

Operating Strategically

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In order to make real progress for research staff in your institution you are likely to need to engage a range of partners and get the issues you care about considered at higher levels. At the recent Midlands Hub Good Practice Takeaway we shared ideas for making a strategic impact. The following list is a short summary of the discussions that we had.

Understanding legal and policy frameworks

A useful way to raise the profile of an issue within an HEI is to make a link to a change in the law or newly developed policy. It is possible to keep up to date with policy and new developments using the Vitae website policy section (<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/1391/Policy.html>).

The Concordat (<http://www.researchconcordat.ac.uk/>) is a current policy which has the potential to raise a large number of relevant issues for people involved in researcher development. However, it is likely to require your institution to devote time to implementing it. Push for it to be considered at appropriate committees, map your current practice onto the Concordat principles and hold a formal launch to raise the profile of the document.

Engaging researchers

Building researcher engagement in your agendas is also likely to be key to achieving them. If there is a groundswell of opinion coming from researchers themselves about a particular issue it is much more likely to be taken seriously and addressed. In order to facilitate this you may wish to review your communication systems with research staff. Researchers who are well informed about their institution, policy and the opportunities that are open to them are much more likely to engage with your agenda.

One issue faced by many research staff is their fragmentation as a community. Bringing them together in social and professional development contexts may help the community to gel and to become more ambitious in its demands. You may also wish to encourage your institution to involve researchers at a more formal level in institutional decision making. Involving them in university committees or establishing a research staff forum might provide structures for this. It may also be useful to provide training and development opportunities for researchers encouraging them to think about the nature of representation and how they might effect change most productively.

Building Partnerships

Developing a strategic approach to supporting research staff is likely to require you to involve other partners. It may be helpful to think through who in your institution might be in a position to help you and to work out how you can best approach them.

University senior managers often have a lot of power over policy and resourcing and so it is important to engage them and to think about how to convince them of the validity of your arguments. Senior managers are usually appointed from existing academics and will be likely to be influenced by support from your academic partners. Building networks of supportive academic staff can be useful in providing you with support. If you are lucky one of your supporter may well take on a more senior role eventually. It is also useful to argue for representation on relevant committees and to approach requests to senior managers backed with relevant evidence.

Another key group to build support with are Human Resources professionals. Lots of the researcher development agenda overlaps with HR who are also likely to be looking to maximise the potential of the research workforce. Developing links with HR through meetings, joint projects and shadowing schemes will increase mutual understanding and respect and help you to address issues such as access to institutional data, appraisal and fixed-term contracts jointly.

It is also vital to engage PIs/Research Managers in your agenda. In addition to building up a network of contacts you may wish to support PIs through a website, dedicated training courses and encouraging them to use national resources like the Leadership Development for PIs (<http://www.le.ac.uk/researchleader/>) site. Another opportunity is in training members of research staff who are about to become PIs and new PIs who are eager to explore what their role involved.

Build policy based on evidence

Finally, it is worth offering some ideas about how to back up your work and development of policy with evidence. The use of the CROS system to undertake research into research staff satisfaction provides valuable data (**what is the best link?**). Not everything it uncovers makes for comfortable reading for all of your audience so go prepared to defend the data and to offer solutions rather than blame. Other useful evidence might include more qualitative data collected from your advocates e.g. positive testimonies from research staff about their experiences. Using attendance and evaluation data, HR staff data and drawing on the experience of alumni also provide powerful sources of evidence for your work.

Many institutions are also interested in comparison with other HEIs and drawing on examples of good practice from the Vitae Database of Practice (<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/1392/Resources.html>) can also be persuasive. Finally drawing on research projects in comparable areas such as the Doctors without orders study (<http://postdoc.sigmaxi.org/results/>) can also convince people that there is a research basis to your work.