

# Update on the activities of the Rugby Team 2008

## Sector working group on the evaluation of skills development of early career researchers

### Background to the Rugby Team

The Rugby Team<sup>1</sup> is a sector-led working group formed following the January 2005 UK GRAD (now Vitae) Roberts Policy Forum<sup>2</sup>. Participants at the forum recognised the need to build an evidence base along with expertise in evaluating the value and impact of skills development for researchers. They believed that this initiative should be driven by the sector with the emphasis on enhancement rather than compliance.

The mission of the Rugby Team is *'to propose meaningful and workable ways of evaluating skills development in early career researchers'*.

Membership of the Rugby Team is drawn from a cross-section of HEIs and other stakeholders interested in the personal and career development of researchers. It operates through a core team, together with a virtual correspondence group (VCG) and discussion forum, both of which are open to all interested parties. The Rugby Team reports back on progress and outputs to the Vitae Roberts Policy Forum.

### Rugby Team 2008

The launch of Vitae as a national programme to support the personal, professional and career development of researchers, including both postgraduate researchers and research staff presented an opportunity to review the role of the Rugby Team. The 2008 Roberts Policy Forum supported the Rugby Team recommendation that it should be reconstituted with a five-year mission.

2008 is a transition year for the Rugby Team. Professor Ella Ritchie, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Newcastle University succeeded Professor Chris Park, Head of Graduate School, Lancaster University as chair for the Rugby Team in May 2008. Chris remains on the Rugby Team as a representative for the HE Academy. During 2008 the membership of the Rugby Team will be reviewed and refreshed.

Following consultation with the VCG and participants of the January 08 Roberts Policy Forum, the mission statement was confirmed as still appropriate and the terms of reference for the Rugby Team (2008 – 2012) agreed as:

- raise the awareness of the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of skills development and the activities of the Rugby Team
- inform national and agency policies and practices relating to the evaluation of skills development of researchers
- provide sector input into shaping a programme to build an evidence base on the effectiveness of developing researchers' skills
- act as a sector 'sounding board' with respect to Vitae's engagement in helping to build the evidence base.

### Rugby Team projects

The consultation also provided feedback on the key recommendations from the 2008 Policy Forum. It was agreed that during 2008 the following projects would be taken forward.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam)

<sup>2</sup> [www.vitae.ac.uk/events](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/events)

## 1. Impact Framework

This is still seen as an important project for the Rugby Team. Having developed and published<sup>3</sup> the Impact Framework, there is a role for a sector-wide working group in taking forward the Framework and building upon the excellent work of the sector to date. The Impact Framework includes a section that provides context for HEIs as to how they can use it to reflect on their own skills development programmes and evidence-building activities.

Activities for the Rugby Team include:

- providing a review of the application of the Impact Framework in a sample of institutions to be available at the January 2009 Roberts Policy Forum
- developing a greater understanding of ongoing evaluation across the sector: the sector is encouraged to make further contributions of examples of practice to the evaluation section of the Vitae Database of Practice<sup>4</sup>
- a review of sector evaluation practice primarily based on the evaluation section of the Vitae Database of Practice will be carried out during 2010 with a report published at the September 2010 Vitae conference
- nurturing and supporting research into effective evaluation of the impact of researcher training and development activity.

By the end of 2008, the Research Councils will start building the evidence base for the next government Spending Review (for 2011-13) and examples of HEIs/the sector engaging in self-evaluation will provide very persuasive evidence of the effectiveness of the Roberts funding in embedding skills development.

Finally, it is very clear to those involved in researcher training and development, that their efforts do have a significant impact on researchers. The Impact Framework is about being able to illustrate predominantly empirical outcomes in a clear, accessible and rigorous manner to all interested stakeholders: researchers, academics, HEIs, employers, funders and government.

## 2. Skills Training and Research Supervision Survey (STaRSS)

STaRSS is a survey of supervisors' views of the skills agenda developed and trialled by the Rugby Team in 2007. The Policy Forum recommended that STaRSS be set up as a national survey along the same lines as the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS)<sup>5</sup> and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)<sup>6</sup> surveys.

Responses to the consultation on this proposal were mixed and on balance the Rugby Team agrees that although STaRSS was clearly of value to those interested in evaluating skills development and the engagement of supervisors, from the supervisor's perspective it also needs to cover additional topics of interest to supervisors. STaRSS is more likely to be used by an institution on a one-off basis as part of an internal/strategic review of skills development programmes and less likely to be used annually/regularly as with other surveys such as PRES and CROS.

As a result the Rugby Team has created a generic version of STaRSS and set it up as a shared template on BOS<sup>7</sup> available for free use by individual HEIs holding a BOS licence.

## 3. CROS and other surveys

The Policy Forum recommended that four existing national surveys that explore the experiences of different stakeholder groups, CROS (research staff), PRES (postgraduate researchers), RL (research leaders) and STaRSS (supervisors), be combined or aligned in some way to create an interlinking survey tool. It suggested that questions are updated and improved to give more explicit outcomes related to national initiatives such as the Roberts agenda<sup>8</sup> and the revised Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> available at the Vitae conference or download from [www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam)

<sup>4</sup> [www.vitae.ac.uk/dop](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/dop)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.cros.ac.uk/?op=cros\\_help](http://www.cros.ac.uk/?op=cros_help)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/pres>

<sup>7</sup> Bristol Online Survey [www.survey.bris.ac.uk](http://www.survey.bris.ac.uk)

<sup>8</sup> [www.vitae.ac.uk/roberts](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/roberts)

<sup>9</sup> [www.researchconcordat.ac.uk](http://www.researchconcordat.ac.uk)

The Rugby Team recognises that CROS is a useful tool in developing an understanding of the career development support of researchers in higher education and as such has a key role to play in building the evidence base and evaluating the implementation of the Concordat.

After consultation with the institutions using CROS, an expanded CROS Steering Group has agreed to revise CROS in order to:

- ensure it will meet future requirements, while maintaining historical comparison where possible
- make the survey more engaging by reducing repetition, ambiguity and, if possible, length
- make the tone of the questions more active, acknowledging researchers are also responsible for their own development
- acknowledge the wider activities of researchers, particularly in supporting of others
- support the monitoring of the implementation of the Concordat's principles.

Members of the Rugby Team are working with the CROS Steering Group to develop the revised survey. To be kept informed of progress/comment on the draft questionnaire sign up to the 'cros-inst' JISC mail list<sup>10</sup>.

The Rugby Team agreed with the responses from the post-Roberts Policy Forum consultation that PRES, managed by the HE Academy, has a different purpose to STaRSS, CROS and RL in that it explores the whole research degree experience and should remain as a discreet survey.

#### **4. Understanding researchers' careers and the Rugby Team careers profiles project**

A wide range of stakeholders have confirmed that better information to inform researcher career choices is timely and much needed. Collecting career profiles of individual researchers has the potential to improve understanding of the career paths followed by researchers and also to demonstrate the impact they have on culture, society and the economy in the UK. An initial stakeholder workshop run by the Rugby Team suggests there is a lot of support from key stakeholders for collecting career profiles in a more systematic way.

This project aims to create a skeleton template to provide greater commonality in the collection of career profiles, such that a national picture can be better explored through larger libraries of career profiles. A sub-group of the Rugby Team is working with other national agencies to agree a way forward, which may constitute agreeing broad areas of interest for profiling careers and a set of core reference headings.

The group will also consider the strategic long term opportunities for the project and tracking researcher careers in general, particularly how this will contribute to gathering evidence for the Impact Framework.

#### **5. Framework of researcher competencies**

A significant recommendation of the Policy Forum was that the sector should develop an overarching competencies framework/model of professional learning for researchers, which builds on or relates to the Joint Skills Statement. This should be a high priority for 2008 and should:

- be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the diversity of researchers, paths, learning styles, disciplines and local environments
- include a range of 'researchers' from postgraduate researcher to supervisor/principal investigator
- include the breadth of activities within the academic role
- differentiate between different defined entry and exit points in higher education.

The Rugby Team agrees that it is important that this project is 'driven' by the sector. A joint Vitae and Rugby Team group is developing a project plan to move this forward. This is being presented at a Vitae conference workshop and will include bringing together interested parties at a scoping workshop.

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<sup>10</sup> [www.jiscmail.ac.uk](http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk)

## 6. International researcher evidence base

The 2008 Roberts Policy Forum highlighted the importance to the UK of international researchers. This has been reinforced by the recent UK Higher Education International Unit report 'The UK's Competitive Advantage' (July 2008) on the market for international postgraduate researchers (PGRs), which highlighted the success and dependence of the UK in attracting international researchers into doctoral programmes. The UK has 15% of the international market for postgraduate researchers, which represents 42% of all PGRs studying in the UK.

The report recommends the development of 'a clear and attractive UK doctoral brand' and to 'more clearly define the benefits of a UK doctorate to an international audience'. The Rugby Team will explore the skills development aspects of these recommendations with the UK Higher Education International Unit and the British Council.

The Rugby Team will also explore the opportunities created by the launch of the European Universities Association (EUA) Council for Doctoral Education, designed to provide a European forum for sharing good practice and to contribute to the enhancement of doctoral education [www.eua.be/index.php?id=607](http://www.eua.be/index.php?id=607)

## Summary

The Rugby Team recognises the scale and complexity of these projects and their importance to the sector. We also acknowledge the inherent difficulty of evaluating the development of 'soft' skills, employability and impact. As a sector-led group we welcome and value additional input from the sector into any or all of these projects. If you have comments, references to relevant research, ideas for alternative approaches or would like to be involved, please contact us at [admin@vitae.ac.uk](mailto:admin@vitae.ac.uk)

Dr Janet Metcalfe, Vitae

Professor Ella Ritchie, Newcastle University; Chair of the Rugby Team

September 2008

The Rugby Team is a sector-led working group, drawn from a cross-section of HEIs and other relevant stakeholders, with a mission to 'propose meaningful and workable ways of evaluating the effectiveness of skills development in early career researchers'.

Vitae provides management support and resources to the Rugby Team. Vitae is funded by the UK Research Councils and managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation dedicated to lifelong career development and active career-related learning.

### Membership of the Rugby Team 2008

- Dr Tony Bromley, University of Leeds; Vitae Y&NE Hub
- Dr Iain Cameron / Kate Reading, RCUK
- Dr Colin Chandler, Northumbria University
- Gill Clarke, University of Bristol; QAA
- Duncan Connors, Secretary, National Postgraduate Committee
- Dr Rob Daley, University of Leicester; Vitae Research Staff Development Advisory Group
- Prof Pam Denicolo, Reading University; SRHE; UKCGE
- Clare Jones, University of Nottingham; AGCAS
- Janice Leung, Universities UK (UUK)
- Dr Janet Metcalfe / Ellen Pearce, Vitae
- Prof Bernie Morley, Imperial College
- Dr Donna Murray, University of Edinburgh
- Prof Chris Park, Lancaster University; HE Academy Senior Associate
- Dr Ashley Pringle, University of Southampton; National Research Staff Association (NRSA)
- Suzanne Wilson, HEFCE
- Dr Chris Wood, University of Plymouth

For more information on current and previous Rugby Team activities and publications go to [www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam)