



Incorporating the UK GRAD Programme and UKHERD

Vitae Roberts Policy Forum

consultation results 2009

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



CRAC

Introduction

The publication of Sir Gareth Roberts' review *SET for Success*¹ in 2002 catalysed a change in how the career development of postgraduate researchers and research staff is supported in higher education institutions (HEIs). The review, commissioned by the Treasury to investigate the supply of people with science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills, made a number of key recommendations relating to the personal and professional development of researchers. Since the availability of funding from 2003/04, allocated on the basis of numbers of research council-funded researchers, institutions have made significant progress in enhancing the provision of personal and career development opportunities for researchers.

However, HEIs and funding bodies also recognise the importance of building an evidence base around the use of Roberts funding, both for demonstrating impact and enhancing provision. This is particularly key in the lead up to the next Comprehensive Spending Review when RCUK and other bodies will require evidence to assess and demonstrate the impact of the Roberts' funding and so inform decisions on the continuation and allocation of funding, e.g. as ring-fenced funding.

A key event in the Roberts calendar is the Vitae Roberts Policy Forum. This annual event brings together individuals responsible for institutional policy with regard to postgraduate researchers and research staff development and implementing the related Roberts recommendations. More recently it has also explored the implications of implementing the revised Concordat for the Career Development of Researchers², which reinforces the messages in *SET for Success* through its seven principles.

The January 2009 Policy Forum was an opportunity to:

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

Of major concern to participants was embedding and sustaining the Roberts agenda, particularly if funding is not sustained beyond 2011. The importance of demonstrating the value and the impact of the Roberts agenda was well recognised. Participants were also interested in how this agenda links with the implementation and the benchmarking of the Concordat³.

It was noted at the end of the Policy Forum that there were a number of outstanding issues where participants would welcome an opportunity to give more specific comment and feedback. This was provided through an informal consultation, inviting participants to respond on four topics:

- the future of Roberts funding (Q1-Q4)
- reporting on the implementation of the Concordat (Q5-Q6)
- assessing impact and evidence building (Q7-Q9)
- the language of high level skills (Q10).

This report provides an overview of the overall results of the consultation⁴.

¹ *SET for Success: the supply of people with science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills* (2002) Sir Gareth Roberts' Review, HM Treasury www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/documents/enterprise_and_productivity/research_and_enterprise/ent_res_roberts.cfm

² Concordat for the Career Development of Researchers (2008) www.researchconcordat.ac.uk

³ Report of the Vitae Roberts Policy Forum: progress in building the evidence base (2009) www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/1.VRPF_Report_Feb09.pdf

⁴ www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/PF%20consultation%20Feb%202009.pdf

Executive summary

The future of Roberts funding

Since the commencement of Roberts funding in 2003/04, significant progress has been made by institutions in enhancing provision of personal and career development opportunities for researchers. However, many respondents to the consultation following the 2009 Vitae Roberts Policy Forum highlighted that skills development is not yet permanently embedded in most institutions and the loss of funding will seriously threaten the progress made and could have a wider impact on the research base.

'...the purpose of Roberts funding, since its introduction in 2004, has been to facilitate a change in culture within higher education institutions and to build the early career research community. Effecting this kind of change in culture so that the change is permanent takes far longer than the initial period of Roberts funding to 2011.'

'Ending ring-fencing in 2010/2011 risks undermining the progress made to date, thereby weakening the significant investment made to date both by RCUK and institutions.'

'Removal of the ring-fence poses a number of risks, which could be to the detriment of research output for the sector.'

Overall, there was overwhelming support for the continuation of ring-fenced Roberts funding and the importance of having a clearly identified payment to institutions so as to ensure continued focus on fully embedding the Roberts agenda.

Institutions have appreciated, and wish to see continue, the existing flexibility to use the funding to support all researchers. Just over half proposed allocating the funding on the basis of total researchers.

'Following the principles of the Concordat to support all researchers we would welcome a funding allocation model which enabled all researchers to benefit equally.'

Reporting on implementation of the Concordat

Institutions recognise the importance of the Concordat and almost all respondents supported reporting on progress in implementing the principles, although many requested a proportionate process.

'We feel that this would be an effective method of encouraging best practice regarding implementation of the principles of the Concordat. We would welcome a light touch approach to such reporting.'

There was less consensus on whether Concordat reporting should be combined with Roberts reporting requirements, respondents highlighting both the overlap and distinctiveness of the two agendas.

'The links should be made explicit, but there are some areas which don't match. One submission reporting could be acceptable as long as it provided opportunity for different strands where no overlap between Roberts and the Concordat occur.'

Assessing impact and evidence building

There was acknowledgement of the importance of building an evidence base both for demonstrating impact and enhancing provision. The Rugby Team Impact Framework⁵ (RTIF) was seen as a useful tool for both these activities, and already being used by some institutions. However, there was a range of views on the value of making use of the RTIF a stronger requirement on institutions.

'In order to build up a better picture of the impact of Roberts across the sector as a whole it would be helpful to adopt some common approaches to how institutional practice in evaluation is framed and described. The advantage of the Rugby Team Impact Framework is that it does not specify or restrict what is evaluated and the methods used, instead it provides a framework within which different approaches and activities can be compared and connected.'

There was general recognition of the importance of promoting the achievements of the Roberts agenda to multiple stakeholders.

'...[Roberts agenda] is clearly highly beneficial for promoting the strength of UK research training, and here there are strong gains to be made.'

The majority of respondents supported an external evaluation of the Roberts agenda. There was significant interest from institutions in participating if it went ahead, even from those that did not support an external evaluation. There was less support for top slicing Roberts funds to pay for the evaluation.

'At the time of the implementation of the recommendations of the Roberts Review, the Government accepted in principle the need for an eventual follow-up review to evaluate progress since the original review. Such a review would now be very timely. The Roberts Review was performed by a team drawn from senior staff in the relevant government departments, under the direction of Sir Gareth Roberts. The outcome was an impressive report, and we would suggest that an analogous approach be adopted to revisit the area, using similar methodology wherever possible.'

The language of high level skills

The importance of using appropriate language for different stakeholders and highlighting and differentiating 'doctoral level skills' was acknowledged, including suggestions for terminology.

'...fundamental to our success in promoting recognition of the value of PhD study and sows the seed for measuring impact.'

⁵ www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam

Overall results

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Consultation responses

42 responses were received from a total 134 participants at the Policy Forum of which 37 were named responses representing 34 institutions. 19 of the 30 largest research council-funded HEIs responded. The remainder was distributed equally across the spectrum of HEIs. Overall the responses represent institutions in receipt of 63% of the Roberts funding. The majority of responses were from, or on behalf of, pro-vice-chancellors, vice principals, heads of graduate schools or the relevant committee responsible for researcher development.

The future of Roberts funding (Q1-Q4)

Institutions with research council-funded researchers have received Roberts funding since 2003/04. Initially this was a phased approach based on the number of postgraduate researchers starting on or after the beginning of academic year 2003/04 and all research staff (RA1A or equivalent) in post from October 2003. The initial total payment to HEIs in 2003/04 was of £6.92M. Full funding in proportion with the total number of research council-funded researchers was available from 2005/06. This now stands at £22.2M in 2008/09. The research councils provide the funding as a single ring-fenced payment to institutions. Institutions are required to report annually to RCUK on how the money is spent for the personal and career development of researchers⁶.

Significant progress has been made by institutions in implementing the Roberts agenda.

'The 2008 reports offer evidence of continuing development and innovation in provisions for both research students and research staff. They continue to provide evidence of substantial activity in supporting the personal and professional development of researchers and greater embedding of this activity within research organisations.'

Summary of 2008 reporting, RCUK

A key concern for institutions is that this ring-fenced funding associated with the Roberts recommendations has only been confirmed until 2010/2011. Future funding will depend on the outcomes of the next Comprehensive Spending Review, however, RCUK have indicated that if funding is available it may not be required to be ring-fenced within institutions.

Although funding is linked only to research council-funded researchers, the Roberts' recommendations for enhanced personal and career development opportunities apply to all researchers. In most institutions research council-funded researchers represent only a small proportion of postgraduate researchers and research staff and numbers are skewed towards the research-intensive institutions (the 30 largest research council-funded HEIs receive 80% of the funding). Institutions have a higher degree of flexibility in how it is used and most, if not all HEIs,

provide equal access to development opportunities for all researchers.

The responses to the questions relevant to Roberts funding are summarised below.

All respondents replied to the question as to whether Roberts funding should continue to be ring-fenced beyond 2010/11 (Question 1). 90% (38 respondents) strongly supported the continuation of ring-fenced funding beyond 2010/11.

Many respondents highlighted that, although much progress had been made, skills development was not permanently embedded in most institutions and the loss of funding will seriously threaten the progress made.

'The Roberts Agenda is making a difference in universities, but is not permanently embedded in most institutions.'

Two of these respondents qualified their response by suggesting that eventually a staged timescale for any reduction of funding will provide incentive to embed. Three respondents disagreed with continued ring-fencing: two suggesting that the funding should be allocated through research council grants and doctoral training accounts.

If Roberts funding is not ring-fenced then the majority (85%, 29 respondents) still wanted an identifiable payment of some sort (Question 2). The main reasons highlighted being the importance of identifying and tracking the funds and using the funds strategically.

'...separate and identifiable subvention to the institution so that it can be identified and tracked.'

There was less agreement as to the best way to distribute the funding if ring-fencing ceased. Six respondents (18%) suggested using grants and studentships, but clearly identifying the amount for skills development. Two respondents (6%) did not want this to come to studentships. 15% (five respondents) suggested using the funding councils' QR stream for distributing Roberts funds, but identifying a specific stream for skills development.

The question of whether funding (assuming a finite pot) should continue to be attached to research council-funded researchers or allocated more generally produced a roughly equal division of responses (Question 3).

Most respondents (95%) identified the importance of providing skills development to all researchers. Of the 37 respondents, 43% (16 respondents) recommended maintaining the current system of using research council funded numbers, but retaining the ability to use the funding for the benefit for all researchers.

'We can see the arguments both in favour of maintaining the link to Research Council funded numbers (indication of research and research training excellence) and in broadening the allocation to cover more PhD researchers and research staff (e.g. using HESA numbers). Broadening the allocation may help to address

⁶ RCUK career development and transferable skills training www.rcuk.ac.uk/rescareer/rcdu/training.htm

perceived inequalities between the sciences and humanities, and between full time/part-time researchers, as well as providing a clear message that the Roberts agenda is relevant to, and an important and distinctive element of, all UK PhDs.'

The remaining 57% (21 respondents) recommended allocating the funding more widely, eight responses coming from Russell Group or 94 Group institutions. Of those supporting wider allocation of funding, eight respondents suggested using HESA-eligible researchers, half of which came from Russell Group or 94 Group institutions.

The allocation of Roberts Money to institutions separately identifies the funds for postgraduate researchers and research staff. From the RCUK annual summary of Roberts' reporting it appears that more progress has been made on supporting postgraduate researchers than research staff; institutions acknowledging the greater challenge of supporting the career development of research staff.

When asked whether there should be any differentiation between funding and/or funding mechanisms for postgraduate researchers and research staff (Question 4) 74% (28 respondents) gave a strong message not to change the current system of the funding formulae for postgraduate researchers and research staff. Interestingly, some respondents see the current funding mechanism as a single pot, while others clearly see the postgraduate researchers and research staff funding as separate streams. These views are strongly influenced by institutional structures for supporting researchers.

'The funding streams should remain separate but reporting systems should be sufficiently flexible to allow institutions to develop – and report on – joint provision where appropriate.'

The balance of ten respondents (26%) suggested the funding mechanisms should be changed, but there was no consistency as to the best way to do this: ranging from more funding for postgraduate researchers to more funding for research staff.

Overall, there was overwhelming support for the continuation of ring-fenced Roberts funding and the importance of having a clearly identified payment to institutions so as to ensure continued focus on fully embedding the Roberts agenda. Institutions have appreciated, and wish to see continue, the existing flexibility to use the funding to support all researchers. Just over half proposed allocating the funding on the basis of total researchers.

Reporting on the implementation of the Concordat (Q5-Q6)

The value of the annual Roberts reporting in raising the profile of the Roberts agenda within institutions, ensuring effective use of Roberts funds and encouraging the sharing of practice has been well recognised. The Policy Forum recommended that it would be useful to have a similar reporting mechanism for the implementation of the Concordat principles. One suggestion was to bring together

Roberts and the Concordat into a single reporting mechanism. Others highlighted that the scope of the Concordat extended beyond the scope of the Roberts agenda, for example incorporating human resources issues.

When asked whether institutions should be required to report on the implementation of the Concordat (Question 5), the majority (95%, 36 respondents) supported the recommendation of reporting on progress in implementing the principles of the Concordat. However, there were some concerns about what form the process may take, highlighting that it needed to 'light touch', but not mechanistic and avoid duplication with other processes, particularly existing legal requirements on institutions.

'It is vital to ensure implementation of the Concordat principles that there is a robust reporting mechanism which includes a clear statement of the requirements and the consequences of not having done this.'

Two respondents did not support a reporting process, highlighting the difficulty of having a useful process and suggesting this will be embedded by funders in the requirements for grant applications.

There was less agreement on the value of a single submission on the implementation of the Roberts recommendations and the Concordat (Question 6). There was recognition of the links between the Roberts agenda and the Concordat, but also acknowledgement of their distinctiveness.

24 of 41 respondents (59%) clearly agreed that a single submission would be useful.

A further four respondents (10%) supported the combination of Roberts and Concordat reporting, but raised some concerns.

13 respondents did not agree with the suggestion that the Roberts and Concordat reporting should be combined, highlighting the elements of the Concordat not covered by the Roberts agenda, the separation of responsibilities in HEIs and the timeliness of doing this.

Institutions recognise the importance of the Concordat and almost all respondents supported reporting on progress in implementing the principles, although many requested a proportionate process. There was less consensus on whether Concordat reporting should be combined with Roberts reporting requirements, respondents highlighting both the overlap and distinctiveness of the two agendas.

2009 Roberts reporting requirements

The responses to the questions above on drawing together the Roberts and Concordat reporting, echoed the responses to a complementary consultation by RCUK on proposed changes to the 2009 Roberts reporting mechanisms. This was prompted by participants at the Policy Forum recognising that the context and implementation of the Roberts agenda has evolved. There was a general consensus at the event that it was timely to review

Overall results

monitoring arrangements, putting more emphasis on evaluation and impact and acknowledging the links between the Roberts agenda and the Concordat.

The proposal from RCUK highlighted proposed changes to the 2009 reporting mechanisms⁷. These include approaches for achieving sustainability, enabling the implementation of the relevant Concordat principles and the evaluation of impact, particularly on business awareness and innovation, public engagement and policy making.

Generally, respondents were receptive to this proposal, welcoming the emphasis on highlights and innovative practice. In terms of linkages to Concordat reporting several respondents suggested that it was too early to link with the Concordat implementation. There was concern, also expressed subsequently by the Rugby Team, that changes to the 2009 reporting should not be significant or involve additional data requirements. It was felt that HEIs should be given at least a year's notice to respond to major changes in the reporting requirements, particularly where this involved changes in the data collection or financial reporting.

Many respondents stressed the value of the reporting continuing to encourage the sharing of practice and collaboration.

Assessing impact and evidence building (Q7-Q9)

There is general recognition of the importance, and challenge, of building an evidence base of the impact of skills development. The Rugby Team Impact Framework⁸ (RTIF) provides a framework for building up a comprehensive record of the impact of the Roberts agenda and approaches to evaluation that will be of great value to the sector. Although the number of institutions using the RTIF to develop their evaluation processes is increasing, the Policy Forum questioned whether RCUK should give more positive encouragement to use the RTIF as part of the Roberts reporting requirements.

The Policy Forum also explored other ways to build this picture more systematically. One recommendation was to commission an external independent evaluation of Roberts and how it is embedded within the sector. It was also recognised that there is a need to raise the profile of the achievements and successes of the Roberts agenda, both in the UK and abroad.

When asked whether there should be more robust encouragement from RCUK to encourage institutions to use the RTIF (Question 7) 15 respondents (38%) agreed. Views ranged from those that thought the RTIF was a useful and flexible tool, to others that recognised the potential to gather impact data.

Eight respondents (21%) expressed uncertainty about moving in this direction, concerned about the resource implications. Six respondents (15%) were against the RTIF being more prominent, raising concerns about it becoming mandatory and adding reporting burdens on institutions.

Ten respondents (26%) felt RCUK already has achieved an appropriate balance of encouragement, highlighting that institutions understand and are responding to the need to undertake evaluation.

'We agree that the sector as a whole needs a good robust evidence base. The Impact Framework is still in the early stages of development and remains an unsophisticated tool based on long-standing principles for evaluating staff development activity. It needs to be refined and tailored to the particular context and purpose before being adopted across the sector. Meanwhile we are considering our own review of the impact of Roberts activities and hope to partner with other institutions for this purpose. We do not think incentives are needed to encourage the sector to take evaluation seriously.'

Ideas on how to encourage use of the RTIF ranged from suggestions on its potential supporting role in the reporting process through to practical ideas on how to make the RTIF more accessible as a tool.

Several respondents commented that RCUK could be more explicit on the evidence that is needed to secure funding. Others suggested the Vitae database of practice could be used more extensively to post evaluation practice.

There were several practical suggestions on how to make the RTIF easier to use, suggesting a simplified version for those new to evaluation and practice sharing workshops.

There was acknowledgement of the importance of building an evidence base both for demonstrating impact and enhancing provision. The Rugby Team Impact Framework (RTIF) was seen as a useful tool for both these activities, and already being used by some institutions. However, there was a range of views on the value of making use of the RTIF a stronger requirement on institutions.

The Policy Forum recommended consideration of the potential value of an independent evaluation of progress in the Roberts agenda, suggesting it may be timely to review the Roberts agenda as a whole (Question 8). Mostly respondents supported this recommendation (28 respondents, 72%). However, eight of these respondents expressed reservations, expressing concern about the specification, diverting resources and transparency.

'An independent but well-informed external evaluation of the impact of Roberts funding and the Roberts agenda could be an extremely useful complement to institutional evaluation and impact assessment. An independent evaluator may be able to see strengths, weaknesses and impacts that are not so obvious to those working within the sector on this agenda.'

A significant proportion (28%) disagreed with an external evaluation, highlighting that internal evaluation would be more formative for institutions, it is too early to be effective and a diversion of money and resources.

⁷ Roberts monitoring requirements 2009 www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/researchcareers/monreq09.pdf

⁸ www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam

Despite these reservations, 27 respondents (90%) stated their HEI would be interested in participating, two fifths (11 respondents) stressing they would want to be involved in the development of the purpose and specification of the evaluation and depending on the time and effort involved.

There was less support for top-slicing the Roberts funds for the any evaluation (even though in practice this would be so small as to be indiscernible in institutional funding allocations). Of the 35 responses 14 respondents (40%) agreed with top-slicing funds. A further 13 respondents (37%) gave a qualified response and 8 respondents (23%) disagreed.

There was general recognition of the importance of promoting the achievements of the Roberts agenda to many audiences (Question 9). Respondents highlighted the importance of targeted dissemination to government and non-HE employers. Several specifically mentioned the importance of international promotion in the context of the reputation of the UK doctorate and the UK research base.

Respondents highlighted the need to be clear what are we are trying to promote.

Suggestions included:

- *increased effectiveness of researchers during their degree programmes*
- *improved employability or effectiveness on entering employability*
- *the special aptitudes and contributions of researchers* [‘Doctoral level skills’]
- *emphasising and demonstrating culture change in HE.*

Several respondents commented that the proposed external independent evaluation would underpin promoting the achievements of the Roberts agenda. Other ideas included a ‘five years of Roberts funding’ report using information from the annual Roberts reports, the Vitae database of practice and the THE Award submissions. Several respondents suggested a case-study approach would be the most beneficial.

A few respondents commented that any promotion of achievements wherever possible should link to research success. This echoed concerns expressed at previous Policy Fora about the potential disconnect between the Roberts agenda and the challenge of embedding researcher development within normal academic practice.

There was general recognition of the importance of promoting the achievements of the Roberts agenda to multiple stakeholders. The majority of respondents supported an external evaluation of the Roberts agenda. There was significant interest from institutions in participating if it went ahead, even from those that did not support an external evaluation. There was less support for top slicing Roberts funds to pay for the evaluation.

The language of high level skills

The Policy Forum acknowledged the level of jargon used by trainers and human resources specialists responsible for supporting the career development of researchers impacts on the ability to communicate with other stakeholders. For example recognising the challenge communicating in appropriate language to researchers and other academics and non-HE employers.

Participants also identified an important gap in terminology. The government uses the term ‘high level skills’ to encompass graduate level skills. There is no equivalent terminology for higher qualifications, such as masters or doctoral degrees. Respondents agreed with the importance of differentiating and promoting doctoral skills (Question 10), believing it is ‘...*fundamental to our success in promoting recognition of the value of PhD study and sows the seed for measuring impact.*’

They also recognised the difficulty of finding an appropriate word or phrase. Comments ranged from the suggestion that we only need better communication, through a range of terms already in use, to needing to create a new word.

Respondents suggested a range of alternative names (Appendix 1, Table 1). These included research/academic-related phrases, incorporating the word ‘professional’, and generic terms such as specialist, expert, enhanced, advanced and progressed. Four respondents built on graduate ‘high level’ skills by suggesting ‘very high level’, ‘highest level’ and ‘extremely high level’ skills.

Seven respondents suggested postgraduate level skills, but it was also highlighted that it may not be so useful to combine masters and doctoral levels within one term. Two respondents identified that we already have a term for doctoral level skills in various qualifications framework (NQF⁹, FHEQ¹⁰, EQF¹¹): ‘Level 8’.

Three respondents suggested that the plainest terms are doctorate level skills and masters level skills:

‘...we see no reason why language should be obscured with a jargon term that simply reduces understanding of the non-specialist.’

The importance of using appropriate language for different stakeholders and highlighting and differentiating ‘doctoral level skills’ was acknowledged, including suggestions for terminology.

⁹ The National Qualifications Framework www.qca.org.uk/qca_5967.aspx

¹⁰ The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/theq/EWNI/default.asp

¹¹ The European Qualifications Framework www.qca.org.uk/qca_19302.aspx



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Vitae

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

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

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

To achieve our vision we have four aims:

- championing the development and implementation of effective policy
- enhancing higher education provision through sharing practice and resources
- providing access to development opportunities and resources
- building an evidence base to support the researcher development agenda.

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

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