



Vitae Research Staff Conference 2011 Local, regional and international: the impact of research staff associations

3 November 2011, Leeds

www.vitae.ac.uk/rsconference2011

Conference report

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



CRAC



UK Research Staff Association presents a collective voice for members of research staff.

Vision: 'A fulfilling career for every researcher'

UKRSA empowers research staff to take control of their careers and contribute to policy

Research staff associations are instrumental in the implementation of policies aiming to enhance the experience of research staff:

- RSAs input into skills and training provision for researchers, which the Research Councils see as a priority to enhance the quality and output of the UK research base
- RSAs can enhance the research environment element of the UK Research Excellence Framework and have the potential to increase outputs and impact
- The UKRSA and local RSAs embrace the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and urge members of research staff to utilise it to affect changes in their institutions
- The UKRSA is represented on the panel which assesses UK higher education submissions for the European HR Excellence in Research Award

The UKRSA has had significant input into the Vitae Research Staff Conference 2011.



The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers sets out the expectations and responsibilities of researchers, their managers, employers and funders. It aims to increase the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK and to improve the quantity, quality and impact of research for the benefit of UK society and the economy.

Since the first of April 2011 Vitae has been responsible for leading the implementation of the following aspects of the Concordat principles:

- Supporting the Concordat Strategy and Executive Groups
- Leading the work programme, including managing the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) and the Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS), and producing a review of the impact of the Concordat three years after its launch
- Managing the process for the European Commission HR Excellence in Research recognition awards

Vitae provides leadership and a single point of contact for both research staff career development and the wider Concordat agenda. Vitae also works with Universities UK and the research funders at the strategic level, to enhance the benefits of good management and career development of research staff to the UK research base, society and the economy.

www.researchconcordat.ac.uk

Vitae Research Staff Conference 2011

Local, regional and international: the impact of research staff associations

Published by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) Ltd.

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Conference report

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Overview

The third Vitae Research Staff Conference brought together members of research staff who are active in research staff associations (RSAs) or who wished to become so.

The 2010 Vitae Research Staff Conference focused on the sustainability and embedding of local research staff associations (RSAs) and the national UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA) as supportive structures for research staff. In 2011 this was consolidated and learning from setting up local RSAs and increasing their impact shared. A further emphasis was on regional RSAs, aligned with and with support from Vitae Hub Managers. Regional RSAs will allow effective practice sharing throughout the year and provide vital support for members of research staff who have no access to a local RSA. There was time set aside before the first plenary session of the conference to discuss setting up regional RSAs.

Participants:

- discussed how research staff can get their voices heard more effectively in policy discussions, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally
- shared how to build and maintain successful research staff communities with illustrative examples of representation in higher education institutions' decision making structures
- explored the contribution of RSAs to the building of institutional capacity to support research staff professional development and careers
- considered the research environment and examined issues that impact on research staff across institutional and disciplinary barriers and how to influence this
- shared resources and best practice concerning setting up of local and regional RSAs, researcher engagement and increasing impact on research outcomes and researcher careers.

Vitae organised the conference with significant input from UKRSA. The event combined key note presentations, question and answer sessions and interactive workshops. Key themes included:

- The importance of evidence in influencing policy to improve research careers
- Evidence of significant, if uneven, progress in implementation of the 2008 Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers
- The need for more active involvement in RSAs and professional development opportunities for research staff
- The opportunity presented by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to leverage support for RSAs
- The value of the Researcher Development Framework and other Vitae resources and the need to promote awareness and use by research staff
- The scope for building international partnerships with other national research staff associations

A lively networking session concluded the day.

This report provides summaries of the plenary sessions and workshops. Presenters' slides and photographs of the event can also be accessed at www.vitae.ac.uk/rsconference2011. There are several reports about the day on the Vitae Research Staff Blog, for example Isabel Krug's '[Vitae Conference in Leeds A great event](#)', Larissa Mihoreanu's '[Thank you, Vitae](#)' and Elizabeth Dodson's '['Twas the night after the Vitae conference](#)'.

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Plenary presentations

Chaired by Dr Daniel Weekes, Senior Scientific Officer, King's College, University of London and Co-chair, UKRSA

Welcome and introduction

Dr Tennie Videler, Programme Manager:
Researchers, Vitae

Tennie Videler gave a warm welcome and outlined the many developments since the 2010 Research Staff Conference:

- UKRSA is going from strength to strength
- The REF consultation is gathering pace and the framework is taking shape
- The Researcher Development Framework, a framework for professional development of researchers, launched by Vitae in 2010, is becoming well embedded in universities
- Vitae's Every Researcher Counts project for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has been developed to improve equality and diversity practice in the research environment
- Research staff feedback from the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) indicates the extent of progress in implementing the Concordat
- The Science is Vital campaign has raised awareness of research staff careers, publishing a report and taking part in roundtable discussion at the Royal Society with David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science
- Vitae's web portal for research staff has been updated and the Research Staff Blog on the Vitae website is going well. A booklet 'Best of the Blog', was distributed at this conference

Now we need to make more people aware of and engaged with RSAs, allowing RSAs to represent research staff more fully and have greater impact. The Researcher Development Framework is an important resource for research staff: 'owning' the framework is a major priority too. The conference is an opportunity to learn more about these developments and others, extend your networks, share practice and get involved with RSA activities over the coming year.



What recent surveys tell us about current research staff experiences

Dr Robin Mellors-Bourne, Director, Research and Intelligence, CRAC: The Career Development Organisation

Robin summarised the findings of the 2011 Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) and the Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS), used by HEIs to help gauge their progress in implementing Concordat principles.

Context

Universities have conducted Concordat gap analyses and published implementation plans. The sector is fortunate in having major survey tools – CROS, PIRLS and PRES (the Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey) – that give consistent and substantial data sets to help monitor Concordat progress. CROS questions are closely tied to the Concordat principles, so are helpful in judging the extent to which Concordat principles are perceived to be achieved. Each survey consists of a common question set with scope for a university to add local questions if desired. In 2011, 51 HEIs ran CROS, achieving 5,585 responses from individual members of research staff (25% response rate). CROS has been run several times; the 2009 and 2011 question sets enable direct comparison. PIRLS, run for the first time in 2011, helps establish a baseline of the views of research leaders. Thirty-three HEIs opted to run PIRLS, gaining 2,500 responses (19% response rate).

Some of the CROS demographic data is likely to interest policy-makers:

- Researcher mobility: 67% of research staff respondents are UK nationals. Of these, 61% have collaborated internationally and 24% have worked abroad. On the other hand, 49% have only worked in their current higher education institution (HEI). 14% have had five or more contracts with their current HEI
- Wider experience: 46% of CROS respondents supervise students and 57% teach. Twenty three percent participate in departmental committees/decision-making and 46% more would like to. Only 5% have undertaken a non-HE placement or exchange
- Three quarters aspire to a career in higher education

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Progress in implementing the Concordat principles

Universities have made significant progress in open and transparent processes in **recruitment, selection and induction**:

- 39% of candidates were offered job information detailing skills/competencies (CROS 2011) compared with 32% (2009)
- 67% of research staff were offered an institutional induction (CROS 2011) compared with 40% in 2009. 31% found it useful compared with 16% in 2009
- 72% of research leaders/principal investigators (PIs) were confident about recruitment/selection

The survey evidence on **fixed-term contracts** is not straightforward. Overall, there were fewer fixed-term contracts in use. Of CROS 2011 respondents 77% were on a fixed-term contract compared with 82% of 2009 respondents. However, this reduction is partly due to the presence of more post-1992 HEIs in the 2011 sample. For example, use of fixed-term contracts reduced from 85% (2009) to 82% (2011) among respondents based at Russell Group HEIs, compared with a reduction from 59% (2009) to 43% (2011) at post-1992 institutions. There is also evidence of some shortening of fixed-term contracts, which needs further investigation. This may not be a negative trend, as it might be explained by an increase in short 'bridging' contracts between grants.

On issues of **recognition and value** there are clear signs of progress. PIRLS found that 82% of research leaders/PIs were appraised (and 57% felt recognised for their role in supervision.) A smaller proportion of research staff, 55% (CROS), reported participation in an appraisal; however this was higher than in 2009 (50%). PIRLS also found that 31% of research leaders/PIs would like to be more confident on appraisal or probation issues.

In general, research staff reported favourably on **equality and diversity** issues. Older research staff are the least satisfied group. Research staff (irrespective of gender) rated work-life balance much more positively than research leaders. Research staff satisfaction compares well against many other employment sectors.

In the area of **skills support and career development** the picture is more mixed. PIRLS found that 33% of research leaders/PIs would like to be more confident in providing career support. CROS found a slight increase in reported participation in career management training, from 16% in 2009 to 20% in 2011. However, considerably more research staff reported being encouraged to participate in continuing professional development (CPD) – 77% in 2011 compared with 64% in 2009. Participation may therefore have levelled off since 2009.

Of most concern is the PIRLS finding that 41% of research leaders/PIs thought that CPD was not very important for future research leaders. Respondents may have a narrow interpretation of the term CPD and further work is needed to explore this finding. The [PIRLS report](#) gives an insight into how research leaders perceive their multiple roles, comparing the importance research leaders attach to their various functions with their confidence in fulfilling them.

Conclusion

The extent of progress varies across Concordat principles, between and within institutions, but the overall direction is positive. Conclusions reported to the Concordat Strategy Group (as part of the three-year review of the Concordat) include the need to address research leaders' need for more support on people management functions and greater encouragement for research staff to engage in career and professional development. Increasingly, universities are putting the infrastructure in place to support research staff: the onus is now on research leaders and research staff themselves to take up the opportunities provided.

Update on the UKRSA

Dr Robert Hardwick, Research Associate, University of Leicester and Co-chair, UKRSA

Rob explained the central role of UKRSA's research projects and publications and outlined priorities for 2012.

UKRSA was formed in January 2010 with support from Vitae. Committee members are research staff from across the UK and different disciplines, with a common interest in, and enthusiasm for, issues of careers and skills development for research staff. All UKRSA committee members have a background in local RSAs and know how valuable they are. UKRSA's aim is to support and champion local RSAs, so that research staff can better develop the skills needed for researcher and other careers. Another key aim is to develop a voice for researchers at national level. UKRSA's main route to this is through its research, so that it can present strong evidence to policy makers.

To date, UKRSA has published two reports based on its surveys of local RSAs. '[Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact](#)' is set in the context of the Concordat and describes the skills and other benefits developed through RSA membership. The '[Guide to Research Staff Associations](#)' considers different RSA structures and models for sustainability. Featuring case studies, it is a practical resource for those looking to set up or strengthen a local RSA.

“ A recent example of Vitae's assistance to UKRSA and RSAs comes from the research staff conference. Held for the first time in Leeds, several RSAs from Leeds and Sheffield were represented who did not know each other, as well as support staff who did not know of RSAs in their institution. This opportunity ensured critical networking happened, I hope this will help to sustain and grow them in the future

Participant feedback

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Current projects

UKRSA has three on-going research projects: these too will result in publications for research staff and RSAs.

Most RSA members are postdoctoral researchers. Their career development within academia is addressed by the Postdoctoral Funding Models project. This will analyse funding models and investigate how they could improve for researchers.

Opportunities for members of research staff, for career development outside academia will be addressed by the Employer Engagement project. This project is about increasing dialogue with different kinds of employers – from industry to third sector – to improve mutual understanding. We need to convince employers of what differentiates research staff from doctoral and other graduates.

The third project, on the value of RSAs follows up the [‘Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact’](#) report, taking a closer look at the specific skills that research staff can gain through their RSA activities mapped to the Researcher Development Framework. Preliminary data from the project’s survey of research staff is being analysed.

All three projects were presented in workshops at this conference.

Building and sustaining RSAs

Another priority is increasing research staff involvement at all levels. In order to reach out to as many researchers as possible, UKRSA is setting up a regional structure, with the support of the Vitae regional Hubs. This will also give more opportunities to share best practice amongst RSAs. UKRSA members have volunteered to be regional contacts, but more volunteers are needed to cover all regions.

A voice for researchers

UKRSA has an advisory role on various national groups: the Concordat Strategy Group, HR Excellence in Research Award panel, Impact and Evaluation Group, CROS/PIRLS Steering Group, and the HEFCE Equality and Diversity Group. UKRSA contributions to these groups are based on the views of researchers as expressed through RSA surveys and other research. All research staff are encouraged to take part in the UKRSA. The next committee meeting will be held in the early 2012 and all are welcome. As well as face-to-face opportunities, UKRSA uses Facebook, Twitter, blogs and email to build researcher involvement with issues that affect their careers.

Publication of research results is an important way to raise the profile of research staff. UKRSA is looking at the potential for publication in peer-reviewed journals to supplement current publication routes.

“ Great to meet researchers from other universities and to compare experiences. ”

Participant feedback

Future directions

UKRSA priorities for 2012 are:

- Employer engagement
- Increasing research staff awareness that the Researcher Development Framework is a powerful tool for identifying and communicating skills
- Exploring the concept of the professional researcher
- Seizing opportunities to use the REF to advantage, not only for individual researchers but also to strengthen HEI recognition of RSAs.

On behalf of postdocs: the National Postdoctoral Association

Cathee Johnson Phillips, Executive Director, National Postdoctoral Association, USA

Cathee gave insights into the development, scope, structure and achievements of the National Postdoctoral Association, which supports 100 postdoctoral associations across the US.

Founded in 2003, the mission of the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) is ‘to advance the US research enterprise by enhancing the quality of the postdoctoral experience for all participants and thereby maximising the effectiveness of the research community’. The best estimate of postdoc numbers in the US puts the figure at 89,000¹, of which 60% are international researchers on temporary visas. It is estimated that 42% of researchers in the US are women; 58% men, that the majority are in their early 30s and one-third have children.² However, the majority of researchers who are US nationals are women, while the majority of international researchers are men.

Postdocs have a range of different job titles in US universities. One of NPA’s early achievements was to work with the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) (the main science research funders in the US) to achieve the NSF/NIH definition of a postdoc as ‘an individual who has received a doctoral degree (or equivalent) and is engaged in a temporary and defined period of mentored advanced training to enhance the professional skills and research independence needed to pursue his or her chosen career path’. The phrase ‘mentored advanced training’ was carefully chosen to begin the process of culture change; that is, postdocs should not be regarded as an extra pair of hands, but rather as colleagues worthy of respect and mentoring. This definition covers science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines only; NPA is still working towards an appropriate definition for the growing numbers of those holding postdoctoral fellowships in the humanities, who generally undertake a greater proportion of teaching than their STEM colleagues.

¹ *National Science Foundation Division of Science Resource Statistics. (January 2010). Science and engineering indicators 2010. Arlington, VA: National Science Board.

² Sigma Xi 2004-2005 Postdoc Survey

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NPA's roots

In 1996, Science Journal started an initiative called Next Wave. Its postdoc network helped to make postdocs more visible. After the national academies report 'Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience for Scientists and Engineers'³, in 2000, more stakeholders started to take postdoctoral issues more seriously. Support from major stakeholders was vital to breakthrough. This came in 2003 when seven postdocs founded NPA and gained a substantial grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, while the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) gave office space and technical and legal support.

Structure and focus

NPA was independently incorporated in 2005, recognised as a non-profit charitable, educational organisation. It is highly volunteer driven: a grass-roots democratic organisation that elects its board of directors (and seven of its 11 directors must be postdocs). A small staff team supports its governance and membership committees, the latter comprising 275 members across US institutions.

NPA's focus is on community building, resource development and advocacy and education. These are all interrelated. For example, NPA has been successful in gaining a grant from the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE Programme for a project to adapt and disseminate promising institutional practices that can help women postdocs successfully transition to faculty careers. One recent output from this project is the '[Postdoc's guide to pregnancy and maternity leave](#)'.

Advocacy and education

Sixty of the USA's 100 postdoc associations have been founded since 2003. NPA also supports postdoctoral officers working – often in isolation – within institutional research offices. Their numbers have doubled to 120 since NPA was founded.

Local postdoctoral associations have a very important role in lobbying their local members of congress, while at national level NPA represents postdocs to federal agencies and offices and other professional societies such as the national academies.

Achievements

NPA is especially proud of its role in:

- the establishment of the [NIH Pathways to Independence Award](#) to help postdocs successfully transition to tenure-track faculty position. These provide two years as a postdoctoral fellow and one year as faculty
- the establishment of the Congressional requirement (America COMPETES Act 2007) that the NIH expand data collection efforts regarding postdocs supported on research grants (previously there was no requirement to report postdocs)
- the establishment of the Congressional requirement in the same act that NSF require mentoring plans in all research grant applications that seek funding for a postdoctoral scholar position

- the establishment of several Postdoctoral Offices (PDOs) and Associations (PDAs) at institutions across the country
- the establishment of key resources such as '[Toolkit on the Responsible Conduct of Research; Survival Guide for International Postdocs](#)'.

Needs of the changing workforce

Among the factors driving NPA's strategies and priorities are work/life balance issues, career options for postdocs, and doing more research with less money.

With the average age of a postdoc up from 28 to 34, postdocs have an increased desire for work/life balance, which demands better recognition of the importance of family-friendly policies in academia.

NPA has been instrumental in promoting awareness that academia cannot support all doctorate holders. In 2006 postdocs had only a 20% chance of achieving a tenure track position; five years later this had only risen to 25%. NPA recognises that greater emphasis on professional development for transferable skills is needed so that postdocs can successfully market themselves outside academia. In 2008, a NPA committee developed the NPA Core Competencies, transferable across different researcher careers. This organises competencies under the headings of Disciplinary Knowledge, Research Skills Development, Communication Skills, Professionalism, Leadership and Management and Responsible Conduct of Research. Less comprehensive than the admirable Vitae Researcher Development Framework, the Core Competencies⁴ may nevertheless be of interest to research staff.

Question and answer

Q: Will the CROS data be available by region and institution?

A: Robin Mellors-Bourne replied that CROS data was owned by the institution, which can make use of benchmarking group data (aggregated results of similar institutions) but not regional data. Research staff should therefore request data from their institution.

Q: Are there research staff associations in other European countries?

A: Tennie Videler introduced Gordon Dalton from the Irish Research Staff Association (IRSA) who is also aiming to set up a European research staff association.

Q: Are there any plans for the National Postdoctoral Association to work together with RSAs in other countries?

A: Cathee Johnson Phillips replied that NPA was currently seeking funding to partner with UKRSA and IRSA to start an international consortium regarding research staff. NPA had also been approached by Japan and China, both keen to improve the postdoctoral experience on their countries. She was optimistic at the prospects for international collaboration.

³ http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=9831

⁴ www.nationalpostdoc.org/competencies

Closing plenary

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Beyond research: engaging with the wider world

Dr Jennifer Rohn, Postdoctoral Researcher and Founder, Science is Vital

Jenny described her 'reluctant transformation from normal scientist to an activist' when, in autumn 2010, a huge cut to the UK science budget appeared imminent. She urged others be active in making a difference for research staff.

"Engaging with the world beyond academia was familiar to me: jobs in publishing and a biotech start-up, being a writer, working with school children and public engagement. But for a long time politics was a no-go area: it seemed mysterious and rather boring. That was until Government Minister Vince Cable made his now infamous speech at Queen Mary College with talk of cutting the science budget between 25 and 40%. On Twitter the reaction was immediate, full of hand-wringing about research and research careers. Incensed at Vince Cable's remarks and determined not to be defeatist, I fired off a blog post 'No more Dr Nice Guy', proposing a protest march in London. Amazingly, the response crashed the server for the blogging network. From not expecting any replies, I now found myself propelling a campaign which I now had to deliver. But already, from the immediate response, a core of group of co-organisers had come on board.

"We judged that we had a month to make a difference before the Comprehensive Spending Review decisions were finalised. A month to organise a rally and march, lobby parliament, get press coverage, write to MPs – it seemed impossible in the timescale. I had only a few months left on my fellowship, so I took the risk of leaving the lab temporarily and throwing myself into the campaign"

Approach

They had one simple strategic message: science is vital. Their message aimed to convince the treasury that science is vital for the UK economy. Not only was their message positive, they also chose to behave with gravitas befitting professional researchers.

Science is Vital used both new and old media to amplify its message: social media (Facebook page, massive Twitter campaign, online petition), email (particularly useful for contacting senior staff such as vice chancellors), building a database of contacts. The Campaign for Science and Engineering gave valuable help via their contacts list too.

They worked hard to get influential backing which gave legitimacy and amplification. Once they got the backing of one large charity, Cancer Research UK, other charities lent their support. The same applied to Fellows of the Royal Society. They courted celebrities, such as Professor Brian Cox. Thanks to his 300,000 Twitter followers their message spread beyond the scientific community and their petition was signed by both scientists and non-scientists.

Thanks to previous public engagement work and their new supporters they also made the most of contacts in journalism.

Results

Two and a half thousand people attended the Science is Vital rally outside the Treasury, and we gained much helpful [media coverage](#) repeating our message. 'Vital' infiltrated the language. David Cameron said science was vital.

The Comprehensive Spending Review resulted in a frozen science budget. This represents a cut in real terms but this outcome was a lot better than expected. They were proud of what they had helped achieve in just a few weeks. It felt good to be given public credit for influencing the outcome, but Science is Vital played a small part alongside other lobbying by learned societies, and so on. They believe that, underneath, government wanted to protect science. Protests by scientists helped legitimise that desire to keep science high priority.

Is activism risky?

Many people worry that activism can harm already precarious research careers. It takes you out of the lab or office; might it also get you a reputation as a rabble-rouser, not serious about research? On the contrary: "Science is Vital has raised my profile in a positive way. I have received letters from eminent scientists and increased my reputation with my Head of Department."

Getting involved to raise the profile of researcher careers need not demand a huge time commitment. Writing to your local MP (you don't have to be UK voter to do this) is a really powerful method. Research staff can change small things in the local (departmental) environment and start from there. Research staff are a very large group. If they get together people will listen. You have power and can use it. Defend your profession – no one else will. In the next budget cycle Science is Vital aims to get back for science the money lost in this budget freeze – the campaign goes to the next stage.

Jenny hopes she has inspired research staff to think about the bigger picture and what they can do to make a positive change for their profession. RSAs can be a powerful way of getting together and making some changes.

“It has been very interesting and stimulating – very inspired by the National Postdoc Society and by Jennifer Rohn.”

Participant feedback

Closing plenary

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Pulling it all together

Jenny Rohn then led a round up of key messages from the workshops (which are more fully covered in the next section).

The value of research staff associations

UKRSA's survey-based studies show that RSAs help members develop a wide range of skills, and evidence RSAs' value to their institution. Workshop participants reported that engaging research staff is a major issue.

Skills development costs are a significant issue particularly now that universities no longer receive ring-fenced funding for researcher development (the Roberts funding which came to an end in April 2011). However, the Research Councils continue to support, and institutions continue to provide, skills and career development for research staff. [Research Councils UK have set out their expectations](#) of institutions and have provided a mechanism through research grant indirect costs by which institutions can apply for dedicated funding.

Research Excellence Framework – what does it mean to you?

This session identified ways in which the impact and environment elements of the REF can be used by research staff to their advantage. For example, research staff can be named in impact case studies and RSAs can be evidenced as benefiting the research environment. The REF thus presents a major opportunity to leverage support and influence for RSAs and researcher skills development within an institution.

Labour market information

This workshop featured an institutional study that found that the longer staff had worked as a researcher, the wider the gap between their career aspiration and their expectations. Outcomes for men and women were also very different. Participants agreed on the need for more studies, from a range of disciplines.

Every Researcher Counts – equality and diversity

As part of this HEFCE-funded project, Vitae has developed flexible resources for staff developers and principal investigators (PIs), that look at how to deal with equality and diversity issues in research leaders' every-day experience. It is important to keep high visibility for these resources; participants could highlight them within their department and institution.

UKRSA research on postdoctoral funding, scoping the research

UKRSA needs to find 'solid data' to prove its assertion that funding discrimination against experienced researchers and short termism, that cause experienced researchers to leave the profession, harms research performance. Jenny Rohn suggested that policy makers understand that there is a problem with researcher careers. The issue for them is, rather, how to find ways to adjust the system without jeopardising the UK's preeminent position. Lee Parry agreed that different solutions for different discipline areas were likely to be needed.

Furthering postdoctoral/RSA causes through international cooperation

This workshop looked both at what national RSAs can get out of working together and how they can support international researchers more effectively. One outcome is to explore a way of populating the various researcher forums through a single portal. There is potential to make better use of the [EURAXESS](#) network and some HEIs assist their international researchers via websites.

The professional researcher

This session explored the value of the professionalisation of researcher status. One of the motivations and potential benefits is to increase the visibility of the doctorate. The group felt that the idea was certainly of interest, but that the concept needed further development before researchers could judge whether to support it.

Owning the Researcher Development Framework

This workshop identified multiple ways in which the Researcher Development Framework can be utilised by individuals and RSAs. Its value deserves to be more widely known. It was also suggested that RSA members could help each other assess themselves against the Framework – a role that many people would rather see done by a peer rather than a manager or careers adviser.

Action planning

Tennie Videler encouraged participants to reflect and develop three action points to achieve in the weeks following the conference. These were recorded and self-addressed to be mailed to participants after the event.



Workshop outcomes

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After the morning plenary session participants chose two from the following eight workshops. Further material from the workshops is available on the conference website.

The value of research staff associations

Dr Christina Fuentes, Postdoctoral Researcher, University College London

Dr Kay Guccione, Postdoctoral Researcher Training and Development Adviser, University of Sheffield,

Dr Daniel Weekes, Senior Scientific Adviser, King's College, University of London and Co-chair, UKRSA

A key activity of the UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA) over the past two years has been to undertake research into the impact and activities of research staff associations (RSAs). Last year the UKRSA collected data that suggested that RSAs are viable and lead to researcher engagement in the implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and individual career development through training and networking. This year it explored how RSAs can deliver value in terms of time and institutional resources invested. This interactive session discussed researcher skills as outlined by the Researcher Development Framework and provided an overview of current and previous RSA surveys. It asked:

- What skills do RSAs enable committee and general members to develop? How are these skills developed?
- How do RSAs benefit research staff development and their institutions?
- What are the costs associated with RSAs?
- How are current RSAs maximising their benefit to researchers and their institutions whilst minimising cost?

Outcomes

- The group gained a broader awareness of RSAs and their value
- Participants learnt about the Researcher Development Framework and how getting involved in RSAs develops researcher skills
- Engagement of researchers is a major issue for RSAs so more exchange of ideas in this area could be useful
- It was suggested that RSAs could be used as a method for promoting public engagement

The presenters collected further [feedback](#) to inform the on-going work of UKRSA. Emma Parry covered this workshop in her blog post '[The value of Research Staff Associations \(RSAs\)](#)'

Research Excellence Framework – what does it mean to you?

Dr Simon Smith, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Leeds

Dr Robert Hardwick, Research Associate, University of Leicester and Co-chair, UKRSA

This session looked at aspects of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) that affect research staff. It introduced the Impact and Environment elements of the REF and considered how they can be used to researchers' advantage.

Impact

Simon Smith is the author of a [peer-reviewed article on Impact in the REF](#)⁵. He presented an overview of the genesis of the REF proposals, highlighting how the impact element was conceived. The REF acknowledges that "all evaluation mechanisms distort the processes they purport to evaluate" (Roberts 2003) and seeks to use that effect to shape behaviour.

Environment

The session examined the ways in which local research staff associations can contribute to this domain and leverage benefits that will create momentum for research staff associations.

Eligibility

Research staff are not universally 'returnable' for the REF. However, research staff may feature in impact case studies to ensure that their contribution to team efforts is recognised?

Outcomes

Participants gained a greater understanding of the logistical workings of the REF in general and the Impact and Environment elements in particular.

Impact is a new element in a research unit's profile. It is worth 20% of the overall profile and challenges research leaders to weave an integrated story of the research unit that goes beyond its publication record. There are opportunities for the work of RSAs to be included as case studies under the impact umbrella, thereby widening the pool of those credited in the REF and gaining increased recognition for RSAs within each HEI.

Research environment is worth 15% of a unit of assessment's profile. Research staff associations clearly fit the criteria of this domain. RSAs can be evidenced as adding to the 'vitality' and 'sustainability' of the unit. By doing so, a wider group of researchers can again be credited in the submission.

Local RSAs should use the opportunity for inclusion in the REF as a means to leverage institutional support for improved continuing professional development and a higher profile for the Researcher Development Framework.

⁵ Smith, S., et al., 'Impact' in the proposals for the UK's Research Excellence Framework: Shifting the boundaries of academic autonomy.' Res. Policy (2011), (www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048733311001077).

Workshop outcomes

3 November 2011, Queens Hotel, Leeds

Labour market information

Dr Shane Bergin, Marie Curie Fellow, Imperial College London

Vitae has recently published '[What do researchers do? Labour market information](#)' which presents a wide range of information about the career destinations of researchers, including information about research staff career pathways.

This workshop presented the findings of a local, in-depth study. Shane Bergin presented his data on career destinations and career aspirations of research staff in the chemistry department of Imperial College London. This was followed by a facilitated discussion on the value of national and local careers destination data. Are participants aware of more such research being done? Should participants consider doing their own research? What about combining outcomes of local studies?

Outcomes

Shane gave an analysis of data collected on the career aspirations and career destinations of around 75 research staff in the Imperial College London's department of chemistry. The study found that:

- the longer staff had worked as a postdoctoral researcher, the wider the gap between their career aspiration and their expectation of what they would achieve
- male respondents were two-and-a-half times more likely to achieve a lectureship than female respondents
- women did more career planning, had lower expectations overall, and left academia earlier than men.

Participants agreed that this data was very valuable and that other local studies were needed.

Kath Scanlon described the workshop in the blog post '[Researchers: The gap between aspirations and expectations](#)'.



Every Researcher Counts – equality and diversity

Cheryl Allsop, Postgraduate Researcher, Cardiff University and Associate, Three Times Three Consulting

Peri Cihan, Associate, Vitae

The [Every Researcher Counts](#) project has been funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), supported by the other UK funding bodies and managed by Vitae. The aim of the project is to promote equality and diversity in research careers across HEIs, as an important part of the implementation strategies for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

As part of the project, a suite of flexible resources for staff developers and PIs has been developed to ensure that, in relation to research staff, equality and diversity issues are understood, visible and prioritised in HEIs.

This workshop gave an introduction to the project and the materials that have been developed (available to research staff as well as to PIs), and provided a chance to go through one of the resources in practice; considering different scenarios in the researcher environment, raising awareness of equality and diversity issues and sharing practical solutions.

Outcomes

The resources present a number of scenarios, covering a wide range of issues – stressing that diversity is more than just sexual and ethnic. The resources were positively received by participants. They valued the opportunity to discuss equality and diversity issues from different perspectives, i.e. that of the researcher and the research leader. Discussion of the materials led participants to consider issues they had not previously thought about, hear about each others' experience and to examine their own viewpoint (for example, on the appropriateness of a research leader asking about a researcher's personal circumstances when discussing a work-related problem.) One theme was the importance of the researcher being pro-active in exploring and suggesting solutions rather than just stating the problem.

The resources have been launched but it is now vital to find ways to sustain momentum for on-going use. To keep these issues and the training resources on PI agendas it is important to stress their value in helping PIs develop leadership skills in general.

Workshop outcomes

3 November 2011, Queens Hotel, Leeds

UKRSA research on postdoctoral funding, scoping the research

Dr Lee Parry, Research Associate, Cardiff University

This year the UKRSA initiated a project to look at issues researchers face in relation to funding and securing a long term academic research career. Many researchers have a negative perception of the strategies used by funding agencies in the awarding of funds. The initial phase of this project was to collect evidence as to whether it becomes harder to obtain funding for a researcher with more experience. Information collected included an analysis of the eligibility criteria for funding employed by the various funding agencies. The workshop looked at the initial findings and invited participants to help establish future directions for this UKRSA research project for 2012.

Outcomes

Lee stressed that this is a long-term project that aims to be positive and productive by investigating solid ideas for moving forward, providing better job prospects, especially for experienced researchers. The aim is well-designed posts adapted to researchers' needs and career prospects. The majority of independent funding opportunities for research staff are aimed at early career researchers without families. Opportunities are limited. The great majority of contracts are short term (less than three years).

About 30% of research staff, however, are over 35, have had an average of three postdocs and more than eight years of research experience. They find it harder to get funding than their less experienced peers.

It is difficult to find data to investigate the widespread perception that there is systemic bias towards employing junior researchers in research grant bids (in preference to researchers with more relevant experience) in order to demonstrate 'value for money'.

In order to understand the current funding situation, UKRSA must provide good data to support any recommendations to policy makers. There is a need to identify the kinds of data that would be most compelling to policy makers.

“ I am elated that you allowed me to contribute to the meeting and look forward to continued collaborations with Vitae/UKRSA in the future. ”

Participant feedback

Furthering postdoctoral/RSA causes through international cooperation

Dr L. David Finger, Board of Directors, National Postdoctoral Association, USA, Marie Curie International Fellow, University of Sheffield, UK

Cathee Johnson-Phillips, Executive Director, National Postdoctoral Association, USA

Postdoctoral fellows (research staff) are critical to any nation's workforce, and in the United States, 60–70% of all postdocs are foreign nationals. These international postdocs face unique challenges (e.g., visas, establishing bank accounts, cultural differences) not experienced by nationals. In response to these unique challenges, the [National Postdoctoral Association](#) (NPA) has established resources for internationals. Since coming to the UK, David has also experienced analogous problems, and thus, has a desire to raise awareness of such issues. In this session, Cathee and David reviewed the international resources of the NPA, reported on current embassy outreach efforts, and facilitated a small group discussion on what RSAs can do to help their international national researcher population.

In addition to US and UK RSAs, research staff associations are also active in Ireland and Canada as well as other countries. How might RSAs help each other in their missions? Participants spent some time exploring the potential for international cooperation between RSAs world-wide.

Outcomes

The workshop identified practical ways in which RSAs could better support international researchers in the UK:

- Putting links to [EURAXESS](#) on all RSA websites and links on all EURAXESS sites to RSAs in the UK
- Linking from RSA websites to learned societies that produce guides for international researchers (e.g. visa requirements, 'survival guides')
- RSAs nominating an international officer. Their role could include organising social outings and coordinating volunteer research staff of different nationalities willing to act as email contacts for queries from incoming researchers from their home country

At national/international level:

- It was agreed to continue to explore ways of sharing best practice and disseminating information amongst RSAs
- UKRSA will explore social networking (blog, Twitter hash tag, LinkedIn, world map to find RSAs) to support both international researchers and international cooperation
- It is important to make full use of existing websites such as Vitae, EURAXESS, Nature, Science, Eurodoc, etc.

Gordon Dalton covered this workshop in his blog post '[International collaborations of research staff associations](#)'.

Workshop outcomes

3 November 2011, Queens Hotel, Leeds

The professional researcher

Dr Tony Bromley, Senior Training and Development Officer, University of Leeds and Yorkshire and North East Hub Coordinator, Vitae

Dr Rhiannon Pursall, Research Associate, University of Birmingham

The research environment has been moving toward professionalisation since the first researcher training courses of the 1990s. The [Joint Skills Statement](#), the [Roberts Report](#) and now the [Researcher Development Framework](#), along with a range of other initiatives ([Vitae](#), [EPSRC Enterprise](#), [QAA Code of Practice](#), the [Concordat](#), [HR Excellence in Research Award](#)) have resulted in an environment of increased access to professional development amid world-class technical excellence. The next stage for researcher development is for the community to embrace professionalisation and establish a brand for the doctorally qualified. This is more than just an idea – the Researcher Development Framework already has a core set of professional values, and principles with which other stakeholders, principally employers, will readily associate the term ‘researcher’. It should apply to all those that have a doctorate, therefore this is not a call for yet another kind of doctorate.

The workshop explored how the Researcher Development Framework is a potent force for this proposal. It looked at:

- how the concept of professionalisation can address the significant gap between what HE does and what employers understand it to do
- how stakeholders might get the best out of the very significant investments in the doctorate of time, money and talent
- advantages (and disadvantages) for the sector for the doctorate to be conceived widely as having professional status
- how quality standards could be modified to further facilitate professional status
- how individuals may use the Researcher Development Framework already to enhance the professional aspects of their CV, including an appreciation of what ‘professionalism’, professional status and professionalisation means
- the elements within the Researcher Development Framework that express the idea and concept of professionalism
- ideas about how best to start this project.

Outcomes

Participants reported a fascinating debate which raised many questions.

There is a gap between what a doctorate means and what employers understand it means. The workshop recommended more dialogue between businesses and researchers. Better use should be made of existing publications (from Vitae and other sources) that explain the competencies of masters and doctoral graduates.

Doctoral degrees with an internship element are being developed via the Research Councils’ new doctoral training models. (For example, [The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council’s new Doctoral Training Partnership programme](#) requires researchers to participate in a three-month professional internship during their doctorate.) The workshop recommended that Research Councils and other funding bodies should encourage professional internships, which give doctoral researchers a foothold on the professional researcher ladder.

Researchers should make full use of the Researcher Development Framework. It is central to a ‘professional researcher’ understanding their own key skills set, and subsequently being able to evidence this to employers.

The workshop discussed whether a ‘chartered researcher’ body could be established via successful existing models such as professional bodies. Would it be necessary to distinguish between different researcher groups (a single category of ‘chartered researcher’ or many categories, e.g. ‘chartered microbiologist’ etc.)



Workshop outcomes

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Owning the Researcher Development Framework

Sheila Thomson, Head of Researcher Development, University of Edinburgh

Dr Elizabeth Adams, Researcher Development Officer, University of Glasgow

This workshop explored how to use the [Researcher Development Framework](#) (RDF) when planning professional development. The RDF is a national framework, developed by Vitae, following consultation with researchers from all subject areas and career stages. It aims to help researchers understand the knowledge, behaviours and attitudes expected of effective and highly skilled researchers, as researchers move through these different career stages.

The workshop covered:

- ways to use the RDF and associated online tool to review and record your current experiences and plan personal, professional and career development
- beginning to identify particular strengths, knowledge and skills and prioritise areas for development
- considering the skills and experience that will enhance career prospects and how to articulate these to a range of employers.
- Participants also discussed how RSAs are embracing the RDF and what RSAs can do to aid implementation of the RDF.

Outcomes

Participants identified that RSAs can use the RDF as a tool for discussion, among their members, with PIs, and with staff developers to inform training provision (for example identifying gaps and discussing how staff developers and RSAs can work together to create skills development opportunities). RSAs can also promote the benefits of the RDF to other researchers in their area.

Individual RSA members can use the RDF to identify:

- training needs and to look for appropriate training/development opportunities
- skills to evidence their ability and thus improve their CVs, prepare for appraisals, and make better fellowship and grant applications
- ways to plan, record and prioritise their own career development (for example, making a short-term and long-term career plan).

Optional workshops

A new feature of the conference were the optional workshops at the start of the day. Participants could select from:

- Crash course in job seeking
- Moving on from fixed-term contracts to create sustainable research careers
- Setting up research staff associations

Crash course in job seeking

Sarah Blackford, Head of Education and Public Affairs, Society for Experimental Biology

Aimed both at postdoctoral researchers looking for a fellowship or a permanent academic position and those considering a non-academic career, this workshop was a high-speed introduction to the job-seeking process, covering:

- the theory of career planning
- analysis of job descriptions
- matching yourself to potential careers
- resources and CVs.

Outcomes

Participants gained a better understanding of how to become an effective job-seeker. The workshop placed particular emphasis on improving the ability to analyse jobs and match them to participants' own skills and interests.

This workshop is described in Maeliosa McCrudden's blog post '[Research Staff Conference Nov 2011 A personal reflection](#)'.



Workshop outcomes

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Moving on from fixed-term contracts to create sustainable research careers

Ronnie Kershaw, National Organiser, Universities and Colleges Union

This session explored the use of fixed-term contracts, the effect they have on researchers and their careers, and how to create greater job security. It looked at researchers' employment rights and the impact of key local policies on their careers. For increased job security and ways to achieve a more supportive research environment, the workshop also looked at consultation on redundancy avoidance, redeployment and support for staff moving between projects. With reference to the [Vitae report on fixed-term contracts](#), the session included a discussion of sustainable research careers that involve breaking the link between the individual researcher and project funding. This gave participants the opportunity to reflect on changes they would like to see in the current way research is managed to achieve a sustainable research career.

Outcomes

- Participants discussed whether Research Council policy presents a barrier to research staff becoming principal investigators. Universities should approach Research Councils UK (RCUK), asking them to look again at funding researchers to develop their own research
- Examples were given of institutions that offer three months salary at the end of a research contract. Participants were keen to see more widespread use of such bridging funding
- A blog or website to post examples of good practice from other universities would be valuable

In addition, UCU and UKRSA will explore the possibility of developing formal links at regional level.

Setting up research staff associations

Dr Dan Weekes, Senior Scientific Officer, King's College, University of London and Co-chair, UKRSA

Dr Chris Thomson, Entrepreneur and Independent Researcher, Member of UKRSA

Dr Mascia Amici, University of Bristol

This workshop was for participants who are starting a research staff association (RSA), are considering setting up an RSA or who are rejuvenating an existing RSA. The session described some 'best practice' models (from the 'Guide to research staff associations') and discussed which models might work best in different circumstances. The workshop had a strong practical focus and aimed to help participants feel enthused, confident and supported in setting up their RSAs.

Outcomes

- This was a helpful session to share experience with those just setting up
- The workshop confirmed that those setting up local RSAs need continuing support
- Participants benefited from the chance to share common problems
- Participants learnt about key resources for establishing RSAs and gaining support

Elizabeth Dodson commented on this workshop in her blog post '[Twas the night after the Vitae Conference](#)'.

After the event

3 November 2011, Queens Hotel, Leeds

Vitae Research Staff Blog

Individual participants shared their impressions and kept conversations going on the Research Staff Blog. See also '[The best of the blog: Examples of posts from the Vitae Research staff blog](#)'.

UKRSA committee meeting

Members of the UKRSA committee met in London in January 2012 to determine direction and priorities for 2012. Please contact ukrsa@gmail.com or tennie.videler@vitae.ac.uk to express an interest in joining the UKRSA committee.

Vitae Research Staff Conference 2012

Discussions have started about the next Vitae Research Staff Conference, to be held in November 2012. If you have any ideas for the programme, workshops or speakers, or would like to chair a workshop, please get in touch with Tennie at tennie.videler@vitae.ac.uk.

Towards a Global Research Staff Association

Members of Vitae, UKRSA, NPA, IRSA, the nascent South African Postdoctoral Forum and WAYS are in discussion about starting a global research staff association. There will be a joint session of research staff associations at the Euro Science Open Forum in Dublin in July.

Project management day, 13 March, London

Members of the UKRSA will be meeting on 13 March at the Bloomsbury Holiday Inn to finalise plans for UKRSA activities for 2012. The day will be a combination of project management training and implementation. Identified projects are:

- Regional research staff association
- Postdoctoral funding
- International collaboration
- Media engagement
- Vitae Research Staff Conference 2012

If you are interested in attending, please contact Tennie at tennie.videler@vitae.ac.uk.



“ It has been REALLY useful – speaking to other RSAs and exhibitors has inspired ideas for our RSA and me

Participant feedback



Vitae

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

Vitae works 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 for researchers.

Our vision is for the UK to be world-class in supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers.

Our aims:

- build human capital by influencing the development and implementation of effective policy relating to researcher development
- enhance higher education provision to train and develop researchers
- empower researchers to make an impact in their careers
- evidence the impact of professional and career development support for researchers.

For further information about the range of Vitae activities go to www.vitae.ac.uk or contact website@vitae.ac.uk

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