

# **What are HEI Research Staff for?**

**September 2007**

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The  
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Team  
evaluating the impacts of  
developing researcher skills



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## What are HEI Research Staff for?

### Introduction

The research carried out by the UK's higher education sector is held in extremely high regard by the international community. In producing 8% of the world's scientific papers and 13% of the world's most highly cited works, the UK ranks second only to the USA [1]. The UK's research staff are central to this achievement. However, this hard-won eminence is threatened by the growth of research funding within other EU countries, China and the Indian sub-continent. In order to maintain the UK's present position, therefore, changes are being planned in both the funding and the management of UK HEI research [1].

In addition to being the academics and HEI research managers of the future, today's research staff<sup>1</sup> are the commercial managers, national/international policy makers and business leaders of tomorrow. How our staff are trained and developed today will shape them and their activities for the future. While it is impossible to predict how any training or development will affect the future society of the UK, there is no doubt that it will affect it.

In view of the recent implementation of the recommendations of the Roberts' Review [2], the publication of the 2003 White Paper [1] and changes in employment legislation for fixed-term staff [3] now seems an appropriate juncture to ask the question: "What are research staff for?". This paper attempts to bring together the opinions and perspectives of line managers, funders and researchers in light of the recent initiatives in research staff training and development within the UK. In order to achieve this there are five questions that need to be answered:

- who are today's research staff?
- who funds research staff and why?
- what do research staff think they will/should be doing?
- what do research staff actually do?
- what are research staff rewarded for?

The main sources of this information have been various reports and published papers dealing with aspects of UK Higher Education, opinions of research staff reflected in the minutes of the inaugural meeting of the National Research Staff Association (NRSA) [4], the 2002 report on the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) [5], individual institutional reports on CROS [6] and other reports<sup>2</sup>. The views of staff supporting researchers were collected at a workshop at the 2006 UKHERD conference, while the views of funders were collected from reports from the Funders' Forum and various research council reports.

### Who are today's research staff?

The 2004/2005 HESA summary of academic staff gives a figure of 36,100 "research only" staff within UK HEIs (30,165 FT and 5,935 PT), of whom 33,435 are graded as researchers (28,130 FT and 5,305 PT) [7]. Therefore, within UK Higher Education, we have around 35,000 researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper the term "research staff" is used to describe all non-academic staff whose main responsibility is to carry out research. This includes research assistants/associates, postdoctoral staff, research officers research fellows, senior research fellows, etc.

<sup>2</sup> The Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) [www.cros.ac.uk](http://www.cros.ac.uk) is an online survey into the working conditions, career aspirations and career development opportunities of research staff. Through a collaborative agreement, survey results currently are only available to CROS partner institutions. For the purpose of this paper we have used only CROS data within the public domain. This consists of a report on the national picture published by CROS in 2002 and various institution reports, publicly available through their websites (see endnote [6] for appropriate links).

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Exactly who are these researchers is difficult to establish; the variety of job/role titles that they fill is extensive. John Bothwell, representing the steering committee of the NRSA, reports that on the 5th of August 2006 there were 49 research positions advertised on [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk) using 21 different titles [4]. The phrase “postdoctoral students” was used in the opening address of Dr Evan Harris (Lib Dem MP for Oxford and Abingdon) to the Westminster Hall debate on January 10th 2006 [8] and again on November 3rd 2006 in the House of Lords by Baroness Sharp of Guilford [9]. This phrase can also be found in a number of articles published in the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) over the last few years [10]. While the vast majority of postdoctoral researchers in the UK occupy staff roles this phraseology suggests they are often assumed to be students by those not familiar with their activities.

### Who funds research staff and why?

The research staff working in UK HEIs are funded by a wide variety of sources. These include the research councils<sup>3</sup>, the funding councils, government departments, charities, the EU, NATO, commercial organisations and the HEIs themselves.

The purpose of the funding also varies; commercial organisations tending to underwrite commercially applicable research, while government departments back work that has broader benefits for society. Charities are interested in gaining further information to help their nominated causes and improve the lives of particular sectors of the population, while the research councils and the funding councils aim to increase the effectiveness of UK research and maintain the UK’s position as a world centre for research. HEFCE aim to maintain a “dynamic, world-class research sector” which is “crucial to economic prosperity and national wellbeing” [11]. Amongst the strategic aims of the AHRC are “to encourage researchers in engaging with the creative, cultural, heritage, and other sectors of society and the economy” and “to represent and promote the interests of arts and humanities research so that its contribution to social, economic, and cultural life is enhanced and more widely appreciated” [12]. The aims of the then Particle Physics & Astronomy Research Council (now SRFC) included providing highly trained staff for industry and commerce and delivering world class research on the origins of the universe and the structure of matter [13].

The view of the research staff [4] was that the funding bodies fund researchers in order to ensure that the UK has a steady stream of skilled researchers to enhance the UK’s research output and to keep it competitive with respect to global competitors.

### What do researchers think they will/should be doing?

This is a difficult question to answer as of yet there has been no direct attempt to collect the expectations of people who are about to undertake their first research role. The information that does exist can be used to outline a possible answer but different groups may have their own answer to this question.

The opinions of some researcher support roles are given in Table 1 and focus on doing research, increasing understanding of research and research management, writing papers, writing funding applications, enhancing teaching and supervisory skills.

One source upon which prospective researchers may base their expectations upon is the advertisements for research positions that appear in the national press and on various web sites. A random sample of seven of the positions advertised on [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk) on October 27th 2006 gave further indication as to the activities that research staff could expect to be involved in. In addition to carrying out research, the successful applicants were

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<sup>3</sup> AHRC, BBSRC, EPSRC, ESRC, MRC, NERC, and SRFC

**Table 1: Responses from UKHERD Conference workshop: What are researchers for? [19]**

What do researchers think they will/ should be doing?	What are researchers actually do?	What are researchers rewarded for?	What are researchers funded for?
"Developing supervisory skills"	"They do what they are told"	"Papers – research outputs"	"To carry out routine research taken on as a project"
"Getting guidance and mentoring"	"How much they go their own way differs depending on the contract, funding and managers"	"Winning funding"	"To provide an opportunity to continue in HE research after a PhD and before a permanent post"
"Learning from the PI (principle investigator) how to run projects, authoring papers and applying for funding"	"They "do research" and write it up"	"Teaching – supervision and marking"	"To provide a cost-effective way of raising the university's research profile"
"Producing papers"	"They learn by experience"	"Networking"	"To provide good quality research in very specific fields"
"Enhance teaching skills to gain accreditation"	"They do things they shouldn't e.g. supervise PhDs"	"Recognition from those you are supervising (not much £ involved)"	
"Running experiments"			

expected to write reports and give presentations, publish results in international journals, assist with postgraduate training, maintain laboratory apparatus, see to general laboratory management, teaching, undertake outreach activities and "carry out any other duties that are within the scope, spirit and purpose of the job".

The consensus of the researchers [4] was that research supervisors/managers expect the research staff to perform a wide number of roles including training other research staff and students, teaching students, providing technical assistance for collaborators, writing reports, writing funding applications and communicating their research to the public. They also noted that the extent to which these activities were encouraged varied widely between departments.

### What do research staff actually do?

Research staff are involved in nearly all aspects of university activity. In addition to carrying out research they can also be involved in laboratory management, instrument maintenance, managing projects (other than their main research project), supervising research students, teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students (lectures, tutorials, fieldwork and lab demonstrating), setting and marking exam questions, designing courses, outreach activities, university marketing activities, commercial consultancy and training, writing papers, reports and funding applications, contributing to departmental and institutional reporting (QAA, RAE, course accreditation etc.), managing health and safety and serving on University committees. This involvement of research staff in teaching and supervision was also recognised in the report of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee [14] and in a report by the Higher Education Policy Institute on student experiences in English universities [15]. This latter report suggests that research staff and research students undertake more than 30% of non-lecturing teaching and tuition.

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### What are research staff rewarded for?

The research staff themselves held the view that potential employers considered research posts to be an opportunity for researchers to gain valuable and transferable skills for use in future positions [4]. The researchers' own views on why they were doing research was to establish themselves as independent researchers. One view expressed was that "A PhD should teach the candidate to direct their own research; a professional post should add the ability to manage other workers' research." One of the views that appears to be widely held is that after two or more postdoctoral positions researchers have effectively priced themselves out of the job market [16]. During a discussion on the role of research staff in developing new research ideas, one principal investigator (PI) commented that the present system does not value or reward the input of researchers [16]. As part of the same discussion another suggested that research staff are effectively self-employed, as they are completely responsible for their own career success. The inability of staff on a fixed-term contract or junior open-ended contract to apply for research council grants prevents them from "taking control of their careers" [14]. There is a feeling amongst research staff that when it comes to permanent academic appointments the most important things are publications and the ability to win research funding. While teaching and administration are recognised as part of the job, they are considered of little importance with regard to research.

There is evidence that those appointing research staff do not necessarily value experience. In many instances research staff take a salary drop between posts and moving from contract to contract is detrimental to salary progression.

### Future requirements

The government intends to increase its spending on research and aims to support emerging research [1]. It also intends to encourage HEIs to increase the number of research-only posts. According to HEFCE estimates, around 6,000 new academic staff will be required by UK HEIs between 2004 and 2011 in order to maintain the same staffing level as in 2003/04 [17]. When the DfES (now DIUS) targets are included an extra 7,000 - 12,000 staff may be required. Presently, the route to an academic position is primarily through a fixed-term research position so it seems reasonable to expect that many of these new staff will come from today's pool of research staff [18]. However, it is important to note that there will not be permanent positions for all those who want them. It should also be noted that the European Union's Lisbon Agenda aims to increase the investment in research to 3% of GDP by 2010 [19]. If this target is to be achieved then there should be a growing market for well-trained researchers within the EU. It is important that UK research staff are suitably trained to avail themselves of such opportunities.

## Challenges

### Career expectations

It was noted that the goal for the majority of research staff was to get a permanent post as an academic staff member or researcher [20]. The various institutional CROS reports indicate that while the majority of research staff wish to remain in a research career, not all of these wish to remain within academia [6]. This suggests that a significant number of researchers wish to pursue research careers outside academia. These reports also indicate that many research staff are undecided about both the type of work that they wish to undertake and which sector they wish to work in. The figures quoted for indecision regarding the "area of work" range from 14% to 21%, while the range for "sector" range from 20% to 30% [6]. It is clear, therefore, that a good starting point would be to address the widespread indecision and unrealistic aspirations of many research staff.

## **Teaching**

Research staff involvement in teaching varies widely between departments and institutions. In some cases there is a contractual expectation that research staff may be called upon to do up to 3 hours a week teaching as part of their post while in others research staff are offered additional financial incentives to encourage them to teach. Some research managers view teaching as being detrimental to research. It was also noted that in research intensive departments there might be no opportunity for research staff to gain experience in teaching. It was generally recognised that to have some teaching experience was a useful addition to any researcher's CV. All institutions represented at the UKHERD conference workshop offered research staff training opportunities in teaching and/or demonstrating [20]. However, when asked about the take-up of this training, they hesitated: at best one of the participants thought that the take-up at their institution was "ok".

## **Supervising students**

There is evidence that some postgraduate students receive a greater part of their supervision from research staff rather than from academic staff [21]. The situation has been compared to that of working in a large company; a student working for a high profile academic might not see much of the academic but instead have most of his/her supervision and guidance from a 'postdoc' in the group. Despite many research staff fulfilling this supervisory role, it is not always recognised and the researchers rarely receive any training for it [20]. There was general support amongst the workshop participants for this training to be mandatory. There was a general acceptance that the real problem here is the lack of recognition for teaching. The view that teaching is "not as valuable as research" is prevalent across the sector and that those who want to teach as a major part of their career are those who "couldn't cut it in research". There is a lack of incentives to encourage researchers to involve themselves in teaching activities.

## **Training and development**

While the implementation of the Roberts' agenda should greatly improve training and development opportunities for research staff, it will be some time before the full effect is observable. There is already evidence that the HEIs focussed on the provision of opportunities for PhD students before turning their attention to research staff. While the staff aspect of the Robert's funding received by institutions accounted for 44.4% of the total, only 38% of the expenditure reported for 2005 was spent on research staff [22]. It has been suggested that due to the short-term nature of researchers contracts and their time within one institution that they would benefit from a twice yearly appraisal [16]. This is an interesting suggestion as there is a general feeling that while most institutions have procedures in place to offer appraisal to research staff, the uptake of this is low. Furthermore few institutions go to any trouble to encourage research staff to undergo appraisal. The CROS 2002 results indicate that around 32% of research staff participate in appraisal, with 82% of these finding it useful [5]. The fact that around 74% of research staff do not engage in a useful appraisal scheme is a clear indication of the work that is needed to be done in this area. Another area where there is opportunity for expansion is "off the job" research training [5]. While only 25% of research staff receive this type of training, 91% of them have found it useful. There are a number of other areas where provision in training opportunities are low (<20%) but where positive feedback from those who have undertaken it. These include staff and team management, coaching others, project and resource planning, teaching, demonstrating, managing budgets, explaining work to people outside your field, writing proposals or grant applications, collaborating with industry, making formal presentations and legal and procedural aspects of intellectual property.

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Another concerning statistic is that less than 15% of research staff have received career advice from their University career service [5]. There is a common perception amongst university staff that the institutional careers service is only for students. While most careers offices will happily make time available for staff and with the implementation of the Roberts' agenda many are involved in the delivery of workshops for research staff<sup>4</sup>, there is still reluctance amongst researchers to avail of their services. There is some evidence to suggest that both academic and research staff would not wish to be seen visiting a careers service for advice, as if to do so was a sign of weakness or failure. In order to overcome this, the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, has set up one-to-one consultations with research staff in a room in the main library "to decrease visibility" [23].

While the general accessibility of information on training opportunities within institutions appears to be good, a number of individual institutions reports on CROS indicate that researchers have difficulty in attending training activities. The main barrier to attendance indicated was available time [6]. This suggests that the demands being placed upon research staff are too great to allow them time to obtain the development and training that will allow them to advance their career. As long as such training and development is seen as something that is to be shoehorned in around other activities, rather than being a worthwhile activity in itself and apportioned suitable space in a normal working plan, research staff will remain unprepared for the next step in their career path. It is important that the managers of research staff see the development of the researchers as an important activity. To this end they should also see that their own development is of importance. It is interesting to note that some of the research councils now expect a statement regarding the PI development and the identification of a suitable mentor for the PI in their first grant application process [24]. One possible way of encouraging more investment by the PIs in the development of their research staff might be to include a researcher training needs analysis and regular updates on training and development undertaken by the researcher in the reporting mechanisms to the research councils.

### Conclusion

Researchers generally want to remain in a research and/or academic role continuing to work within their own subject/discipline. The general impression that they receive from their managers and the sector as a whole is that these research posts are only useful as a stepping stone on the route to an academic post. (It has been noted that it would be useful if good statistics and evidence could be gathered regarding this.) Within scientific and engineering disciplines, permanent lab manager posts are much sought after though this responsibility is usually "rolled in" to senior researcher posts. It was suggested that full economic costing (FEC) might impact on how institutions cost research proposals and that they may be prepared to include the costs of a lab manager type role in future proposals [19].

The following are some of the questions that need to be answered if the career expectations and the training and development needs of researchers are to be met:

- How can we get a clear picture of how many researchers manage to progress to a permanent research or academic post and what are the characteristics or achievements of these staff that led to them attaining these positions?
- How can we ensure that training and development is seen as an important professional activity by both research staff and their managers and administrators?
- How can we ensure that researchers participate in a meaningful and productive appraisal process?
- How can we improve the opportunities and take-up of "off the job" training by researchers?
- How can we ensure that research staff have access to accurate information to help them to develop achievable career aspirations?

<sup>4</sup> Examples available at UK GRAD Database of Practice [www.grad.ac.uk/practice](http://www.grad.ac.uk/practice)

If research posts are to continue to attract well-qualified and talented researchers it is important that there are obvious career paths available to those who take up such posts. These career paths must also be clear to all those involved in managing and advising research staff. To this end it is important that the level of training and development that researchers receive is improved and that the support from their managers and institution is also improved. These researchers must be treated as valuable contributors to the research process and be made feel that they have a bright future within UK research. This is a responsibility that all of those involved in UK research share. As Professor Ian Diamond remarked, this is “*an agenda that the nation cannot afford to fail on*” [25].

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# The Rugby Team

evaluating the impacts of  
developing researcher skills

The Rugby Team is a sector-led working group, which was set up following the UK GRAD Programme Roberts Policy Forum in Rugby in January 2005.

The mission of the group is to propose meaningful and workable ways of evaluating the effectiveness of skills development in early career researchers (this includes both postgraduate researchers and research staff in the first ten years of their research careers).

Membership of the Rugby Team is drawn from a cross-section of HEIs and other stakeholders interested in the personal and career development of researchers. Terms of reference, membership and appropriate projects are agreed each year following the recommendations of the annual Roberts Policy Forum. The Rugby Team reports back on progress and outputs to the subsequent Policy Forum.

To ensure as wide an input as possible the Rugby Team also operates a Virtual Consultation Group (VCG); membership of this group is open to all. The views of this broader group are sought through the UK GRAD bulletin board [www.grad.ac.uk/bulletinboard](http://www.grad.ac.uk/bulletinboard) and email. To join the VCG contact [admin@grad.ac.uk](mailto:admin@grad.ac.uk)

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The role of the UK GRAD Programme is to support the academic sector to embed personal and professional skills development into research degree programmes. Our national Centre for Excellence and a network of regional Hubs support growing networks of universities, employers, supervisors, training professionals, academic administrators, careers services and others interested in developing researchers.

Our vision is for all postgraduate researchers to be fully equipped and encouraged to complete their studies and to make a successful transition to their future careers. The UK GRAD Programme has a key role in enabling them to realise their potential.

As part of this remit, UK GRAD has run an annual Roberts Policy Forum since 2004. The aims of these events are to:

- engage participants in a strategic review of the implementation of Sir Gareth Roberts recommendations in SET for Success on the training requirements for postgraduate researchers and research staff
- contextualise skills and career development of researchers within the wider UK challenges of a developing knowledge economy.

Following the recommendations of the 2005 Policy Forum, UK GRAD set up and subsequently has supported the Rugby Team and its various projects.

For further information about the range of UK GRAD activities go to [www.grad.ac.uk](http://www.grad.ac.uk) or contact [admin@grad.ac.uk](mailto:admin@grad.ac.uk)

