

Vitae Roberts Policy Forum

Progress in building the evidence base

January 2009, Manchester

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Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK (RCUK), managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation and delivered in partnership with regional Hub host universities

Overview

The Vitae Roberts Policy Forum in 2009 was an opportunity to:

- explore the strategic importance of the Concordat implementation process, including contributing to the development of the specification for the Concordat benchmarking process
- identify the priorities of the sector in further evidencing the impact of the 'Roberts agenda', particularly through the application of skills in enterprise activities, outreach and public dialogue, and use of research outputs in policy making
- share approaches and practice in evidencing, evaluating and demonstrating the impact of researcher development activities.

The Policy Forum was aimed at individuals responsible for institutional policy with regard to postgraduate researchers and research staff and for implementing the Concordat and the Roberts' recommendations for researchers.

The event comprised plenary presentations, panel discussion and workshops. This report provides an overview of inputs and outcomes, including recommendations. Further details of individual workshops and plenary presentation slides can be found at: www.vitae.ac.uk/policyforum

Day 1 Plenary presentations

Day 1 Plenary presentations and discussions

Introduction: strategy development

Dr Janet Metcalfe, Chair and Head, Vitae and member of the Concordat Strategy Group

In her introduction, Forum chair Janet Metcalfe reflected on the unprecedented 'distance travelled' since the last Policy Forum. 2008 saw the launches of Vitae, which brings together support for postgraduate researchers and research staff, and of the Concordat, which provided renewed impetus for institutions to strengthen support for research staff. One aim of the Forum was to explore practical synergies between the Roberts and Concordat agendas. Participants' input to shaping the specification of the Concordat benchmarking process was also key.

Evidencing impact

RCUK's most recent letter on Roberts payments and monitoring¹ highlighted the growing drive to enhance the impact of high quality research and placed new emphasis on increasing activity in the areas of enterprise/entrepreneurship, public engagement and policy engagement. Two of the Rugby Team's projects to support the sector in assessing and demonstrating the value of researcher development activity, the Rugby Team Impact Framework (RTIF) and development work on a new framework of researcher competencies/attributes, have especially broad application.

The Forum was also an important opportunity to discuss the key questions and concerns participants had registered in advance of the event. The issue of funding beyond 2011 dominated responses – irrespective of the level of institutions' Roberts funding. Issues primarily related to whether there would be a continuation of funding, and/or ring-fencing; and the potential negative impact in the sector due to uncertainty.

Update on Vitae activities

Ellen Pearce, Director, Vitae

Ellen outlined Vitae's 2009 priorities: supporting the implementation of the Concordat; exploring the sustainability of the Roberts agenda; and embedding Vitae's research and innovation activities.

Vitae's role in supporting the importance of the Concordat principle is to enable the sharing of strategies and practice. Ellen was pleased to launch a new briefing pack covering six key groups of staff.

Vitae's policy activity to explore the sustainability of the Roberts agenda will include responding to the Thrift report², which addresses research careers as part of the HE debate³. The distribution model of any Roberts funding post 2011 is a key issue for debate. While the current model concentrates funding in large research-based institutions, it nevertheless creates momentum and drive throughout the sector and raises overall capacity.

¹ www.rcuk.ac.uk/rescareer/rcdu/training.htm

² www.dius.gov.uk/policy/research_careers.html

³ www.dius.gov.uk/policy/HE-debate.html

2009 research projects will include one to explore the impact of the 2002 Fixed-term Employees Regulations. Forthcoming research publications from Vitae include the report of the Midlands Hub part-time researcher project, and the next 'What Do Researchers Do?' publication, both due out in spring 2009. Innovation will be supported by a new two-stage process of seeking ideas and funding innovative activity, following principles of open innovation. The first call for ideas will be in the spring and call for proposals in summer 2009.

A vision for the future: research and researchers

John Nielson, Director, Research Base, DIUS

John Nielson began with a reminder of current achievement: the latest RAE reinforces the UK's position as a world leader in research. The doubling of research funding in real terms over the last decade has been built on government acceptance of the case that an excellent research base is essential for the UK economy.

'Even in an economic downturn the fundamental case for investing in research and researchers remains the same. Having a supply of highly skilled people is vital for our international competitiveness.'

His vision of research in five to ten years has four components of success: 'excellence with impact'; international competitiveness maintained; world class facilities; nurtured talent.

In these evolving economic circumstances it is vital to continue to develop a strong case and continually raise the profile of research in the face of competing government priorities. Resource is scarce and, in the next period of HE funding, decisions on priorities are the key issue. Establishing the evidence and raising the profile of research are both vital activities.

The impacts expected of the research base are much broader than the umbrella term 'economic impact' might suggest. Of equal importance to the creation of new businesses and improved products and services are qualified people, improved public policy and public services, and attracting investment. Research policy priorities

Better coordination is a major theme of research spend 2009-11. Diversity of funding streams remains, but with aligned strategy and purpose. Already the Technology Strategy Board is coordinating grants with the research councils. A further example is the six cross-research council programmes.

The funders' principle of 'excellence with impact' is crucial. Without impact, research does not influence and affect those who might benefit and use the outcomes. Without excellence, research is neither valued by other researchers nor enhances scientific reputation. Excellence with impact ensures that business outcomes, policy and practice are changed by the best research outcomes.

The quest for a robust methodology to demonstrate impact is very important to government. There are some excellent recent impact studies showing that many benefits only accrue in the long term. But it is also a vital part of making the case for funding to evaluate medium term benefits. Each research council now has an economic impact

baseline, with indicators that are periodically reported. Econometric studies have a leading role but case studies are also important in telling stories that politicians can use and cite. Programme evaluations are also an important part of 'making the case'.

The incentives to producing excellence with impact must be considered in the context of research assessment. There is still scope to influence the shape of the future Research Excellence Framework (REF). Important questions remain on how to continue to incentivise excellence and promote greater impact of research, in particular the use of research in public policy. John highlighted some key issues across the research spectrum:

- funding following the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – how selective should it be?
- Wellings report⁴ and the university intellectual property debate
- Wakeham report⁵ (recommendation that physics departments be more broadly based)
- Wilson report⁶ (humanities and social science influence in public policy making)
- Thrift report⁷ on research careers (greater movement between universities and business; attract the best global talent and nurture UK talent)
- science and society (vital to maintain UK society's support for leading research).

The 2009 HE Framework will draw together the threads of government policy for the next ten years. Decisions on fees will be critical.

Implications for researcher development

The 'excellence with impact' agenda put a high value on how researcher skills are used across the UK economy, from within and beyond academia. The role of Vitae in supporting transferable skills training is important. Key attributes needed by researchers are flexibility and the ability to work in multi-disciplinary ways. Researchers need to be extensively networked – not only with current users of research but also potential ones.

Role of institutions in achieving the vision for researchers

Professor Mary Bownes, Vice-Principal for Research Training and Community Relations, University of Edinburgh

Mary gave an insight into the complex issues facing institutions in defining their strategies and practice in light of government agendas. Institutions are indeed responding to government initiatives and evaluation of institutional practice is key. Measuring impact and culture change is complex and long term.

The Roberts agenda has contributed significant progress in skills training and career support for researchers, making them more suited to a variety of careers. The new Concordat should be closely tied into this change agenda and reported on. Other initiatives that enhance

⁴ www.dius.gov.uk/policy/intellectual_property.html

⁵ www.rcuk.ac.uk/review/physics/default.htm

⁶ www.britac.ac.uk/reports/wilson/index.cfm

⁷ www.dius.gov.uk/policy/research_careers.html

Day 1 Plenary presentations and discussions

researcher experience and employability need to be closely linked, for example public engagement and research influence on public policy.

'How can we look at the mix of agendas that HEIs are embracing in a coherent way? Research, teaching/learning, knowledge exchange, commercialisation, wealth creation for UK, internationalisation, outreach to the public, schools, academic research and public policy...?'

The Concordat embedded in HEIs is crucial to providing a good environment for researchers to flourish. The University of Edinburgh has developed a Code of Practice that complements the Concordat. It spells out the expectations and responsibilities of research staff, supervisors and their managers. Effectiveness is evaluated in a number of ways.

Culture change takes time and institutions have to do this whilst maintaining quality teaching and learning environments, balancing the books, maintaining student numbers and so on. Evaluation is important but should not divert too much time from delivering a good research environment.

Diversity is an important issue: 'we don't all need to do everything and will fare better by concentrating on strengths. This means sharing resources and activities between HEIs in some cases to provide the right career support for students/researchers.' For some institutions, internationalisation strategy and sharing of research programmes is important, both for HEI contribution to the economy and researcher training and mobility. More attention should be focused on promoting those universities offering a good researcher experience and finding ways to demonstrate how this links into the success of the institution, the UK and the long-term career success of individuals.

Both government and institutions should also encourage exchange between HEIs and business/industry and share research programmes – this means resolving intellectual property issues in a flexible way to the benefit of researchers, HEIs and businesses and better enabling mobility between sectors.

Mary called for the government to retain ring-fenced support for professional and career development activities that are beginning to have an impact on research culture. Government departments should integrate policy to avoid driving HEIs in conflicting directions. The sector should be allowed to diversify, with funding streams that respect diversity of mission.

Priorities in implementing the Roberts agenda and the Concordat principles

Dr Iain Cameron, Head of Researcher Careers and Diversity Unit, RCUK and member of Concordat Strategy Group

Iain emphasised the impressive growth in inputs and impact of researcher skills development since 2002. Universities have supplemented Roberts funding, sometimes substantially to extend their researcher development provision. 2009 priorities should be: enhanced skills provision; embedding skills and career development throughout the researcher continuum; evaluation of implementation and impact; and ensuring the sustainability of the agenda.

Enhanced skills provision

Policy focus on the impact of research (economic and social) is combined with a constant concern for the health of the future supply chain. A greater emphasis on enterprise skills and science into policy links directly to the impact agenda, while public engagement/outreach responds particularly to supply chain challenges. The researcher supply chain is constantly evolving. Only 25% of postgraduate researchers are now UK-domiciled direct entrants. 40% are international students and the remainder UK mature students or employees.

Embedding skills and career development

Focussing particularly on the implementation of the 2008 Concordat, Iain updated participants on the forthcoming appointment of a Concordat Implementation Coordinator, to raise awareness, maintain visibility and promote and support HEI's implementation. The Concordat website continues to develop and highlight launch/awareness raising events at universities and by regions. Other work includes: redeveloping CROS to support the Concordat; ensuring links to the EU Charter and Code implementation; continuing practice sharing; incorporating the Council for Science and Technology 'Pathways to the future' agenda. Vitae is contributing to the awareness campaign, building on Policy Forum workshops to help develop the benchmarking process, extending the Vitae database of practice (alignment with Concordat principles), promoting the Concordat through the regional Hub networks, organising workshops, and promoting CROS uptake.

Evaluation and sustainability

A strength of the Roberts agenda is that evaluation has been driven by HE institutions through the work of the Rugby Team. It has been noted for some time that the government had stated that Roberts funding would be ring-fenced until the end of 2011. The next spending review might well produce a different outcome. Participants should do all possible to embed Roberts activity in their institutions, sharing the good practice and progress made in the sector.

Panel: questions and discussion

Key topics for further discussion were: developing the high level skills agenda; attracting international talent; culture change in HEIs; future of Roberts funding.

High level skills

The skills of doctoral graduates remains poorly understood by many employers and regional development agencies. John Neilson accepted the request that DIUS recognise the specific skills of doctoral graduates into the high level skills strategy and other policy development. The department has recently merged vocational and HE interests and there is a consequent need for more joined-up thinking and terminology. It was suggested that Vitae should develop a suitable term to differentiate doctoral level skills from graduate level. This is vital both for spreading the network of research users in the UK and promoting the British research base abroad. Doctoral skills should not be compartmentalised (eg 'business', 'transferable', 'research'). The skills sought by academic research managers and businesses are similar. It was also suggested that the government interest in 'public engagement' might deflect resources from the important business of 'employer engagement'.

Attracting international talent

The UK research base is highly dependent on overseas talent. There is concern that government policy in a number of areas (eg loss of the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme, identity cards, licensing of international researchers) will make it more difficult for institutions to attract top overseas researchers. DIUS should continue to press the Home Office to change its approach to avoid the unintended consequences for research that results from the broader legislation. The UK also needs a national champion for promoting the British doctorate overseas and it was suggested DIUS might best fill that role.

HE culture change

The most difficult groups to see the value of researcher development are principal investigators (PIs) and departmental research managers. Other skills development is sometimes perceived as add-on rather than integral to the research effort. More progress has been made in working closely with these groups with regard to postgraduate researchers than to research staff. One purpose of the RTIF is to encourage institutions to develop and demonstrate more robust evidence of how researcher development impacts on research outcomes. Constant dialogue is important, giving examples and case studies, and using PI peers to reinforce positive messages. Institutions should make the case strongly for the REF to take account of how universities develop early career research talent.

Roberts funding

The likely level of funding agreed in the next spending review will be impacted by the economic downturn and competing priorities. Roberts funding was designed as an incentivisation method at a time when normal provision for researcher training through QR funding had inadequate outcomes. There are strong arguments that ring-fencing is needed for a further period to complete the important work begun in 2002. Changes to the funding model (whether to continue to channel through the research councils or by some method that encompasses non-RC students too) have not yet been discussed within DIUS.

Day 1 Workshop outcomes

Day 1 Workshop outcomes

These workshops explored the emerging policy and strategy issues in further enhancing researchers' impact and examples of how institutions are responding.

Embedding and sustaining the Roberts agenda

Jon Turner, University of Edinburgh and Lowry McComb, Durham University

Institutions have developed many different innovative and effective approaches to implementing the Roberts agenda. Effecting and maintaining change is both people and resource heavy and more work is needed to continue this progress and ensure the sustainability of the changes made to date. Key recommendations for further discussion and consideration were:

- **a prime need to retain the ring-fenced funding (or other clearly identified funding stream) beyond 2011.** There was a concern that, without this, even maintaining change would be unlikely in some institutions
- **review the pros and cons of different funding models post 2011, assuming Roberts funding does continue.** Possibilities include the current model, based on numbers of RC-funded researchers versus a model based on all HESA eligible postgraduate researchers
- **examine the role of reporting in continuing to build the profile of the Roberts agenda, and in demonstrating its value and impact.** A key challenge is convincing senior academics and managers not directly responsible for the Roberts agenda of its real impact
- **the potential value of an external evaluation.** Whilst continued sector-led reporting and evaluation based around the Rugby Team Impact Framework is crucial, an independent evaluation of the agenda as a whole might be timely and a useful addition
- **the importance for institutions to plan for a range of funding scenarios beyond 2010-11.**

Developing a framework of researcher attributes

Pam Denicolo, University of Reading and Rob Daley, Herriot Watt University

Researcher developers have recognised the need for an updated framework of researcher competencies or attributes, both to ensure that provision for researcher development was appropriate and to encourage self-reflection and continued professional development by researchers. This workshop contributed further information to the debate about what attributes define researchers, from training through to experience. It explored some key attributes of researchers generated by the Rugby Team's current project 'Developing a framework of researcher attributes'.

The workshop agreed that this is an important Rugby Team project that should focus on the needs of researchers (and their mentors) as they develop. There was debate on the extent to which the project should take account of alternative approaches, eg existing development profiles. Currency and using the language of researchers are important considerations. It would be useful to coordinate the work of similar projects in progress to produce combined or parallel frameworks.

Understanding non-HE employers' needs and views of researchers

Kate Reading, Research Careers and Diversity Unit, RCUK and Clair Souter, University of Leeds

This workshop was an opportunity to contribute to research council thinking on why and how to seek employer perspectives. Examining the impact of researchers and a focus on evidence-based policy development are twin drivers of current national initiatives. Stakeholders have a number of motivations for better understanding employers' views of researchers.

The workshop agreed on the importance of gaining the views of non-HE employers, in order to: assist researchers in their career planning; inform employers and share recruitment practices; develop more effective programmes; inform policy. Participants recognised that gaining employer views was not straightforward and was highly resource intensive. Projects must be highly focused. It is particularly important to gain the views of small and medium enterprises.

Developing skills to equip researchers to be more entrepreneurial/enterprising

Simon Cutler, BBSRC, Ian Lyne, BBSRC and Alison Mitchell, University of Strathclyde

The session focused on the recent report 'Enterprise at Work: Exploring intrapreneurship in researcher development'⁸ and considered its findings about the skills needed for innovation *within* organisations, as well as in the creation of new entrepreneurial ventures.

The workshop generated lively debate, which highlights that terminology in this field is often insufficiently defined and creates barriers to effective communication with researchers, senior academics/managers and those in business. The culture within organisations, such as a university or research group, has an important part to play in opportunities for skills development in terms of an 'enabling context'. Participants debated the relative importance of raising awareness/changing attitudes versus provision of specific knowledge and skills, and suggested that practitioners should aim to be innovative and entrepreneurial themselves in programme development and delivery.

Developing skills that support researchers to contribute to outreach and public awareness activities

Imelda Race, University of East Anglia and Saffron Townsend, Science In Society, RCUK

The workshop explored how the Roberts and outreach agendas work together conceptually, both for the research councils and for institutions, and examples of practice where Roberts funding has extended or could enlarge the opportunities available to researchers for skills development related to outreach and public dialogue. Adopting the umbrella term public engagement (PE) to denote a range of activities, the workshop made a number of recommendations:

- Institutions should develop incentives and rewards for their staff to engage with PE
- Vitae and the Rugby Team should ensure that the framework of researcher attributes draws attention to all the skills developed by PE
- Funders should put greater emphasis on PE in: guidance to panels, monitoring of planned PE activity and evaluation of outcomes. National PE schemes should encompass both research council- and non research council-funded researchers
- Vitae should disseminate more information about PE initiatives, eg through Hub communications

Developing skills that foster the better use of research outputs in policy making

Julie McLaren, ESRC and Emily Paremain, NERC

The workshop explored: how the research councils engage and promote the research into policy agenda; the skills and attributes researchers might develop through engaging with policy and practice; how the Roberts framework currently facilitates the development of these skills; and how/where Roberts skills training could be adapted/extended to enhance researcher skills in this area.

Participants debated the relative importance of developing researcher skills and raising their awareness of the importance of engaging with policy processes, concluding that a balance of both elements was needed. Activities funded by the Roberts agenda already develop the necessary skills, however, this is not always made explicit or linked to the research into policy agenda.

Stakeholders (HE institutions, funders, Vitae) should: identify and promote effective ways of raising researcher awareness; help spread good practice; engage in offering collaborative activity on a regional or national basis; promote experiential modes of learning.

⁸ http://vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/1.Intra%20Report_Final_33.pdf

Day 2 Plenary presentations

Day 2 Plenary presentations

Update on Rugby Team activities

Professor Ella Ritchie, Pro Vice Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) University of Newcastle Chair, Rugby Team and member of the Concordat Strategy Group

Rugby Team terms of reference 2008-12

- Inform national and agency policies and practices relating to the evaluation of skills development of researchers (both postgraduate researchers and research staff)
- 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' to Vitae with respect to its engagement in helping to build the evidence base

The Rugby Team's new chair, Ella Ritchie, described developments in the Rugby Team's remit; supporting more explicitly both postgraduate researchers and research staff and a five-year mandate. The national and international context is changing but the overall mission is unaltered. Ella thanked her predecessor Chris Park for the very good work he has done since the Rugby Team's inception.

The changing national environment for researcher training

Previous speakers drew attention to the uncertainty of earmarked funding beyond 2011, and the importance of the integration of researcher development with the creation of Vitae and the launch of the Concordat. The skills agenda at all levels of HE has broadened, for example, with additional funding for enterprise activities and public engagement.

All these developments work within, and contribute to, a more complex HEI environment. Integrating postgraduate researcher and research staff development at institutional level brings organisational challenges, but is important. It is also vital that the recent professionalisation of training for postgraduate researchers links in to other aspects of the doctorate: training should enhance cognitive and intellectual skill development, which lies at the heart of the doctorate, not diverge from it. This would help make the Roberts case at all levels; the international, national and institutional. The Roberts agenda is only one of many competing university priorities; in arguing the case for sustainability, it is important to emphasise that in a complex HE environment, transferable skills in researcher training will help researchers manage their role in diverse HE missions and career paths.

The Rugby Team therefore needs to refresh its model of generic and transferable skills and, along with Vitae, become more strongly linked into the wider skills/employability agenda. Impact assessment of the value of skills training is difficult but critically important, in order to build: the evidence base for the next Comprehensive Spending Review (2011-2013); the case for sustainability within institutions beyond Roberts' funding; and the case for employability.

The changing international context

The creation of the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area⁹ and the development of the Doctoral Cycle of the Bologna Agreement¹⁰ coincided with a gradual increase in international and European competition for researchers. The skills/training dimension of UK doctorate is a real strength, and features of the UK doctorate increasingly emulated. There is, however, an urgent need to coordinate at national level to emphasise the value of skills development to international researchers and research funders and to emphasise the advantages that UK experience could bring to collaborative networks. Internationalisation of research also calls for inclusion of cross-cultural skills as part of researchers' portfolio of competencies.

Rugby Team progress

2008 saw the completion of the STaRSS¹¹ project, strong progress on implementing the RTIF, and successful revisions to CROS. Progress was made on two joint projects with Vitae; development of a framework of researcher competencies/attributes and the career profiles framework. The Rugby Team are volunteers with limited time, hence the importance of its recent stakeholder mapping exercise which identifies priorities in communication and collaboration. The Team is currently seeking additional support from sector volunteers, especially on developing the framework of researcher competencies/attributes.

Progress in implementing the Rugby Team Impact Framework

Dr Tony Bromley Vitae Yorkshire and North East Hub and University of Leeds

Tony reported that the sector is working collaboratively and effectively to build the evidence base. The RTIF¹², published at the 2008 Vitae conference, provides such language that evaluations of differing methods can be understood in the context of a single framework. The level of activity across the sector provides a very positive outlook for building the evidence base. He cited a number of completed evaluation projects and findings in the public domain at universities such as Cardiff, Durham, Leicester, Manchester, Southampton, UEA, Bangor and Imperial College.

Evaluation has several drivers:

- to demonstrate the appropriateness of emphasis on skills development
- to provide feedback to funding bodies to help them evaluate the effectiveness and impact of investment
- to inform enhancement of researcher experience
- to assess the impact of initiatives (especially Roberts funding) on the employability of researchers.

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/index_en.html

¹⁰ <http://vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/1705/Bologna-process.html>

¹¹ http://vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/1418/Rugby-Team-activities.html#_STaRSS

¹² http://vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/1.Rugby%20Impact%20Framework_33.pdf

RTIF implementation plans and support to the sector

HEIs are encouraged to add examples of evaluation practice to the Vitae database of practice and the RCUK Roberts reporting letter of August 2008 refers to the RTIF. The Vitae conference in September 2010 will see the results of a major review of evaluation in the sector primarily based upon the database of practice. The Rugby Team will also discuss the idea of an independent evaluation to strengthen the case for Roberts impact.

Evaluation research by the sector will continue to be nurtured and supported. Mechanisms include: a JISCmail email network 'Evaluating Impact'; Vitae national and Hub events/newsletter updates; a Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) publication 'A guide to evaluating postgraduate research training and development programmes' to be published in the spring 2009.

Planned evaluation projects are taking a wide range of approaches. They include projects looking at: single impact levels; multiple impact levels; workshop activities and whole programmes; themes such as entrepreneurship and public engagement; and longitudinal studies. By sharing such information institutions will help to build up a compelling body of evidence. Small pieces of information held by different universities, once put together, could reveal potentially important trends.

Benchmarking the implementation of the Concordat principles

Dr Janet Metcalfe, Vitae

Janet emphasised that benchmarking – an assessment of current position against which to measure progress – is an important part of the Concordat implementation plan. There was no opportunity to benchmark when Roberts funding was introduced: it is excellent to be able to do so with the revised Concordat. Benchmarking would aim to measure both the awareness of the Concordat and the implementation of its principles. This is an important distinction. It could be argued that researchers do not need to know about the Concordat by name if they experience the principles being followed in their institution.

Benchmarking principles

Benchmarking is a process not a project. It is designed to highlight useful practice and encourage an enhancement-led approach to Concordat implementation. Existing data and qualitative information will be used wherever possible. Benchmarking will focus on institutional approaches to supporting research staff, research staff experiences and PI perceptions. Janet stressed that benchmarking will report on the UK position and not individual institutions.

Benchmarking process

Initial scoping has been done by the Concordat implementation group; the forthcoming high level strategy group will agree the specifications. Further scoping input from the Policy Forum will be reflected in the paper in preparation for the strategy group. The benchmarking implementation process will be managed by the Concordat Coordinator, based at UUK. By the 2009 Vitae conference it will be possible to report on some CROS results, followed by a significant update in September 2010 and a progress review in 2012.

The Concordat implementation group has begun to scope several potential projects:

- understanding the research staff cohort
- exploring the experiences of research staff
- exploring HEI approaches to human resources strategies for research staff
- reviewing the use of fixed term contracts
- views and perceptions of PIs
- exploring funders' responses to the Concordat principles.

Commenting on these projects, Janet urged participants to encourage a high uptake of CROS and to promote response rate in order to ensure a sufficient national data set. She noted that the project to gauge the perceptions of PIs is key to successful Concordat implementation and culture change. The Concordat strategy group will consider whether this should be measured by a national survey or through sampling techniques. Exploring funders' responses to the Concordat principles in policies and practices is also critically important. Ideas for these or other projects and suggestions for the benchmarking process are welcome. Flexibility is built into the design process in order that it is constructive and useful for institutions.

Question and answer session

A number of suggestions for strengthening evidence base processes were offered, such as requiring institutions to use the RTIF and employing the known benefits of peer or independent review. There is concern that insufficient resources were available to the Rugby Team to drive evaluation projects. There is dedicated resource for Concordat benchmarking projects and Vitae resource is employed jointly with the Rugby Team on other priority projects, but much remains to be taken forward on a voluntary basis.

A further topic was convergence of the postgraduate researcher and research staff agendas. The Rugby Team has explored the possibility of combining CROS and PRES, but the purposes of these surveys are too disparate; PRES looks at the holistic researcher experience while CROS aims for depth of information on researcher training and development. However, the competency/attributes framework is a key project that addresses all researchers. It is a current priority to get clarity on the knowledge and skills needed at each level of the framework.

Day 2 Workshop outcomes

Day 2 Workshop outcomes

These workshops explored various aspects of building the evidence base for the Roberts agenda and the implementation of the Concordat principles. Several provided the opportunity for HEIs to influence the specification of the proposed projects within the Concordat benchmarking process.

Understanding the demographics and needs of postgraduate researchers

Gosia Kulej, Higher Education Academy; Chris Park, Lancaster University and Suzanne Wilson, HEFCE

This workshop discussed the demographic composition and profile of postgraduate researchers (based on a forthcoming HEFCE PhD trends report), and postgraduate researchers' views on what they need to be successful, (based on analysis of the 2008 PRES results by the HE Academy).

These analyses were judged to be extremely useful, however, important areas for further investigation and reporting are: finer granularity of survey results; how researcher views change over time; effects of particular skills development interventions; how individual HE institutions compare with the sectoral trend; better understanding of the relationship between HE organisational structures and the research student experience; insight into the relationship between academic cultures/'tribes' and the research student experience; what factors inform student expectations of being a doctoral researcher.

Methods for developing understanding could be the refinement of existing tools such as PRES and wider dissemination of local, small scale analyses. The latter has an important role in identifying trends.

Understanding the demographics and needs of research staff

Hannah Falvey, Finance and Corporate Services, HEFCW and Sheila Thompson, University of Edinburgh

This workshop summarised information available from the HESA staff record about research staff at UK HEIs and discussed limitations of the available data. A case study from the University of Edinburgh gave an insight into its methods for investigating research staff needs.

Participants discussed ideas for improving research staff data and the tracking of researchers' careers and made several recommendations:

- HESA and HEIs should address problems with uptake and transfer of the HESA unique staff identifier and categorisation of job roles
- institutions should make appraisal mandatory (and include review of skills needs and effectiveness of training, capturing and following up such information)
- Edinburgh's exit survey structure using BOS software should be made available to all HEIs

- Institutions should capture entry-level data from their research staff

The workshop recognised that issues remained about how to tap into the needs and views of 'non-respondant' populations.

Using the revised 'Careers in Research Online Survey' (CROS) in the context of the Concordat implementation

Andy Wilson, Loughborough University and Jane Wellens, University of Nottingham

Since 2002 CROS has enabled universities anonymously to gather data about research staff working conditions, career aspirations and development opportunities. Following the 2008 Concordat launch, the CROS steering group has been working to update the survey and relate it to the Concordat principles.

Participants agreed that the revised CROS was more engaging and relevant. Although the emphasis has been on Concordat alignment, CROS continues to meet its core purpose of providing valuable information to assist researcher developers in understanding the development needs of researchers. It was felt that it would be useful to share the mapping exercise that showed which questions within CROS relate to which principles, to aid institutional reporting. The workshop agreed on the importance of strongly marketing CROS, tying in with communication plans for the Concordat. Vitae Hubs could have an important role. They might be encouraged to share their data and perhaps become a set of benchmarking clubs that allow institutions to make useful comparisons with other institutions they know well.

Institutional use of the Rugby Team Impact Framework

Tony Bromley, University of Leeds, Parmjit Dhugga, University of Nottingham and Lucy Lee, University of Sheffield

This workshop explored the application of the RTIF to evaluation in institutions and also, using case studies from two institutions, how existing evaluation may be mapped against the RTIF.

A presentation of a 'broad' evaluation programme by the University of Nottingham, spanning all five faculties, was complemented by an outline of the 'deep' approach taken by the University of Sheffield School of Medicine.

Discussion centred on examples of evaluation at different levels of the framework. The workshop made several recommendations:

- Institutions are strongly encouraged to adopt the RTIF to underpin sector evaluation activities based on a common language
- Vitae should further support the development of evaluation expertise by, for example: disseminating information from the Vitae database of practice and setting up interest groups in a similar manner to the benchmarking clubs of PRES. The 2009 Vitae conference should include a significant core session on evaluation and give opportunities to hear about and exchange good practice

Reviewing HEI human resources strategies for researchers

Sheila Gupta, University of Edinburgh and Sara Williams, Cardiff University

This workshop explored how HEIs were developing their overall and human resources strategies for researchers, key issues in embedding the development of researchers within HR strategies, potential solutions, and appropriate mechanisms to share practice and experiences.

Participants concluded that responsibility for implementing the Concordat was collective. Good people management should occur across the organisation. This is a challenge: appropriate language and shared ownership are critical. HR professionals and Roberts staff need ways to learn from each other, enhance their knowledge and share practice. Vitae should lead in forming links between the researcher development and HR communities. Strategies are helpful starting points; there should be relevant implementation points in all institutional strategies, not only HR ones. The workshop recommended examining governance reporting as a source of useful benchmarking information.

Exploring the use of the Fixed-term Employees Regulations in practice

Tristram Hooley, Vitae and Liz Oliver, European Law and Policy Research Group, University of Liverpool

This workshop discussed the implications that the Fixed-term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations, introduced in 2002, are having on HE institutions. Vitae, in partnership with the European Law and Policy Research Group (University of Liverpool), is planning some research into the sector's response to changes in fixed-term regulation and how these new regulations have impacted on researchers' careers.

There was helpful discussion of the research proposal, and the workshop recommended:

- that the research topic is important, will be useful to the sector and should be pursued by Vitae
- that the research councils would be supportive and would be likely to have relevant data and intelligence that might help shape and inform the project
- that it would be necessary to narrow the area of study and focus, for example on particular institutions/disciplines, themes or types of institution in order to create a viable project.

Developing a framework for career profiles of researchers

Julia Horn, Centre for Career Management Skills, University of Reading and Ellen Pearce, Vitae

A Rugby Team project aims to create a common framework to underpin the collection of career profiles such that they meet the needs of a range of stakeholders. The Reading Centre for Career Management Skills has developed a career web resource specifically for arts and humanities PhD researchers, called 'Beyond the PhD'.

This workshop explored how best to use existing career profiles and how to support a growing community of practice.

The workshop recommended that Vitae:

- create a portal which links to existing career profiles
- manage a project to review how to demonstrate the impact and breadth of researcher careers from existing profiles
- consider creating a database of profiles to which institutions can add.

In relation to the Rugby Team project, a range of key questions that might be used in collecting/interrogating career stories were identified. The Rugby Team/Vitae should engage a survey expert to further develop those question areas.

Way ahead

Janet Metcalfe noted that the Policy Forum had raised a number of issues where further consultation with the sector is important. Vitae will frame questions for an informal email consultation of institutions, which will ask for responses on the following:

Funding

Should Roberts money continue to be ring-fenced? If ring-fencing were not a possibility, what would be institutions preferred method of receiving whatever money is available? Should funding continue to be attached to research-council funded researchers or be more generally available to the HESA cohort?

Reporting

How should annual reporting evolve? In light of the need to demonstrate impact, is the current style of Roberts reporting (based on inputs and throughputs) still appropriate? Should there be more emphasis on outcomes and application of skills? Should the Roberts and Concordat agendas be pulled together, by requiring institutions to report on Concordat implementation in the same submission?

Evidence

How robustly should institutions be encouraged to use the RTIF? All institutions have 'pieces of the evaluation jigsaw'; how best could these be put together to increase the value of the evidence base?

Researcher attributes

There was general agreement of the value of a framework of researcher skills and that the Joint Skills Statement no longer meets requirements: how should work on the framework of researcher attributes continue?

Communications

There is an urgent need to raise the profile of the achievements and successes of the Roberts agenda, both in the UK and abroad. How can this be achieved?

Language

The Forum identified many instances of miscommunication through lack of appropriate or commonly understood language (eg the language of researchers, employers, trainers, HR departments). It also identified an important gap in terminology: what name should be given to doctoral level skills, if 'higher level skills' encompassed graduate level ones? The Rugby Team should consider how best to move forward on these language challenges.

Recommendations

The Policy Forum made a number of recommendations to stakeholders. These are summarised in the relevant workshop outcome sections above and listed in full below.

To higher education institutions

- As a priority, plan for a range of funding scenarios beyond 2010-11
- Institutions should be strongly encouraged to adopt the RTIF so that sector evaluation activities are underpinned by a common framework
- Develop incentives and rewards for their staff to engage with public engagement
- Capture entry-level data from all research staff
- Make appraisal mandatory. Appraisal should include review of skills needs and effectiveness of training. Institutions need a mechanism to capture this information from appraisals and follow up such information
- The University of Edinburgh's exit survey structure using BOS software should be made available to all HEIs
- Examine existing governance reporting to derive Concordat benchmarking information

To HESA and higher education institutions

- Address problems with uptake and transfer of the HESA unique staff identifier, including an exploration of alternative identifiers
- HESA should supply HEIs with clearer guidance on how to categorise staff into Teaching, Research, and Teaching and Research categories which HEIs should follow

To the DIUS, RCs, FCs, and other funders

- Review the pros and cons of different funding models post 2011, assuming Roberts funding does continue
- Retain ring-fenced funding (or other clearly identified funding stream) beyond 2011
- Put greater emphasis on public engagement in: guidance to panels, monitoring of planned PE activity and evaluation of outcomes
- Encompass both research council- and non research council-funded researchers in national PE schemes

To RCUK

- Examine the role of reporting in continuing to build the profile of the Roberts agenda, and in demonstrating its value and impact
- Consider whether the Roberts and Concordat agendas should be pulled together by requiring institutions to report on both in the same submission

To the Rugby Team/Vitae

- Engage a survey expert to further develop identified career profiles question areas that might be used in collecting career stories, where the aim is specifically to demonstrate wider impact
- Ensure that the framework of researcher attributes draws attention to all skills developed by public engagement

To the Rugby Team

- Consider the potential value of an external evaluation of the impact of the Roberts funding
- Review the use of language, ie find a terminology to differentiate doctoral skills (and taught masters) from higher level skills (graduate)

To Vitae

- Further support and encourage the development of evaluation expertise by, for example: disseminating information from the Vitae database of practice and setting up interest groups in a similar manner to the benchmarking clubs for PRES. The Vitae annual conference in September 2009 should include a significant core session on evaluation and give opportunities to hear about and exchange good practice (eg a poster session)
- Disseminate more information about public engagement initiatives, eg through Hub communications
- Create a portal which links to the wide-ranging set of career profiles for researchers that already exist
- Lead a project to review available career profiles/stories and how we can best use what we have to demonstrate the impact of breadth of researcher careers
- Consider creating and managing a database of career profiles to which institutions can add

Vitae builds on previous work by the UK GRAD Programme and UKHERD. Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK (RCUK) and managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation and delivered in partnership with regional Hub host universities.

The role of Vitae is to work with UK higher education institutions (HEIs) to embed professional and career development in the research environment. Vitae plays a major role in innovating, sharing practice and enhancing the capability of the higher education sector to provide professional development and training of researchers.

Our vision is for the UK to be world-class in supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers. For further information about the range of Vitae activities go to

www.vitae.ac.uk or contact enquiries@vitae.ac.uk

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Incorporating the UK GRAD Programme and UKHERD



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