms. They have to be able to talk about other subject areas within the arts and humanities in an accessible and refreshing manner, with an awareness of the wider public audience.

Applicants do not have to be funded by the AHRC to apply; the scheme is open to early career researchers and PhD students studying in all disciplines, as long as their work fuses with arts and humanities research.
A dynamic injection of ideas

Matthew Dodd
Head of Speech programmes, BBC Radio 3

It’s no exaggeration to say that BBC Radio 3’s engagement with academia can be divided into two time periods: “Pre-New Generation Thinkers” and “Post-New Generation Thinkers”.

Pre-New Generation Thinkers was an era when we at Radio 3 often pondered the intermittent way in which we encountered the latest research in arts and the humanities. Our producers had excellent contacts with well-established “media dons”, and we had well-oiled communication with publishers who promoted academic authors. But every now and then a guest came to one of our studios who gave us a glimpse of something else: academics at the start of their careers, often unpublished, bursting with ideas, energetic to share their new research and to expound on their fascinating but specialist subject areas. How could we reach more of these people? And were there many of them?

The “Post-New Generation Thinkers” era began when we finally managed to get together with the AHRC and realise that here was a great opportunity for universities and broadcasters alike. Why not offer researchers the chance to engage with a wider public, to build bridges with lay audiences and in so doing create some fascinating programmes? And rather than the BBC having to burrow into the faculty buildings of institutions with which we weren’t familiar, or rely on any lingering prejudices about ivory towers or old fashioned bookworms have been swept away.”

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Matthew Dodd. Photo courtesy of the BBC
our existing contacts, why not let the researchers come to us, by issuing an open call for proposals? And work with a partner who they knew well, like the AHRC?

Right from the very start, those New Generation Thinkers haven’t failed to impress us. Any lingering prejudices about ivory tower intellectuals or old-fashioned book-worms, have been swept away by thousands of engrossing application forms, hundreds of charismatic workshop attendees and 80 pioneering NGTs.

In the Post-New Generation Thinker period, Radio 3’s arts output has undergone a dynamic injection of people and ideas. These days I’m always intrigued by the specialist nature of a NGT’s topic of conversation when I hear them introduced on our “Free Thinking” programme. I know that working with our producers and the AHRC, they will have been picked because they have the ability to turn their cutting-edge research into a moment of pure listening pleasure on the radio. Or I listen with intrigue as a recent PhD I met at a NGT workshop nine months ago, now comfortably debates a pressing issue of the humanities with a roundtable of established journalists and critics at Broadcasting House.

Some of the first graduates of the NGT scheme have firmly established themselves as presenters or regular contributors to BBC Radio programmes. But I would like to think that BBC Radio 3’s arts programmes and its producers have also been changed by this scheme. We place a premium on understanding exactly what the latest academic research tells us about any given topic. We have learnt from experience that more than likely somewhere in a British university there is a dedicated researcher, full of knowledge and ideas, who can convey the passion behind their subject.

“The 2016 new Generation Thinkers were announced at the Hay Festival of Literature and Arts

Lisa Mullen from the 2018 NGT cohort, appearing at the Free Thinking festival

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“Some of the early graduates of the NGT scheme have firmly established themselves as presenters or regular contributors to BBC Radio programmes.”
I was in my last year of a three year contract at Queen Mary University of London and I had just applied for a full-time job when I applied for the NGT scheme – I ended up getting both on the same day! That was quite a good day.

In many ways it seemed a perfect fit for me. I was always the sort of person who would pipe up in discussions, and I had already done some chairing of debates at festivals, so I was used to public facing work. But it wasn't easy at all – at least not in the beginning. I went to the first workshop at the BBC and it was absolutely terrifying! We were ushered into the basement of the BBC. We were these young, ambitious academics and it was quite sharp-elbowed. It was very competitive; a sort of academic X Factor, as The Guardian called it at the time.

But I got through the selection process and had an amazing, life-changing experience as an NGT – it even changed the direction of my work. When I began I was working on the Arabian Nights, having just finished my book on Keats, and I was looking around for another project to get my teeth into.

The NGT scheme exposed me to a lot of ideas and discussions, and one of the things I became more and more interested in over the course of my year was philosophy. I realised that was the direction I wanted to go and the NGT gave me a kind of playground to explore it further.

It's interesting, because media work changes you in ways you don't even notice. I found my original application recently and I was mortified to read my pitch! I was so obtuse! But academics can't help it – that's how we communicate with each other.

One of the things I've learned through the NGT scheme is how to express ideas in different ways. I had to recalibrate my brain. I had always listened to, and loved, arts programmes on the radio. But to be involved in making them you have to see the wiring behind the boards, so to speak. You have to learn to listen to the radio in a different way. You have to think about how

“IT’S ABOUT THINKING OUT LOUD AND PROVIDING LISTENERS WITH COMPANIONABLE CONVERSATION. YOU HAVE TO MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME IN THE STUDIO AND IMAGINE THE LISTENERS AT HOME ARE WITH YOU IN THE STUDIO.”
many things you can say in the allotted time and still be effective; that certain ways of expressing yourself are more powerful than others. It’s a bit like driving a car, most of us drive without thinking but then when you poke around under the bonnet and you understand how the car really works!

Before becoming an NGT I had a sense of the BBC being a very formidable place, where you could only take part or present in the most polished way. But that’s not how radio is in reality. Often it is about thinking out loud and providing listeners with a companionable conversation. You have to make yourself at home in the studio and imagine the listeners at home are in the studio with you.

I had thought it would be very hard to find a way into the BBC. But it’s actually quite easy to befriend a producer and send them ideas. Anyone can do it. The BBC are looking for smart people, smart ideas and exciting stories.

“We went to a modern drag club in London. The whole thing was brilliant, unexpected, full of anecdote, life, and feeling in the way that radio can be.”

“Above all, I think it’s a really crucial time for academics to do media work.”

We’ve just finished recording a free Thinking episode on Drag culture. We wanted to cover an exhibition at the V&A museum about fashion. The programme was scheduled to air the same time as Ru Paul’s Drag Race was airing on Netflix, and it seemed like a great cultural moment to investigate. We interviewed a drag queen from the 1960s who was part of a Californian acid-hippie theatre group! And then we went to a modern drag club in London. The whole thing was brilliant, unexpected, full of anecdote and life and feeling in the way that radio can be.

And there have been some real challenges along the way as well. I had to interview Salman Rushdie for Free Thinking and that was quite daunting. I think he had done about 60 interviews to promote his book over two weeks and I had to think of a fresh way of talking to him. But I found it tremendous fun looking for the angle that would allow him to open up.

“DR SHAHIDHA BARI’S FIVE TOP TIPS FOR NGTs”

1 | Why should we care?
Set out for your audience the reasons why your research matters, point out the part of life that it speaks to and how it might make a difference to them. It’s worth doing this for your own purposes too - what’s at stake in your research and why do you care?

2 | Say “yes”. (Also say “no”.)
You’re an academic so you’re used to testing out an idea AND hazarding a question. Programmes won’t always be about the precise thing you work on, but what you do know might give a different topic a fresh angle. Lend your brain to an audience. Say “yes” to debates and subjects that might not be within your exact expertise — you’ll know more than you think and you’ll find it exhilarating. And say “no”, if you need to. That door won’t slam shut forever.

3 | Challenge.
Producers, editors and commissioners might ask you to be accessible. It’s courteous to speak in a language that others understand. But don’t be afraid to complicate a debate and to paraphrase difficult arguments. At its best, research can inform and lift public discourse. Academics can create audience appetite for the strangest, most obscure things. You just have to find the right way to express it.

4 | Listen.
If you don’t already tune into Free Thinking, or download it as the BBC Arts and Ideas podcast, you should — it’s wonderful! And radio is an evolving art form. Listen across the station and beyond the BBC. You can learn a programme’s house style and the timbre of its discussion, but the podcast world is vast and vivacious too. The more you listen, the more you’ll learn about how to communicate your ideas engagingly.

5 | Knock on the door.
If you have an idea, if your work is suddenly topical, if you know there’s an exhibition or an anniversary coming up, contact the programme you think it might fit. Producers are always looking for fresh voices and new ideas. That’s you. Don’t be afraid to get in touch.
I am a generalist and I enjoy lending my brain to lots of different topics. The NGT experience teaches you new skills. I was terrified of live broadcasting, but I found out that I could do it. Academics teach, so we are used to taking the measure of a room and adapting how we frame a question to suit the atmosphere, which is all great preparation for media work.

But while I loved the experience, it’s not for everyone, and it’s important to think hard about whether you really want to be an NGT before you apply. The best academics I know spend their time at the British Library, not Broadcasting House, and media work uses up a lot of time you could be spending on research. If that doesn’t sound right for you, you really don’t need to be an NGT. But if you do, it can be joyful and intellectually invigorating.

One of the things I’ve enjoyed the most is meeting BBC producers. They are like the most capable graduate students; they are the people that you wish had done a PhD, but had more important things to do. They always surprise me with their expertise and I love learning from them.

But above all, I think it’s a really crucial time for academics to do media work. We’re living through an age in which people in power actively discredit experts and deride ‘intellectuals’. It’s really important for us to be able to explain what we know and to persuade people why it matters.

Academic research can inform and lift public debate. I think that’s what we should be aiming towards.

Curriculum Vitae

Dr Shahidha Bari is a Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Queen Mary, University of London.

Currently, she is one of the presenters of Free Thinking, the nightly arts and ideas programme on BBC Radio 3, and features regularly on Front Row and Saturday Review on BBC Radio 4.

She has also presented Saturday Review (BBC Radio 4), and documentaries “Codename: Madeline” (BBC World Service) and “Poetry Idol” (BBC World Service). Her last documentary, “My Mother’s Sari” (BBC Radio 4) was selected as Pick of the Week for The Guardian, Telegraph, Times and Radio Times. She also reviews fiction and non-fiction for The Financial Times, The Guardian, The Times Literary Supplement, The Literary Review. Her next book, Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes is published by Jonathan Cape in 2019.
I had been doing research into arts, culture and health for some time, and because so many people engage with the arts in some way, this topic seemed to speak to a lot of people. But while they were curious, generally they didn’t seem to know very much about how the arts could affect their health. It came as a real surprise to people to find out that what they did recreationally with arts and culture could actually be good for them as well.

I really wanted to do more to raise awareness of the work I’m doing among the general population and the NGT scheme seemed a good route into engaging more with the public. I believe that, in the same way that we all know that eating vegetables and exercising is good for us, people need to know how the arts can be good for them as well. Engaging with arts and culture has tangible positive benefits on so many aspects of our health from mental health to chronic pain to immune activity to dementia.

Just before doing my year as an NGT I had been on the British Science Association Award Lecture Scheme, which had given me some training in public speaking and communication – and I loved that. It had enabled me to do things like give keynote talks at science festivals, and I was really enjoying myself.

It was a really helpful extension of this to get direct experience of doing radio and TV work as an NGT and I learned so much about how the media worked. I really enjoyed the opportunity to get to know the BBC producers and be part of a cohort who were going through their year as an NGT together. We could compare experiences and learn from each other. That was one of the things I enjoyed the most – meeting all these people doing all this fascinating research.

I also worked with the BBC to design the Great British Creativity Test, which attempted to find out more about how being creative affects our emotions, and this produced new data that I could feed back into my research.

I’ve done about 15 or so programmes since technically ‘finishing’ my time as an NGT. As [BBC editor] Robyn says: ‘Once an NGT, always an NGT.’ The BBC have a lovely attitude that it’s not so much about passing the baton on when you finish, more about welcoming the next group in.

As an academic it is very likely that at some point your research will be picked up by the media and it can be quite hard to know exactly how to capitalise on that. Being an NGT gives you the confidence to engage with the media and the skills to make the most of the opportunity.

Plus, it reflects back on your work. It will give you a stronger standing at your university and in your field so it can help your own development as a researcher.

In September 2018 Daisy was announced as a winner of a Health Humanities Medal – a national award to celebrate the contribution of the arts and humanities to improving healthcare, health and wellbeing. She won the Best Doctoral or Early Career Research Award for her research into the combined psychological and biological effects that listening to music can have.
Dr Will Abberley (NGT 2014) is Senior Lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Sussex. His research focuses on Victorian literature and culture, history of science and literature, nineteenth-century biology and evolutionary theory.

When I heard about [the NGT scheme] I had just started a post doc and was in that classic insecure phase of an academic career. I listened to some of the content that NGTs had made for Radio 3 and felt inspired; applying just seemed like the right thing to do.

Before I did my PhD I had worked on news broadcasts for a local radio station, and I had been looking for a way to combine my broadcast and media careers. The NGT scheme seemed perfect. I wanted to find ways to talk to people who weren’t up in our academic ivory towers; I strongly believe that as academics this is something that we should do.

Media work can seem very opaque – it’s not always easy to see how you translate an academic career into a media career and there are not many places where you can learn, apart from the NGT.

Everyone I met seemed great and very bright. I didn’t hold out much hope that I would get through, but I did. I think my previous media work must have helped give me a bit of an edge, because I already had some experience of how to write for the media in an accessible way.

“I think jargon can sometimes be a way of hiding and glossing over complexities in research and getting rid of it all is hugely liberating.”
It's not only good for us as academics in that it helps disseminate our research, I think it also makes us better academics as well.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about the natural world and how we humans look at it; we tend to look at living things as machines and I wanted to ask the question: what if they function more like interpreters looking for signs in the world around them like humans do?

The whole debate around this issue is usually couched in dense philosophical jargon. But having to strip all that out forced me to go back to first principles. I think jargon can sometimes be a way of hiding and glossing over complexities in research and getting rid of it all is hugely liberating.

I wouldn’t say it changed my mind, as such. But it did make me focus and find new ways to express myself. I’ve been able to abstract from the very technical conversation and find a more accessible way to discuss these complex issues.

I’ve learned such a lot. Particularly when making longer documentaries, which I found very challenging. There’s always the temptation to turn what you are doing into a lecture – which is exactly what it shouldn’t be!

As an academic, I’m always trying to be objective and serious – I would never put myself in my research. But of course as a broadcaster that’s exactly what you should be doing.

One of the programmes I really enjoyed was the Proms Extra on HG Wells. I was chairing the debate, and on the programme was an HG Wells expert and a novelist who had written a sequel to *War of the Worlds*. It just seemed the perfect mix of academic rigour and accessible conversation. And it happened in front of a live audience, which gave it all a very nice atmosphere.

As an NGT you can find yourself working on all sorts of programmes. A few years ago a film came out called *Black Sea*, which starred Jude Law and was a disaster thriller about a submarine. I suddenly found myself thinking about how many films there were set on submarines, and realised it was a genre in itself.

I approached the editor and said: ‘how about a programme on submarine films.’ And he said ‘yes’. So off we went. It wasn’t my specialist subject, but I read up on it and it was a fascinating programme to make. I think it’s important to remember that you can do things beyond your PhD. You can be a generalist.

Being an NGT is a brilliant prestige thing to have on your C.V. I was doing post doc when I applied and I’m now a senior lecturer with a permanent position. I’m sure that all my broadcasting work, public engagement and impact was instrumental in getting me that job. Impact is highly regarded these days; people look for it when they are recruiting.

**“I think it’s important to remember you can do things beyond your PhD. You can be a generalist.”**

![The Boat: The Other Side of World War II](image)
Seeking a fresh perspective

Robyn Read
Editor of BBC Radio 3’s Free Thinking

I love finding out about the research projects of both the academics who go on to become New Generation Thinkers and of all the applicants to the scheme.

Each year we meet 60 candidates for workshops. We select ten and aim to share with them information about how radio programmes get made along with some of our ideas about what makes a good contributor who is able to get their ideas across to a general audience.

I am always looking for ways of involving people from the workshops in Free Thinking discussions, and getting them thinking about news ‘pegs’, anniversaries, ways of combining their research with the new exhibitions, books, plays, films and TV programmes that we cover. Their insights can give our coverage a fresh perspective, and I hope they find the experience of working with radio producers helpful. We can talk through what strikes a chord, what makes a good top line to kick off a conversation; we can find ways to boost their confidence and find an opinion on something that isn’t necessarily a specialist subject for them, but that they can bring their critical faculties to consider.

It’s really interesting following different Twitter feeds and seeing what topics academics are discussing and how they view news events. We pick up on some of those discussions for the Free Thinking programme.

I have also tried to widen the range of opportunities available by involving New Generation Thinkers in the free audience events we programme before every Prom concert in the summer.

Public events are different to studio discussions, or the process of writing and performing an episode for Radio 3’s The Essay, where it’s only your writing and reading on show.

I also try to pass on contacts to colleagues making programmes for other networks like BBC Radio 4.

New Generation Thinkers have appeared on Woman’s Hour, In Our Time, Front Row, have made documentaries for BBC Radio 3 and 4 and are now regular writers for the Essential Classics Time Travellers feature each week day morning on BBC Radio 3 and available as the Time Travellers podcast.

“We can talk through what strikes a chord, what makes a good top line to kick off a conversation.”
Dr Iain Smith (NGT 2018) at BBC R3 Free Thinking studio. Iain’s research investigates the impact of globalisation on popular films made around the world, in particular, unlicensed remakes of Hollywood films.
A DAY IN THE RESEARCH LIFE
Dr Alistair Fraser (NGT 2017) is a senior lecturer at the University of Glasgow, an expert on urban gangs and a former NGT. His research has taken him out onto the streets of Glasgow, Chicago and Hong Kong to meet gang members on their home turf.

In sociology we often say that our aim is to make the unfamiliar, familiar or the familiar, unfamiliar. In other words, we are trying to think about groups that are seen as ‘different’ or unfamiliar and show how similar to the rest of us they really are – and that’s what I’ve tried to do with gang members.

I’m interested in them as a social group, as much about how they interact with each as the impact and consequences of their behaviour.

My media work has very much been an extension of this way of working. As a researcher I’ve occupied an ambiguous space that is somewhere between insider and outsider, and moving from there into broadcasting has been a natural continuation of this; I’m just occupying new margins.

I found this difficult at first, but I quickly discovered that it was very productive space to be in. Working with the media has forced me to really boil down what I do to its essence, without the scaffolding of footnotes and academic packaging.

This has definitely reflected back into my academic work, especially my writing, and there’s no doubt the scheme has had a real impact on my work. I’ve really enjoyed stripping out the chaff and my academic style has developed. I’m experimenting with a more direct writing style – still with footnotes and references, but clearer and pared back – and I hope my writing will get better because of this.

When I was first contacted by the media, before I was an NGT, I was terrified. I was convinced my words would be twisted and I would be misrepresented. But being an NGT has given me a window into how the media work, how decisions are really made, and I’m much more confident working with journalists and producers as a result.

“I’m experimenting with a more direct writing style – still with footnotes and references, but clearer and pared back – and I hope my writing will get better because of this.”
For the past five years, I’ve had what must be one of the best jobs in higher education: I’ve been the manager and principal curator of the Being Human Festival. In partnership with the AHRC and the British Academy, we established the festival in 2014 as a forum to showcase cutting-edge humanities research to the public in fun and engaging ways.

One of the best things about my job is the incredible perspective it’s given me on the breadth of research taking place within the arts and humanities. It’s also offered a unique opportunity to meet and work with the people doing that research – the humans behind the humanities.

New Generation Thinkers have featured prominently every year in Being Human. For example, in 2015 Dr Preti Taneja (NGT 2014) took part in the launch of the festival, talking about her research into Shakespearian performances in Syrian refugee camps.

The University of Liverpool’s Professor Sarah Peverley (NGT 2013) also played a massive part in 2015 and again in 2016, adding stories of werewolves and mermaids to our celebration of Being Human.

We have been inspired by everything from Dr Anindya RayChaudhuri’s (NGT 2015) exhibition exploring the legacies and memories of Indian partition, to Dr Dr Sarah Jackson (NGT 2016) creating a series of pop-up activities in a disused phone box in Nottingham, inviting local people to explore the history of the telephone.

We have even had a New Generation Thinker on the festival team, the irrepressible and inimitable scholar of suffrage theatre, Dr Naomi Paxton (NGT 2014). Naomi led programming at the University of London and created her own immersive ‘living literature’ walk around Bloomsbury and Soho. Last year she returned with a series of theatrical walks inspired by the lives of women during the First World War.

Partly through our shared connections with the New Generation scheme and the AHRC we’ve been incredibly lucky to work closely with BBC Radio 3’s Free Thinking Festival and we have created a series of special Being Human broadcasts, often featuring New Generation Thinkers past and present.

Being Human provides opportunities for researchers in the humanities to share their ideas with new audiences. It challenges them and supports them in finding new ways to share their knowledge and personal passions in formats that are engaging, involving and fun.

The AHRC has been looking for more opportunities for new NGTs to engage with the public and develop their skills and experiences, so it was a pleasure to welcome this year’s cohort to our annual masterclass for those taking part in Being Human. When the AHRC also pledged to support each of them with £500 if they wanted to curate an event, I was more than happy to help and advise them and they have developed some exciting contributions.

It’s no surprise that Being Human has overlapped so organically with New Generation Thinkers, when both are creating new avenues for researchers to do something absolutely essential: talk about what they do, what they believe in, and what they know in ways that are understandable and exciting to a broad public audience.

If that’s not a job for a new generation of scholars, then what is?
“It’s no surprise that Being Human has overlapped so organically with New Generation Thinkers.”
I was already in a teaching position at Liverpool University when I applied. It was the second year that the scheme had been running – a colleague pointed me in the right direction and I just decided to go for it. I had no prior media experience at all. I just thought it sounded interesting and fun.

I was also coming up for a period of research leave and I thought this would give me some flexibility if it was needed to focus on media work – and I think that was really important. These things take a lot of time, even in the planning. It’s amazing how long it takes to make even a short five or 10 minute programme. I was also quite slow to begin with as it was all new, so everything took even longer! I’ve been doing things fairly regularly with the BBC since finishing.

One of the things that struck me was that the AHRC tends to present the NGT scheme as a way of promoting your own research, which it is. But it also brings you into contact with so many other scholars. There are a huge

“Yes, being an NGT is about your research, but the conversations you have with others are just as important.”

Nandini Das (NGT 2012) is Professor of English Literature at the University of Liverpool. Her research focuses on Renaissance romance, fiction, and early travel and cross-cultural encounters.
range of NGTs doing all kinds of fascinating work, from the history of school shootings to food allergies and everything in between. This wasn’t something I was expecting. Yes, being an NGT is about your research, but the conversations you have with others are just as important.

You also learn how to frame your research for a wider audience. I had always enjoyed working with students in seminars and lectures, but becoming more conscious about the way I was communicating and how I was framing my narrative was an important step change for me.

My research focuses on 16th and 17th century travel writing. One way to talk about this subject would be to paint a broad-brush picture of its importance, and of the ways in which it helped shape the way we think about the world. Another way would be to focus on individual stories – both historical and fictional. The real challenge in making a good programme, as I soon discovered, is to find a balance between the two.

I’m never quite sure when you stop being an NGT? Do we at some point become Middle Generation Thinkers? Or Old Generation Thinkers.

I think we have a duty as academics to communicate what we do to the public. But it’s more than that, we also have a responsibility to relate our work to the world around us, to the issues and questions that we face here and now.

Being an NGT was hugely exciting, productive and fulfilling. But it demands commitment and time.
New Generation Thinkers in Numbers

2011 - 2019
Now in its 9th year

4,038
Total applications

1,100
Applications from early career researchers in first year

520
Early career researchers have got through to workshops stage

100
NGT applicants have gone on to feature across BBC Radio

80
Total New Generation Thinkers