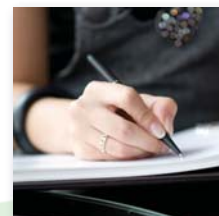


overview

for supervisors and principal investigators

welcome



As I write this we are deep in the throes of autumn – ah....autumn – season of mists and mellow fruitfulness – and it would seem, for this year at least, season of reviews and many consultations.

In a few short months we have had announcements of a consultation on the new Research Excellence Framework, a review of postgraduate education, a blueprint for higher education – Higher Ambitions and a review of higher education funding. Not to be left out, Vitae has launched its own consultation on the new Researcher development framework which, it is hoped, will be of value to anyone conducting research in higher education, whether this is their main role or part of a wider remit.

We urge to you look at all these reviews and consultations and contribute your views.

As we go to press, we are still waiting to hear from RCUK who are expected to set up an independent panel to review the impact of the Roberts' recommendations and associated funding, with the results deciding what form any future research council funding will take – so, an uncertain time for many of us.

Uncertainty has been a bit of a theme for all sectors over this past year and it is a times like this when good leadership is essential. This issue of Overview takes an in-depth look at what HEIs are providing for our future leaders and features a very personal view of how current academics should be supported.

Finally, we have two interesting articles – one on the benefit of setting up action learning sets and something to help you persuade your researchers to do the one thing they are sometimes reluctant to do – start writing!

As usual, if you have any comments on this issue, or would like to submit an article, contact us on overview@vitae.ac.uk.

Anne Goodman, Editor

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Researcher development framework consultation

Vitae recently consulted supervisors, PIs and other individuals as well as organisations with an interest in the personal, professional and career development of researchers on a new 'Researcher development framework'. The final consultation closed on 11 December but Vitae is still keen to hear your views.

The framework has been created as a tool for planning, promoting and supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers in higher education. It describes the knowledge, skills, behaviours and personal qualities of researchers and encourages researchers to aspire to excellence through achieving higher levels of development. It will be of value to anyone conducting research in higher education, whether this is their main role or part of a wider remit.

Further information about the framework can be found at www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf, a further update will be available in January at the Vitae Roberts Policy Form and the final framework will be launched later in spring 2010.

Example Question from the consultation

Are the distinctions between the career stages clear; are the definitions appropriate?

Stage	Description
New researcher	Researcher in training, new doctoral candidate or early career research assistant
Researcher	Newly qualified researcher <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Early career researcher, in the first years of employment as a researcher ■ Those who are close to completing or have recently completed a doctorate but have not yet established a significant level of independence ■ Other researchers with equivalent level of experience, such as technical/research laboratory staff in higher education (and other private and public sectors where the doctorate is not the norm)
Established researcher	Postdoctoral or experienced researcher who has developed a level of independence Developing or has a national reputation within their field
Advanced researcher	Leader of research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Researcher who is leading in their field ■ Team leader of a research group Has a national reputation and is developing or has an international reputation in their field.
Eminent researcher	Has globally recognised eminence in their field. Is an international leader and an acknowledged world expert.

RDF at a glance

- The proposed framework incorporates all of, and is an evolution of, the 2001 Joint Statement of the UK Research Councils' Training Requirements for Research Students (JSS)¹ covering a longer period of the research career than the JSS's snapshot, and broadening the range of descriptors, ie, including skills, knowledge, behaviours, qualities and attitudes
- Its aim is to encourage researchers to aspire to excellence through achieving higher levels of development
- The project is funded and project-managed by Vitae and builds upon initial work by the Rugby Team² and precursor projects at the University of Manchester³ and Glasgow Caledonian University⁴. The framework has also been informed by the input of various stakeholder groups and feedback from the Vitae researcher development conference in September 2009

¹ Joint Statement of the UK Research Councils' Training Requirements for Research Students (JSS) www.vitae.ac.uk/jss

² Vitae Roberts Policy Forum workshop, Prof Pam Denicolo, University of Reading, Rob Daley, Heriot-Watt University Daley www.vitae.ac.uk/rdfconsultation

³ Academic competencies, 2008, Dr Maria Nevada, University of Manchester, Dr Julie Reeves, (now) University of Southampton www.vitae.ac.uk/rdfconsultation

⁴ The Glasgow Caledonian University Researcher Skills Map Project, 2008, Prof Bonnie Steves, Calum Webster and the generic leadership framework in Webster, C 2007 'Glasgow Caledonian University Leadership Development Centre Workbook', Glasgow Caledonian University www.vitae.ac.uk/rdfconsultation

Early career researchers named in REF

Consultation has begun on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – the new process for assessing research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). The exercise will focus on the assessment of three elements – outputs, impact and environment, weighted 60%, 25% and 15% respectively.

Elements of the consultation of particular interest to those responsible for research staff include:

- Early career researchers who may only recently have established themselves as principal investigators undertaking work of high quality, part-time staff and researchers who may have spent time away from research due to personal circumstances such as maternity leave, will be able to submit fewer than the maximum number of outputs, without reducing their contribution to the volume measure for funding purposes
- Staff development, including support for early career researchers and training of postgraduate researchers (PGRs), including data about PGR numbers and completions will be measured under management of the research environment

A brief guide to the proposals can be seen at www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/resources/REFguide.pdf. The full consultation papers can be downloaded at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_38/.



Promoting the UK doctorate

'We need to promote the attractiveness of the UK PhD to employers, as well as students. We also need to do more to encourage mobility between academia and business, and vice versa. Transferable employability skills for PhD graduates, allowing them to work effectively within industry as well as academia, are critical.'

A new UUK research briefing 'Promoting the UK doctorate: opportunities and challenges', authored by Faye Emery and Dr Janet Metcalfe of Vitae provides valuable insights into the key challenges to the future development of postgraduate research education, both within the UK and internationally. The report shows how study at doctoral level will provide the high level skills needed to help drive our economy in a post-recession environment.

The report was launched at a joint UUK and Vitae parliamentary breakfast in late October hosted by Roberta Blackman-Woods MP (PPS to David Lammy) with contributions from Professor Steve Smith, President, Universities UK and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Exeter; Dr Janet Metcalfe, Chair and Head of Vitae; and the Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP, Minister for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

Speaking to an audience of MPs and Vice-Chancellors, Prof Smith highlighted four areas addressed in 'Promoting the UK Doctorate' for consideration in the PG review (consultation ended on 18 December): the need to secure the support for the development and the future employability of PhD students; the importance of the continuation of Roberts' funding to support the skills development of researchers *'beyond the current timeframe of 2010/11 in a clear and identifiable way'*; the financial sustainability of doctorate provision and the international competitiveness and reputation of the UK doctorate.

A podcast from the event containing full speeches is available on the UUK website www.universitiesuk.ac.uk. Download the full report on www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Pages/PromotingTheUKDoctorate.aspx

Postgraduate review timely says Janet Metcalfe

Vitae welcomed a review on postgraduate provision in the UK led by Professor Adrian Smith.

Dr Janet Metcalfe, Chair and Head of Vitae said: ***'this review is timely and has the potential to play a key role in shaping the future of doctoral programmes. This comes at a time when there is a particular focus on the continuation and sustainability of the activities that have been developed by institutions to support researcher careers as part of the Roberts' agenda. The UK needs to consider how to ensure that postgraduate study here remains internationally attractive.'***

The Review considered the benefits of postgraduate study to the economy and the UK as a whole, as well as other wide-ranging issues including research competitiveness and the UK's international position.

The Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) issued a call for evidence from all those with an interest in this important topic. Vitae provided evidence to the call by the deadline set for 18 December. The review is due to report back to Ministers by Spring 2010.

Research students very satisfied, three-year study shows

UK research students are very satisfied overall with four out of five postgraduate researchers rating their experience as having met or exceeded expectation, a report published by the Higher Education Academy has found. The Academy's report reviews three years of its Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES).

Views on skills development were among the most positive of all responses. Two out of three agreed that they had adequate opportunities to further develop their research skills and their transferable skills. Also supervision and thesis examination were rated as positive areas within students' overall experience.

Professor Sue Law, Director of Academic Practice, Higher Education Academy, said: ***'The Academy's postgraduate experience research offers a valuable benchmark, especially at a time when the Smith Review is taking place. It is excellent news that postgraduate researchers have such a positive view of UK higher education.'***

Dr Janet Metcalfe, Chair and Head of Vitae and member of the PRES Steering Group said: ***'It is clear from the 2009 PRES results that the Roberts' agenda and associated funding is having an impact with respondents reporting a significant improvement in the availability of opportunities to develop their transferable skills.'***

For full results download the report 'Research student experience: Lessons from PRES' at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/supportingresearch/postgraduatework>

Principal investigators key to research career development

In the first of a regular column, Thomas Papworth, Concordat Implementation Coordinator reflects on his first few months in the job and what research staff have been telling him. Tom's role is to oversee the implementation and review of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. This is a new post, funded by the research and funding councils and based in Universities UK.



Come the New Year it will have been 18 months since the launch of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. The focus so far has been on institutions, policy and gaining high-level support. But the real power to make a difference to researchers' careers lies with the researchers themselves and with you, their PIs.

Before we look at how you can make that difference, it may be worth setting this agenda in context. This is not the first time that the sector has tried to tackle research careers. Yet there is widespread recognition in the sector that the 1996 Concordat did not achieve its ambition because – while the sector broadly supported it – there was no coordinated effort to ensure that it was carried through. Leaders in the sector are determined that the 2008 Concordat will be more successful.

To this end, universities and other employers, funders, government, representatives of research staff and other stakeholders have come together to form a Strategy Group that will take ownership of, and ensure the delivery of, the Concordat. And the funding councils and research councils are providing the funding to support my work in driving this agenda forward.

There has been a series of launches, seminars and practice sharing events – many hosted by Vitae Hubs – that have enabled staff to engage with the Concordat and helped policymakers and those implementing the Concordat at an institutional level to learn from the policies and practices of other institutions. In addition, many HEIs have revised their policies in the light of the Concordat – see www.researchconcordat.ac.uk/events/index.html for details.

But while it is important that institutional policy reflects research staff needs, and while leadership from the top is vital, it is the actions of researchers and their PIs that will have the most influence on research staff careers.

As leaders of research, you have a unique opportunity to encourage and guide your research staff. In my discussions with research staff at Conferences and Vitae Hub events across the country, a number of themes have recurred:

■ Recognition for their work

The European Charter for Researchers has re-emphasised the importance of recognising the intellectual property rights of researchers and acknowledging their contribution to publications. Researchers should be encouraged to publish in their own right as well as being accredited where they have contributed to the work of others. In addition, they should be given the opportunity to attend and speak at conferences where they can showcase their own work and that of the team of which they are a part.

■ Training both within and beyond the discipline

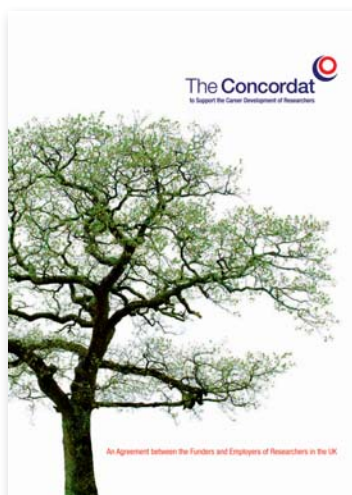
Research excellence requires a deep understanding of the subject one is studying. But it also requires skills that are not unique to any one discipline. These skills will not only enable researchers to pursue their careers, no matter in what direction that takes them; it will also make them better able to contribute to a successful project, team and department. PIs should encourage research staff to develop a wide set of skills by providing access to training.

■ A wealth of opportunity

Perhaps the most powerful tool at anyone's disposal is their social capital, the networks of colleagues with whom they can share ideas and resources. These take time to build up, and researchers need to have the opportunities to meet one another frequently in symposia and at workshops to develop the contacts that they will rely on in the future.

■ Frank advice on performance and prospects

Not everybody can go on to an academic career. And many researchers do not want to. As was made clear by the Vitae publication 'What do researchers do?' there is a wide variety of career paths open to those with good research skills. Research supervisors need to give their staff frank guidance on how likely it is that a future academic career is open to them, and be willing and able to discuss other options that may be of interest.



Many of you will be doing these things already, of course. Others have voiced their concern that the above costs money that they can ill afford. More than one research leader has told me of their concern that adding lines to their budgets to allow their staff to attend training and conferences that are not core to their research will make their applications for grant funding uneconomical. Yet the research councils are adamant that grant applicants have nothing to fear in this respect.

For one thing, a number of institutions currently have access to Roberts' money – finances dedicated to the training and development of research staff. But irrespective of the Roberts' money, training and development falls within the indirect costs that universities should automatically apply to funding bids. As universities have themselves acknowledged, the move to full economic costing has contributed to developing research staff, 'particularly in providing greater flexibility to departments to provide support for development activities and bridging funding to retain staff between externally supported research contracts.'¹

In fact, research leaders can contribute to the development of their staff just by making sure that their institutions continue to see researchers as a priority. Put it on the agenda at meetings; raise the question at every opportunity; ensure that it is the focus of your department, school and institution.

As Gareth Roberts explained, 'The product that the PhD researcher creates is not the thesis – vital though that is to their subject area through the creation of original knowledge – no, the product of their study is the development of themselves'. This is not limited to postgraduate researchers, however, but is true of all research staff. PIs are in a unique position to nurture and encourage that development.

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Take a look at the Vitae Database of practice for examples of Concordat related activities in HEIs www.vitae.ac.uk/dop.

¹RCUK/UUK Review of the Impact of Full Economic Costing on the UK Higher Education Sector, report prepared for Research Councils UK and Universities UK by a panel chaired by Professor Alan Alexander FRSE, April 2009, <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/reviews/fec/fecexecsum.pdf>.

Impact – one year on

The Rugby team impact framework (RTIF) which we featured in Overview 6 has proved invaluable as both a methodology for evaluation of training and development activities and as a national framework for building the evidence base through mapping the impacts from specific evaluation projects.

Now we have the 'Rugby team impact framework: one year on' – a report which provides an overview of known completed and planned evaluation activity relating to researcher training and development since publication of the RTIF.

Examples covering all four levels of the framework are included in the report – from Foundation (eg University of Sheffield – Baseline Study: Research Staff Training Programme, School of Medicine and University of Strathclyde – Enterprise skills) to Level 4 (eg the 1994 Group – Survey on the Impact of the Roberts' Fund at 1994 Group Institutions and the University of Leeds Employability project.) The report also contains a number of detailed case studies.

The report concludes:

- There is clearly significant breadth and depth of evaluation now taking place in institutions, including evidence of impact on research outputs, enhanced employability and increased outreach activities by researchers and plans to support continued growth
- The sector is demonstrably taking responsibility for evaluating researcher training and development activity
- It is also clear that by continuing to work collaboratively and sharing information, through this report and other mechanisms, the sector can be confident in achieving the aim of building a significant evidence base for researcher training and development over the coming years

There is a JISCMail evaluation network which currently has over 100 members. To join – go to www.jiscmail.ac.uk and join the EVALUATING-IMPACT list.



The Rugby Team
evaluating the impacts of
developing researcher skills

RTIF at a glance

- Impact Level 0: Foundations
- Impact Level 1: Reaction
- Impact Level 2: Learning
- Impact Level 3: Behaviour
- Impact Level 4: Outcomes

The Rugby Team is a sector-led working group, drawn from a cross-section of HEIs and other relevant stakeholders, with a mission to 'propose meaningful and workable ways of evaluating the effectiveness of skills development in early career researchers'. Vitae provides management support and resources to the Rugby Team. For further information on all the material covered in this article go to the Rugby Team website www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam.

Do you recognise this picture?

As reported in Overview 6, the national CROS survey (Careers in Research Online Survey) took place this year, relaunched after a gap of a few years. CROS 2009 was designed to gather the views of research staff in UK HEIs, chiefly about their experiences and aspirations in relation to careers and work. However it also provides a pretty interesting snapshot of the national population of research staff. Dr Robin Mellors-Bourne, Commercial & Business Development Director, CRAC, co-author of the analysis report explains.

Key findings – in brief

Overall most of the messages from CROS are positive.

- Most researchers feel valued, are satisfied with their work-life balance and believe their institutions are committed to equality and diversity
- Institutions appear to recognise the importance of supporting career development and there is clear improvement in the uptake of induction, appraisal, and training and development opportunities by research staff compared to previous CROS results
- Most research staff are integrated within their departmental research community, and stimulated by their institution's research culture

The numbers

CROS is actually a series of parallel surveys by individual HEIs, which use a common, core, question set from which the responses are combined.

- 51 HEIs took part, with the Russell Group and 94 Group institutions strongly represented
- Collectively, these institutions represent 74% of an estimated UK research staff population of approximately 38,000
- The nearly 6000 responses equate to a 21% response rate for the target sample, or 16% of the total UK research staff population
- For a survey of this kind, 21% is a good response rate and this is a large sample. The high response rate, and strong statistical confidence afforded by this, suggests that responses will be representative of the UK research staff population. This is confirmed by comparing the demographic information with existing HESA data about the UK research staff population

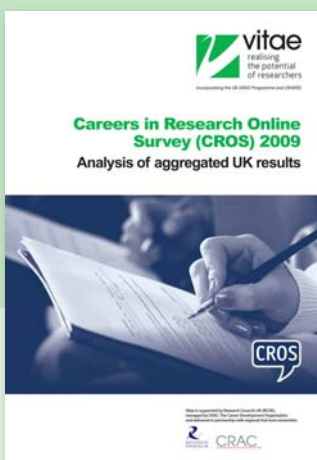
One of the purposes of the CROS survey is to provide a means to measure progress in terms of implementing the 'Concordat for the Career Development of Researchers'¹ and other personal development interventions within the Roberts' agenda.

To look at a few specific areas in detail.

Appraisal/staff review – do you do it?

One of the Concordat's goals is for all researchers to receive support through a regular (annual) appraisal or review by their manager or PI. While we might not all enjoy the process, it is almost universally embedded in management practice outside the HE sector. The CROS results report that 50% of research staff have had such an appraisal (or 'staff review') within the last two years, up from 32% in 2002. That appears to represent progress in terms of spreading the practice. Of the 50% who had not participated in appraisal, about a quarter had only recently been appointed, so lack of appraisal is understandable. However, almost half of them (which means 23% of all respondents) claimed that they had not been invited for appraisal.

If 23% of all researchers genuinely are not being invited for appraisal by their manager, are you doing your bit in inviting your researchers and giving it a try? Alternatively, if your invitations are just a bit subtle, and are going unrecognised, maybe use this statistic quietly as an encouragement for your people to ask or to re-interpret that conversation!



¹ www.researchconcordat.ac.uk

Training

CROS also measures the amount of continuing professional development (CPD) activity undertaken by researchers. 72% had participated in training activities or courses within their HEI in the last year, a big rise on the 36% reported in CROS 2006. Some 47% participated in external courses or training activities. So, again, on this rather crude measure, progress is being made in terms of widening the take-up of training and development activities.

And what sort of training or activity did they do and do they seek? The most widespread was research skills and techniques (which 39% have done). A good many were looking at the wider skills picture and over 50% sought development in career management, leadership and knowledge transfer.

Interestingly, only 15% had done training in teamworking, which is currently the personal skill most highly sought by employers outside the HE sector.

Wider experience

The CROS results provide a picture of the working and wider experiences of research staff for the first time. Nationally, about half are undertaking teaching and 43% supervise students, and 35% manage a budget.

On the flip side, many felt that their contributions in these areas were not fully recognised by their universities, unlike their more direct contributions to research output and publications.



More placement opportunities?

About one third already collaborate with industry and as many again would like to do so. Only 5% had actually undertaken a work placement outside the HE sector, but up to half said they would like to, which is surely a call for more effort to provide and arrange placement opportunities. We know from undergraduate work experience schemes that they provide the strongest steer for career thinking (stronger than any other career-related support or intervention). And this does not have to mean distraction in terms of efficacy for the project or research; the positive impact of what is learned in a work placement when working 'back home' is well-documented.

So what is the overall message? Research staff seem to accept that training and wider experiences are open and available to them, and claim that they would like to take them up, and that there could be immediate benefits as well as long-term career thinking. So what are they waiting for?

What they may need is some help with contacts (which you might well have) as well as the 'permission' (emotional and practical) to go...

Career aspirations

The CROS questionnaires sought career aspirations, both now and in five years. Perhaps reassuringly, more than 62% claimed that they did want to be in HE research now, which is at least a modest endorsement that they are in the right job. More important, probably, are their ideas about career in five years. 52% want to work in HE-based roles that combine teaching and research, whereas 34% would like to remain in research-only HE roles.

The problem is that the sector simply cannot accommodate that volume, so they may not necessarily be able to fulfil those aspirations. On the other hand, quite a number, about 25%, would be keen to leave the HE sector, albeit most want to remain in a research role.

Are your research staff over-worked?

A simple question within CROS reveals that nearly 75% are satisfied (or more) with their work-life balance, which is very high. It is much higher than you find in studies in the private or corporate sectors, where employees rate their work-life balance much less positively. Perhaps it is just that (most) researchers love, and are committed to, the value of their work, so putting in the hours is something they are only too prepared to do.

Nonetheless, a word of acknowledgement probably does not go amiss!

Focus on leadership

Outstanding leadership, at all levels, is vital to a university's success but if like Warren Bennis, widely regarded as a pioneer of the contemporary field of leadership studies, you believe that 'Leaders are made rather than born.' what are universities doing to provide effective training for those who aspire to leadership?

Over the following pages, we look at a range of initiatives from a number of HEIs who have decided to make new leaders of their postgraduate researchers and research staff. And we have a personal rallying call for more support for continuing development of leaders themselves.



Leaders in their field

Dr Elizabeth Adams coordinates the Researcher Development initiative at the University of Glasgow.



For many early career researchers, the term 'Leadership', isn't something they'd readily associate with. For some, it conjures up images from the corporate world and 'HR speak' whilst others believe it's something you have to be born into. However, at the University of Glasgow, we believe our early career researchers have the potential to go on to become leaders in their chosen fields and for many, it's simply a matter of recognising their own strengths and the style of leadership which suits them best.

Over the past year, we've run two separate leadership programmes at Glasgow: one for postgraduate researchers and one for new and aspiring principal investigators. Although the audiences and styles of delivery were very different, the common element was the structured time and space for reflection that each course provided (over a period of either months or weeks) and also the use of role models from academia and outside.

Quick Facts

- The Postgraduate Leadership Programme is a seven-day course, which gives postgraduate researchers the chance to explore theories behind team working and leadership and consider how they can apply these to their current role and in a future career
- Participants who attend all sessions and complete the assessments to the required standard will receive an ILM Level 2 Award in Team Leading from the Institute of Leadership and Management, the leading European awarding body for qualifications in leadership and management
- The Principal Investigator programme runs over four days for new and aspiring PIs. It covers National and local HE policy and strategy, project management tools, personal communication styles (including use of MBTI – Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), conflict and performance management and career planning

The Postgraduate leadership programme

The idea for our Postgraduate Leadership Programme followed consultation with both employers and postgraduate researchers (PGRs). The latter felt that they were already receiving very useful training as part of their PhD but had nothing tangible to demonstrate their management skills to employers. An accredited leadership course therefore seemed like an ideal answer and we were pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to set up, with much less paperwork and at a lower cost than anticipated. We simply chose a certain number of units from the awarding body and built our course round these to include any particular topics of interest to our researchers, such as 'Communication in Research Projects'. We also invited a number of speakers from both inside the university and externally who contributed to lively debates on issues such as women in academia and how to sell your leadership skills at a job interview. This is an area we are seeking to expand in future courses, with contributions from employers in a variety of different sectors, to reflect the diverse roles our researchers go into.

Beyond the obvious addition to a CV, we believe the accreditation provides many other benefits to the participants, both in prompting them to create personal development plans (something most PGRs admit to being a good idea they never quite get round to) and also in terms of giving the participants' confidence in their skills. Several of last year's participants have left the University to go on to employment and have commented on the usefulness of the programme in terms of being able to articulate their skills to a prospective employer.

We intend to run the Postgraduate Leadership Programme for the second time in 2010 and are pleased to see that it has again attracted researchers from all subject areas as well as a mixture of full and part time PhDs.

'I think being more aware of how we are with other people – how we come across and communicate – is very important and this course made me much more aware of how I am with people at work.'

The Principal Investigator (PI) programme

The PI Programme was designed for new PIs and researchers who are aiming to take on that role in the near future. The four sessions (spread over several weeks) cover:

- effective communication
- managing a research team effectively to deliver a project
- managing conflict
- career development.

For many, this last session was particularly significant as it contained practical advice on how they could develop their own careers, as well as how to support their research staff and PGRs in career planning. The course has run three times, due to the high demand since its inception in late 2008. Each course has had a 50/50 mix of new

lecturing staff and research staff, which created some interesting discussions with a mixture of experience and perspectives. At a follow-up event, several participants commented on how the course helped them decide on the next steps to take in their career.

'As a research fellow, the timing of the PI programme was ideal. It covered the major landmarks in the management of people and systems and was a significant 'light bulb' moment in my personal development; I now look at the world in a different way and feel privileged to have access to these 'tools' to help me be a more effective researcher, PI and manager.'

Vitae leadership course

Vitae's newly developed 'Leadership in action' residential course took place at the end of July, aimed at postgraduate researchers and research staff with an interest in exploring and developing their leadership skills. Running over three days, it was designed to give participants the opportunity to develop their understanding of leadership in both theory and practice. Each participant was given a practical opportunity to lead so that they could learn more about their strengths and weaknesses, understand the impact they have on those they are leading, and build their confidence in their leadership style.

Groups were coached and guided by a team of experienced trainers with vast experience of leadership development in a range of fields. The course received an overwhelmingly positive response from the 60 participants who attended

Vitae is currently considering the best way to take forward the success of this programme to ensure that the course and the new resources that have been developed can be utilised by institutions.

'It was incredibly demanding and very exhausting but what a fantastic experience that I will remember for the rest of my career – as I will be putting so much into practice.'

If you would like any further information about the programme then please contact jonathan.roberts@vitae.ac.uk.

Focus on leadership

Researchers into management

'I think the course was really very useful, we often see researchers and managers as two different entities whereas in reality we need to be both.'



Dr Gemma Muckle, Researcher Development Officer, Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences, University of Manchester.

Research staff are busy people. They need to balance planning, implementing and publishing research; they may supervise students or even a research lab, and in addition they need to focus on developing themselves and their careers. At the University of Manchester, we have set up a professional development programme for early-career researchers to develop as leaders and managers – both to support their current roles and to take on future challenges.

Researchers into Management covers both theory and practice, drawing on case studies and examples from a range of sectors. We encourage participants to apply management approaches and models to their current setting, via contributions to an online forum, a project, and their workplace behaviours. The title of the programme reflects the fact that participants may have little or no formal management experience, but intend to take on management responsibilities – whether in academia, industry, business or other contexts.

Growing in confidence

The programme gives researchers an overview of approaches to managing people, projects and teams, together with many practical tools and examples. Some researchers have had very limited previous experience of being managed, and found that the course broadened their perspectives. The course explores different styles and behaviours of managers, drawing on published literature and developing practical skills. Participants have enjoyed exploring their own tendencies and gaining insight into others' management styles, appreciated 'the discovery that an open management style is possible, if not indeed preferable', and expanded their views about what managers should focus on.

A different perspective

Research staff occupy a particular niche within universities, and are often unaware of broader institutional operations. The course enabled them to grasp strategic overviews and to understand better the tensions and pressures faced by Principal Investigators, Heads of School and others. A better understanding and appreciation of their own managers and why certain demands were made of them was another positive outcome.

A sustainable future

Researchers into Management was initially funded from institutional Roberts' money earmarked for the professional and career development of researchers. The programme was developed collaboratively between myself as a (Roberts-funded) Faculty Researcher Development Officer – bringing an understanding of researchers' interests and needs – and the central Staff Training and Development Unit, which contributed expertise in designing leadership and management programmes. The workshops are delivered by both these parties plus six external trainers, each contributing their specific expertise. The programme has run twice in 2009, and will continue to run annually funded from the university's Staff Training and Development Unit budget.

For further details on the Researchers into Management programme, visit the course website www.manchester.ac.uk/researchersintomanagement or contact: Dr. Gemma Muckle, 0161 306 4169, gemma.muckle@manchester.ac.uk.

Accreditation

- externally accredited by the Institute of Leadership and Management (participants gain a Level 5 Award)
- accreditation encourages researchers to engage fully with a comprehensive training programme, and gives researchers confidence in their abilities.

Structure and content

- based on three units outlined by the Institute of Leadership and Management
 - Understanding the Management Role
 - Managing for Efficiency and Effectiveness
 - Managing Projects, Resources and Finance
- run over nine workshop days, outlined on the course website
- individual assessments provided using an occupational personality questionnaire, followed with an individual discussion on the results with a staff development advisor
- participants form small 'buddy groups' with the aim of better supporting the translation of course material from theory into practice
- homework is reading from journal articles and the course textbook¹. Participants are asked to consider related questions and respond to these using a dedicated online forum
- as an extra, a computer business game simulation is run over two days as a residential climax to the course. This is intended to put the course material into practice, and provide a complex case study for practicing team-working and leadership skills
- an individual project report and work-based assignment enables consolidation and application of learning.

Feedback

- overwhelmingly positive
- participants gained more confidence in their abilities, and felt able to take on new projects and responsibilities
- accreditation is a big attraction – the ILM qualification is valued
- seen as a good investment of time
- high quality of the various presenters appreciated
- interactive exercises and discussions enjoyable
- external presenters commented on the enthusiasm and commitment of the researchers who were keen to expand their skills and understanding of how become excellent managers and leaders.

¹The Higher Education Manager's Handbook by Peter McCaffery (2004, RoutledgeFalmer).

Leading the way at Leeds

Dr Odette Dewhurst, Senior Research Training and Development Officer, Penny Foster, Senior Staff Development Adviser, Paul Heaton, Principal Staff Development Adviser, SDDU, University of Leeds.

'The way a university treats its early-career researchers is vital, not only to them, but also to the success of the institution at large.'

Professor Andrew Thompson, PVC Research, University of Leeds (THES May 2009.)



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Valuing and developing all staff is a key part of the University's strategy, and our comprehensive leadership development provision aims to ensure that all research leaders have the skills to develop high performing teams of researchers, resulting in the delivery of international excellence in all areas of research.

In line with this, the Staff and Departmental Development Unit (SDDU) at the University of Leeds works closely with research and academic staff to provide effective guidance and support to develop their leadership skills at all stages of their career. All of our provision is embedded within our **Leadership and Management Standard** (www.leeds.ac.uk/sddu/personal/people_management.html) which was shortlisted for a 2009 Times Higher Education Award. The Standard establishes a baseline set of values and behaviours which the University expects anyone with leadership and management responsibilities to demonstrate.

It was developed by a process of consultation, taking information and feedback from a wide variety of sources. Our key challenge is getting people to think of leadership and management as an integral part of being a successful academic or researcher and not a 'bolt-on' activity. Leadership does not always form part of the job title but is often an essential part of the job. At the various stages of an individual's career the complexity and breadth of the leadership challenge intensifies and our support reflects this.

'Leadership does not always form part of the job title but is often an essential part of the job.'

Examples of our provision for staff at different stages of their careers include:

Stage 1 Leadership for research staff

Our provision begins with a short course for early career researchers that introduces a range of concepts and theories behind different leadership styles and how this can be applied in a practical way. We also encourage participants to consider what qualities they look for in their PI and therefore develop strategies for getting the best support from them.

Stage 2 From post-doc to PI

Making the move from being a researcher on someone else's grant, to running your own grant is often a daunting prospect and our Introduction to the Role of PI sessions help to smooth this transition by looking at the role in more detail, as well as providing a platform for the new PIs to discuss their concerns/hopes/fears with their peers.

Stage 3 Leading and managing in an academic environment

This suite of 11 short self contained leadership and management development workshops is aimed at both academic and professional and managerial staff who already have some leadership and management responsibilities – for example in leading a team, a research area or a programme. The workshops cover a range of topics including conflict resolution, creating a positive working environment, strategic thinking and planning and leading change.

Stage 4 Support for senior academics

Our **Tomorrow's Leaders** programme (www.leeds.ac.uk/sddu/leadership/tomorrow.html), which was shortlisted for a 2006 Times Higher Award, supports a nominated group of about 18 relatively senior academics and six professional and managerial staff who will be taking on more senior leadership roles in the near future. The programme comprises 360 degree feedback, personality profiling, personal development planning, action learning sets, mentoring, learning resources and six core workshops on topics such as leadership in HE, strategic thinking, resource management, leading change, interpersonal skills, and people and performance.

Focus on leadership

And what about you...?

Expanding our horizons: research related development for academic staff



Dr Rob Daley, Researcher Development Coordinator, Heriot-Watt University

Background

Over the last decade, UK HE has introduced many initiatives to improve the professional skills of our academics and researchers. In the wake of the Dearing review of 1997¹, universities introduced various programmes of teaching development for new academic staff. These courses have grown in the intervening decade and now most universities also provide training and development opportunities for staff in the use of technology in their teaching (e-learning).

The research councils introduced the Roberts' agenda in 2003² and provided funding for transferable skills and career orientated development for research students and research staff. Alongside these initiatives, the role of the academic as a researcher and research leader has changed considerably with increased expectations of effort in public engagement, knowledge transfer/exchange, effecting impact and increased responsibly as a supervisor/manager.

Most non-academic professions have an explicit expectation that their members will engage in continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Their professional bodies require evidence of this to gain membership or chartered status and require evidence of continued activity for maintenance of that level of recognition. As a sector, we identify the need to provide development activities for our postgraduate researchers and our research staff, to provide support for academics in their teaching and learning (including e-learning). However, as of yet the UK HE sector has little provision of research related development for academics and little expectation of their engagement in these activities.

OK – maybe this is a slight overstatement. Most universities expect supervisors of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) to undertake some form of training and they are usually expected to work with an experienced supervisor for their first PGR. Many institutions provide some form of staff induction, which will probably include some research related information, and many provide some sort of workshop programme on issues around writing research grants and understanding sources of research funding. The research councils also provide some training, (e.g. EPSRC Mock Panel; ESRC Media training) as do professional bodies and discipline groups. And some HEIs (see article from Leeds on page 11) are addressing this. However, if we are serious about maximising our research potential then do we not need to focus more effort on enhancing our skills and abilities to achieve this?

Much evidence has been presented in recent surveys to indicate that academic staff would welcome such support. A survey carried out by the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO)³ indicated that senior scientists wished they had undertaken training in a range of research related topics earlier in their career. These included Personnel Recruitment/Management; Grant Writing; Research Project Management; Time Management and Public Communication. The data presented in the report suggests that while some of the respondents had managed to improve their skills without specific training, many still identified a need to improve their abilities in these areas. The UK Research Leaders' survey⁴, carried out in 2005/06, indicated that only 39% of respondents had undertaken training relating to research leadership/management. This survey identified a number of areas in which the respondents felt training would be useful. These included Leading and Managing People; Managing Performance; Motivating People; Providing advice on Promotion and Recruitment and Selection of staff. Further indications of the demand for such training are the provision of different support mechanisms across UK HE. These mechanisms include open workshop programmes (e.g. Newcastle⁵), funding for external training (e.g. Warwick⁶) and inclusion of such training in Postgraduate Certificates in Academic Practice (e.g. Heriot-Watt⁷).



¹ Available at www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/

² Details available at www.rcuk.ac.uk/rescareer/rcdu/training.htm

³ See www.embo.org/documents/embo_sci_skills.pdf

⁴ See presentation at <https://connect.le.ac.uk/p37637449/>

⁵ See <http://researchstaff.ncl.ac.uk/rss/training/workshops/programme>

⁶ See www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/ldcl/funding/asdf/

⁷ www.hw.ac.uk/edu/ldcl/pgcap-overview.htm



Support

But provision of just a workshop programme will not have much impact unless staff are encouraged and facilitated in understanding their own development needs and provided with support in their CPD planning. We need to provide such support as well as providing, and recognising, time for both the planning and the development.

Workshops provide good introductory support for individuals, but are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to developing as research leaders and in developing highly efficient research teams. There should also be support provided at a school/department level so that teams working together can identify the teams' development requirements and can share the burden as well as support each other in this process. This is an important aspect where different disciplines require different approaches (one weakness of an institutional workshop programme) but would also ensure that local structures and procedures are in-line with the development process and not in conflict with it. The development of peer support mechanisms through action learning sets would also help to enhance this development as well as embed it in normal academic activity. Supporting your colleagues in their development, and they supporting you in yours, should create a much richer development experience but should also create ongoing support beyond the topic of the moment and help shape working practice to achieve greater research productivity.

While achieving a UK HE sector where every academic is actively engaging in peer-supported research related development may take some time to achieve, we have to start somewhere, so why not here and now?

What would an optimum research related CPD programme look like?

In a perfect world, with unlimited funding, it might include teams of high-level coaches and mentors to discuss ongoing development plans, to support all aspects of being a research leader. These individuals would be available for you whenever you needed them and would be sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced to assist you in every aspect of your research. However, the budgets may not stretch to fund this level of attention.

A pragmatic approach would include an institutional workshop programme that would cover all the 'research related' activities in which successful academics engage. One important aspect is the management skills required (time management, people management, financial management, project management and strategic management). Did any academic start their career with a view of becoming a multifaceted, multidimensional manager? The programmes would include ethics and governance, aspects of obtaining research funding, dissemination of research including publication, public engagement, knowledge transfer/exchange and, focus of the moment, impact! It should also include aspects of supervision, career development, maybe much more...

(The views expressed in this article are the author's own.)

Do you want a piece of the action...?

Action learning is gaining in popularity across HE as a powerful aid to professional development. This article explains what it is and discusses its use within the researcher community.



Dr Andy Wilson is Director of Capability Enhancement at Loughborough University and Chair of the CROS Steering Group.

The role of the set members is not to provide answers; rather it is to help the issue holder to develop a deeper understanding of their issue and of possible ways of addressing it.

Action learning can take many forms. The model described here is the one that a group of midlands staff developers established about five years ago for use with heads of department. This brings together groups of about five people, who meet four times, about a month apart. We try to mix the groups by discipline, institution and gender. An experienced facilitator is present.

During each meeting each set member has a chunk of time, usually about 45 minutes, during which the set concentrates on an issue that the set member has presented. The issue is usually a professional one, but personal aspects may emerge too. The role of the set members is not to provide answers; rather it is to help the issue holder to develop a deeper understanding of their issue and of possible ways of addressing it. At the end of the 45 minutes there is strong encouragement for the issue holder to commit to action and at the next meeting this action is reported on and the cycle is repeated.

The core of the process is questioning by the other set members to encourage reflection by the issue holder. The questioning comes from different perspectives and this often offers new insights. It also offers an intriguing mixture of challenge and support, which is encouraged by the fact that everyone goes through the same process. The facilitator helps to set the style, but their role often becomes less important over time as the set develops its own way of working.

The process is strictly confidential. A group of colleagues focus their attention on helping you to address your issue. They are both interested and disinterested. Interested because they want to help, disinterested because they are not affected by what the issue holder does. Many set members describe the experience as unique and intensely powerful.

The core of the process is questioning by the other set members to encourage reflection by the issue holder.



Issues and benefits

The issues that are raised often concern one or more of the following:

- strategic direction – where am I taking my group?
- motivation – how can I take people with me?
- transition – what's happening to me and my role?

The benefits that set members typically report are:

- a much improved understanding of their issue and of possible actions often linked to a much greater sense of confidence in handling it
- valuable lessons from seeing other people deal with issues that are quite often related in some way to their own
- a new set of questioning techniques that can be used in their day-to-day leadership and management.

As a leadership and management development tool the greatest benefit is the timely focus on the individual's current concerns. The greatest disadvantage is the time commitment. It is a testimony to the usefulness of the process that set members usually go to considerable lengths to attend the set meetings.

Action learning and researchers

Action learning lends itself to issues that are challenges rather than puzzles, long-term rather than short-term, and people-related rather than technical. Research leadership fits well with this and our experience of action learning for researchers, though limited, indicates that it is as effective for them as for heads of department.

A similar point could be made about coaching and it seems likely that the intensely customised nature of action learning and coaching is especially suited to the development needs of researchers, whose leadership role is subject to considerable variation. The Concordat, of course, is encouraging new development opportunities for researchers.

All this is leading to several institutions in the midlands offering action learning for researchers, and to Roberts' practitioners developing the skills of action learning facilitators.

Vitae update

Vitae events, resources and publications

For more information on all items featured over the next couple of pages, go to www.vitae.ac.uk.

Finding a set

If you are interested in joining a set as a member then here are some suggestions:

- contact your institution's leadership and management development team and/or your local Roberts' practitioners
- see if they can find you a place on an institutional or regional set. If they can't, try your Vitae Hub contact; other institutions may have a spare place.
- ask them to put you in touch with someone who has been a set member. Action learning is not for everyone so it will help to talk to someone with direct experience
- talk to your fellow researchers; if there's a group of you interested in action learning then this will encourage your institution to get it going.

Becoming a facilitator

The ability to facilitate action learning sets is a powerful skill for any developer. The view of the midlands team would be that you should not facilitate a set without having been a member of one and without having been trained as a facilitator.

Fortunately the growing interest in action learning means that groups like the Midlands Staff Development Partnership and the Vitae Midlands Hub are running training sets from time to time. These are an ideal way of developing your skills. The MSDP will run a day on action learning facilitation, followed by a training set, early in 2010. If you're interested you're welcome to contact me at d.a.wilson@lboro.ac.uk.

The SWW Hub ran an introduction to Action Learning with its network in November, with a view to setting up Action Learning sets. A follow up on facilitation skills may follow. For more information, contact swwhub@vitae.ac.uk.

Vitae innovate

Vitae innovate is a scheme to encourage innovation in the personal, professional and career development of researchers, with funding of up to £100k to be allocated to innovative projects in 2009. 190 bids were received with over £3million pounds being requested. Of these 64 were shortlisted for consideration by an independent panel who were impressed with the very large number of bids that were received.

The majority of the 64 bids that the panel reviewed were excellent projects which would make a clear contribution to enabling researchers to reach their potential in both their research and their careers. They reflected the very high standard of provision in many institutions for professional and career development for researchers, and reflected in many cases new potential collaborations. The panel agreed funding for seven projects totalling £75k of the available £100k fund.

- **Open research: the application of e-knowledge tools in researcher careers training and development:** The Open University (OU), £20,000
- **Essential business skills for the low carbon economy: a bespoke programme for researchers:** University of East Anglia, £15,725
- **Researcher-led initiatives: generating frameworks for promoting a postgraduate researcher stake in researcher development:** National Union of Students, £9,900
- **Building impact into social science research:** University of Leeds, £9,750
- **The research impact agenda and early career development for historians: a pilot study:** History Research Wales, £8,516
- **Facilitating research as a creative process:** Imperial College London, £7,160
- **Win-Win: developing the transferable skills of research staff through mentoring:** University of Sussex, £4,500.

The panel looked to fund ideas and projects which were genuinely aiming to discover, try or set up something new. The aim of the fund was to enable projects to happen which were not currently planned or likely to take place under existing funding or provision for supporting researchers. Projects which the panel considered to be either an adaption or continuation of previous or current work were not funded.

However, given the quality and potential value of some of the proposals to researcher development, Vitae will be reviewing the range of proposals and may be in touch with individual bidders to discuss taking forward some projects within other Vitae workstreams, such as our resources development or research projects.

The remaining unallocated monies will be carried forward in the Vitae innovate fund. Further information on the next call for proposals will be available shortly.

In the meantime, thank you again to all bidders and congratulations to those who were successful. We are looking forward to the outcome of these projects.

Vitae update

Events

Fireworks from research staff?

On November 5 Vitae held its first national conference for research staff. Representatives from over 30 institutions discussed issues related to the professional and career development of research staff, including the new UK Researcher development framework and the Research Excellence Framework. Many institutional research staff societies and associations were represented in this emerging national network.

David Proctor, of Dundee, articulated a clear call from research staff to research staff to collaborate and build a collective voice on issues of career and personal development. There was a clear view among participants that this was needed and that researcher issues were common across discipline and institutional boundaries. You can view further discussion at the research staff blog (www.vitae.ac.uk/rsblog.)

During the conference Brian Iddon MP and member of the Science and Technology Committee also encouraged all participants to get in touch with their local MPs to discuss issues relating to their research and to their experience of being researchers in UK higher education.

For further information about the research staff conference, the plenary presentations and workshop programme please see www.vitae.ac.uk/researchstaffconference.



Enhancing employability

As part of Vitae's successful Careers In Focus programme, two new activities specifically designed to enhance postgraduate researchers' employability have been run recently – a 'Careers in focus: environmental sector' event and a 'Creativity in research' workshop. For more details see www.vitae.ac.uk/cif.

PVC gives tips for advancing in academia

For researchers who were looking to advance their academic career Vitae provided a one-day event in June. Advancing in Academia was supported by a team of successful academics, from a range of disciplines, and included a presentation from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Research, Professor Robert Allison from the University of Sussex, who gave his hints and tips for advancing an academic career. By the end of the day participants had developed an action plan to manage their career strategically.

Looking to the future at the Vitae conference

Ellen Pearce, Director of Vitae reports

Potential changes in policy, funding, structures of research and the implications for training and developing the next generation of researchers were all discussed and debated on 8-9 September when over 400 people with a stake in developing researchers in higher education met at Warwick University for the 2nd Vitae Annual Conference. For the first year, provision for those not able to attend was made through the use of a special conference blog and Twitter.

The conference speakers, workshops and discussions raised issues relating to the long term future, the medium term (say within the next year or so) and to immediate actions that needed to be taken.

Long term

Technological advances are changing the nature of how research is undertaken, raising issues relating to:

- IP – are your researchers twittering their best ideas?
- collaboration
- engaging the public in community-owned projects
- how our personal and institutional responses match a generation of people who will use advanced technology intuitively.

Medium term

Many speakers raised the importance of

- multidisciplinary research, and the implications for institutional structures
- rewarding staff
- the new Research Excellence Framework (see page 2)
- the future skills set of researchers.

Immediate action

The future of the Roberts agenda (funding currently confirmed until 2001) was an important theme.

- It is clear that the ring-fenced funding and reporting has provided a huge drive and success to this agenda
- The research councils have been scoping an external evaluation of progress and future scenarios. Further information will be available shortly

For a full conference report or to watch plenary speakers online go to www.vitae.ac.uk/vitaeconference2009.

Resources

Careers in academia

Vitae's very successful 'Careers in academia' programme provides participants with the chance to find out what life as an academic is really like, what is involved and what skills and strengths it will take to succeed, in order to help them decide if this is a career they would like to pursue. Vitae will shortly be making the 'Careers in academia' programme freely available for use by UK HEIs. This will include manuals with all the information needed to organise and deliver the programme as well as a supporting podcast of the presentations from one of the national programmes. For more information contact jonathan.roberts@vitae.ac.uk.

Researcher careers and recession

In order to provide realistic perspectives on career opportunities for researchers, Vitae has set up an online discussion space to explore researcher careers and the recession with dedicated space on the website to post articles (commissioned specifically for this purpose) on the topic of the recession and its potential impact on researcher careers.

Articles include:

- 'Challenges and Perspectives for Early Career Researchers during the current economic climate', by Professor Sarah O'Hara, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Professor Bob Webb, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research, University of Nottingham
- 'Impact of the recession on research and research careers', by Aaron Porter, Vice-President (Higher Education), National Union of Students

If you have a view, let us hear it – go to www.vitae.ac.uk/careersandrecession.

New publications

What do researchers do? First destinations of doctoral graduates by subject demonstrates that doctoral graduates continue to be highly employable across the economy in a wide range of occupations, and for the first time data is available by subject.

What do researchers do? Career profiles of doctoral graduates is a collection of 40 career profiles. These career stories provide insights into the paths that doctoral graduates take beyond their first destination.

What do researchers do? Career stories on film is a collection of 20 films of researchers talking about their careers. These films illustrate the range and variety of careers that people with a research training go on to provide an opportunity for researchers to talk about how their experience has helped them in roles across the economy.

Employers briefing: Targeting the postgraduate and researcher market highlights the skills and experience of postgraduates and people with a background in academic research and was jointly written by Vitae, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services and the Association of Graduate Recruiters.

Researchers' skills and competencies – at a glance

Designed to enable employers to see, at a glance, the skills and competencies doctoral researchers and research staff can bring to an organisation, this publication lists some of the relevant skills that researchers typically develop, against some of the competencies that are most frequently desired by employers. Also given are some real examples to show the kind of evidence that might be cited by researchers to evidence the development of those skills.



The creative researcher: tools and techniques to unleash your creativity

Coinciding with the creative researcher workshop held on 7 December, Vitae has published the next title in the series of practical 'researcher booklets'. 'The creative researcher' provides practical advice and tips to postgraduate researchers and research staff about creativity in a research environment, drawing from examples from the experience of researchers themselves. This publication follows the release of the first booklet in the series last year 'The balanced researcher' www.vitae.ac.uk/researcherbooklets

Vitae annual report If you would like to know more about Vitae's first year of operation, take a look at the 'Vitae annual report 2008' at www.vitae.ac.uk/aboutus

twitter

Follow Vitae on Twitter

You can follow Vitae on Twitter at www.twitter.com/vitae_news. A number of Hubs also have Twitter feeds – see below to see which one you want to follow.

- **London Hub:** www.twitter.com/vitaelondonhub
- **Midlands Hub:** www.twitter.com/Midlands_Hub
- **NW Hub:** www.twitter.com/VitaeNWHub
- **SE Hub:** www.twitter.com/Vitae_SE_Hub
- **SWW Hub:** www.twitter.com/VitaeSWWHub
- **YNE Hub:** www.twitter.com/VitaeYNEHub

The write stuff – getting your researchers to write!

In October 2009 Hugh Kearns toured the UK running workshops for postgraduate researchers and their supervisors including one called Turbocharging Your Writing. He lectures and researches on doctoral education at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia. Together with his colleague, Maria Gardiner, he runs a company called Thinkwell. Find more information at ithinkwell.com.au.



You try to support your postgraduate researcher. You urge them to show you some writing. You try to apply some pressure and explain that they have to write to complete their thesis. But no matter what you do they won't write. Most supervisors will come across this problem at some point. So what are you to do? Can anything be done?

Over the past number of years my colleague and I have run programmes for thousands of doctoral researchers in Australia, the USA, the UK and Ireland and without doubt writing is one of the issues most raised as a real struggle. And when you get to know them you begin to realise there are some reasons they don't write and some things that can assist.

Why they don't write

Let's get straight to the point. For most people writing is scary! Even people who like writing often find it scary. Why? Because they know (or fear) what is likely to happen to those precious words they put down on paper. In an academic culture you will be exposed to what is euphemistically called academic rigour. A more accurate name might be ritual humiliation! When you write you will be evaluated – often harshly. And sensibly enough most of us don't like that prospect. Which is why checking emails, reading, even visiting the in-laws looks appealing when the alternative is writing.

Don't believe me? Think back to your own experiences. Or think back to the last time you got a rejection letter. Didn't leave you feeling very motivated did it?

One of the main reasons most people don't write is because they are terrified of the consequences (real or imagined). So what to do? Well here are some tips that have helped some postgraduate researchers (PGRs) – and their supervisors.

Hopefully some of these ideas work. If not you may be forced to resort to the tactics of one desperate supervisor. She got her student to move into her house and kept her there, providing food and sustenance, until she produced the required number of words!

Top tips

1. Write early and write often One of the things is to try to prevent the problem in the first place – that means getting the PGR to write early and write often. They will often resist – but encourage them to have a go at a small writing task eg review two or three journal articles, right from the start.

2. Break it down into small bits PGRs see themselves as writing a thesis. This tends to make it hard. It's so big and has to be so good. So it's helpful to get them to think about much smaller bits of writing, for example two or three pages. Whatever amount that makes it seem possible to start.

3. Encourage them to write for seminars, papers, conferences This gets them focussed and has the added benefit of having a deadline.

4. Explain what a draft is Some PGRs think that they need to produce finished prose right from the start. It can be useful to explain that writing usually has to go through several drafts. A really useful strategy is to explain your writing process – and perhaps even show them your drafts!

5. Writing groups If they are worried about showing work to you then another approach is that they could show it to another PGR or a member of research staff. Or perhaps your department has a writing group. If not, perhaps you could get some PGRs together to form one.

6. Be kind

'I have spread my dreams under your feet; Tread softly because you tread upon my dreams.'

William Butler Yeats

One PGR told us that in the margin of her text her supervisor had written in red capitals 'GROAN!!!' As you can imagine she wasn't particularly excited about handing in more. So, when reviewing their first few pieces of work, be gentle.

7. Be specific PGRs find it particularly demoralising when they get feedback like 'This isn't deep enough' or 'This is unclear'. Try to provide some clues or even examples.

8. Agree on the type of feedback The PGR hands in a rough draft hoping to find out if they are on track. You spend several hours correcting every spelling mistake. You've wasted your time and they will feel terrible. Or you give a general comment when they want more detail. The rule should be that whenever words are handed in there is an agreement about the type of feedback to be provided.

9. Feedback can be positive! There is a natural temptation to quickly pass over work that is fine without much comment and focus on where the gaps are. This means that most of the feedback is going to be negative. So where you can, try to be balanced in the feedback. (I know – sometimes this can be hard – but try!)

10. Use a green pen Supervisors should speak softly and use a green pen. Getting a paper back with every square inch covered in red ink is demoralising. The modern equivalent with track changes is getting a document with 250 little boxes down the margin. So while you may think you're doing a great favour the recipient may not see it that way. It's useful to remember that:

- you think you are commenting on a thesis – but the writer thinks you are commenting on the person
- when you write 'This is unclear' the writer hears 'I am unclear'
- there is a person behind those words – and often a very vulnerable one at that.

Miscellany

THE success

A team from Durham University was announced the winner of the Outstanding Support for Early Career Researchers at the THE Awards dinner in October. This Award was sponsored by Research Councils UK in association with Vitae.

Durham University won with a programme ensuring that transferable skills training is accessible to all doctoral candidates and early career research staff. Professor Ian Diamond, RCUK Skills Champion, commented: ***'This is an outstanding programme, consisting of an impressive mix of innovative actions generated by a real evidence base. The UK needs to support and build on our existing skills base, and forward thinking programmes like this, which ensure that all talented researchers can access excellent training whatever their situation, deserve recognition.'***

Congratulations should also go to the other shortlisted universities: University of Cambridge, University of Edinburgh, University of Manchester, University of Nottingham, and University of Oxford.

Science: (So what? So everything)

Encourages public interest in science and shows people its importance to their everyday lives as well as to the strength of the UK economy. This campaign is backed by the Government, the science community and a variety of high profile supporters including author Terry Pratchett, businessman James Caan and scientist and presenter Kathy Sykes. The lively website is of particular interest to those involved in public engagement activities <http://sciencesowhat.direct.gov.uk/>.



Framework for public engagement

The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement has launched a draft framework for public engagement and would like your views on what they have produced. Questions asked include why does public engagement matter; how do you measure its impact and what would an engaged university look like? The NCCPE has also published a research paper on Auditing, Benchmarking and Evaluating Public Engagement www.publicengagement.ac.uk.

Diary

Below are events which may be of interest to you and your researchers in early 2010, for a comprehensive listing go to www.vitae.ac.uk/events

January

January 6

Vitae Roberts Policy Forum 2010

January 11

YNE Hub – Cross cultural issues in PhD supervision workshop

January 12

Midlands and SWW Hub – Cross cultural issues in PhD supervision workshop

January 14

NW Hub – Cross cultural issues in PhD supervision workshop

February

February 10

Midlands Hub – Broadening horizons – train the trainer

February 24

Vitae SWW Hub – Good practice conference

March

March 2-5

Vitae national GRADschool for postgraduate researchers

March 15

Vitae national event 'Digital researcher' for researchers

March 29

Vitae national event 'Advancing in academia' for research staff

March 30

Vitae national event 'Careers in academia' for postgraduate researchers

Keep in touch

Vitae has a central team and a network of eight Regional Hubs. Each Hub has a Hub Co-ordinator and a Hub Manager and is hosted by a university in the Region. If you would like to be on the mailing list of the Vitae programme or your local Hub, to receive Regional newsletters, email alerts and details of local events, contact:

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- London
- Midlands
- Scotland and Northern Ireland
- North West
- South West and Wales
- Yorkshire and North East Hub
- East of England
- South East

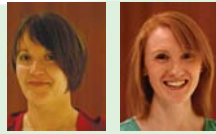
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The advisory board provides input to the editor of 'overview' about the content and style of the publication. The group communicates virtually so membership does not require attendance at meetings. If you are interested in joining the advisory board, please contact overview@vitae.ac.uk.

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