



## Vitae research staff conference

5 November 2009, London

[www.vitae.ac.uk/researchstaffconference](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchstaffconference)

## Conference report

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



**CRAC**



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

The single largest contribution to the implementation of the Concordat will be through the Vitae programme. Vitae champions the personal, professional and career development of researchers in the UK and its activities will support universities and research institutions to achieve the principles of the Concordat. Vitae has published a series of specific briefings for the range of higher education professionals involved in implementing the principles of the Concordat, these are available for downloading at [www.vitae.ac.uk/concordat](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/concordat)

One of the Vitae's aims is building an evidence base to support the researcher development agenda. As part of this aim, Vitae is working with the Concordat implementation Coordinator, the HE sector and other stakeholders to review progress in implementing the Concordat and taking forward the benchmarking projects. Key to this is the publication 'Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2009: analysis of aggregated UK results' which is available for downloading at [www.vitae.ac.uk/cros](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/cros)

[www.researchconcordat.ac.uk](http://www.researchconcordat.ac.uk)

# Conference report

5 November 2009, Novotel London St Pancras Hotel

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## Introduction

This one-day national conference explored some of the key issues faced by research staff in the current climate and explored how researchers can make their voice heard more effectively within institutions and by national policymakers. The last few years have seen an increasing focus on the professional and career development of researchers. These developments have been consolidated in the [Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers](#), which was launched in 2008 to increase the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK and to improve the quantity, quality and impact of research for the benefit of UK society and the economy.

The conference focused on the following themes:

- developing researcher communities
- how can researchers get their voice heard around national policy issues?
- the changing research environment
- careers and professional development.

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 (REF). Many institutional research staff societies and associations and University and College Union (UCU) members were represented in this emerging national network.

Dr. David Proctor, of Dundee, articulated a clear call from research staff to research staff to build a collective voice for research staff. 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](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rsblog)).

The day included opportunities to network with other researchers and policy makers.

This report provides summaries of the plenary sessions and workshops. Presenters' slides and photographs of the event can also be accessed at [www.vitae.ac.uk/researchstaffconference](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchstaffconference).

# Plenary presentations

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**Plenary presentations**, chaired by Dr Patrick Hadoke, Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh

## Introduction and welcome

**Dr Tennie Videler**, Programme Manager: Researcher Networks, Vitae

Tennie Videler welcomed participants and outlined how research staff have gained a higher profile in recent years through the report by Sir Gareth Roberts '[Set for success](#)', the Concordat and the launch of Vitae. Since 2008 Vitae has played a pivotal role in enhancing the provision of training for research staff in institutions including launching the 'Broadening horizons: career management for researchers' and 'How to be an effective researcher for research staff' programmes. It has also provided the following directly for research staff: [a dedicated part of the Vitae website](#), [events](#), such as 'Advancing in academia' and 'Leadership in action', [a stakeholder briefing on how research staff can engage in implementing the Concordat](#) principles and a research staff blog, as well as materials offering practical information about their personal, professional and career development.

## Engaging researchers in policy

**Dr Brian Iddon**, MP for Bolton South East

Brian Iddon gave an insight into his own career history, showing the benefits he had gained from taking (and making) opportunities beyond his academic base. He then demystified some of the key roles and organisations that make up 'science in government'.

## A career spanning research, public engagement and politics

Following good science teaching at school and technical college (plus a good chemistry set) Brian read chemistry at the University of Hull, where he also completed a doctorate. He then became the University of Durham's first senior demonstrator in organic chemistry before moving to the University of Salford, where he remained for three decades as a lecturer, senior lecturer and reader. In this period he became involved in local politics, was elected to Bolton Council and became Chairman of its housing committee for ten years. In parallel, Brian developed a public presentation 'The Magic of Chemistry' which has been seen throughout the UK, on TV and internationally. As a result of enjoying his contribution to local government, Brian moved into national politics. In 1997 he stood for Parliament as a Labour candidate and has been re-elected twice since. Brian urged participants to be prepared to do something different: 'have more than one arrow to fire for the rest of your life'.

## Science in government

Brian explained the role of the **Minister for Science and Innovation**, Lord Drayson, whose appointment to Cabinet comes after a period where science and technology was not represented at cabinet level.

The **Council for Science and Technology** advises the Prime Minister on strategic issues and takes a medium to long term view.

The **Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA)** reports to the Prime Minister and Cabinet and works with all Government departments. He is supported by the Government Office for Science (GO-Science). GO-Science's two main management units are Science in Government and Foresight.

The **Science and Technology Committee** is the cross-party select committee of which Brian Iddon is a member, that exists to ensure that Government policy and decision-making are based on good scientific and engineering advice and evidence. As a result of its work the representation of science in parliament has been strengthened.

The **Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology** (POST) exists to support MPs and peers in their decision-making. POST issues note briefings on topical issues and longer research reports.

The **Parliamentary and Scientific Committee** aims to provide a permanent liaison between Parliament, scientific bodies, science-based industry and the academic world. It has no formal advisory function to Government.

Brian encouraged all participants to get in touch with their **members of Parliament** to discuss issues relating to their research and to their experience of being researchers in UK higher education.

## UK-wide and institutional initiatives for the career development of researchers

**Dr Sara Williams**, Chair, Vitae Research Staff Development Advisory Group and Training and Development Manager, Cardiff University

Sara Williams outlined the developments that are reshaping the landscape for the career development of researchers. She discussed what these developments mean for higher education institutions and opportunities for research staff to get involved.

## UK developments

Key features of the researcher development landscape are:

- **RAE/REF**: The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was designed to measure the quality of research in UK higher education institutions but, in practice, it helped to shape their research strategies too. The new Research Excellence Framework (REF) will undoubtedly have the same effect. It is therefore vital for researchers to take the opportunity to make their views known during the current consultation period, particularly in relation to how REF will measure the research environment and support for research careers
- **National Framework Agreement<sup>1</sup>** on pay structures – researchers need to familiarise themselves with how it is implemented at local level

<sup>1</sup> 'The Framework Agreement for the modernisation of pay structures' (2004) between employers and HE trade unions led to higher education salary arrangements undergoing major change. Individual universities have been required to implement new pay and grading arrangements mapped to a national single pay spine, effective from no later than 1 August 2006. Prior to 2004 there were a number of different pay grading structures within UK HE.

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- **Fixed-term contract legislation**<sup>2</sup> – set a framework on when it is legal to use fixed-term contracts and how they should be managed which, amongst other things, led to the dropping of the term ‘contract researcher’ at many universities
- **Dual support system/full economic cost (FEC)** – in broad terms, research funding is split between block grants for infrastructure costs (from UK funding councils) and project grants (research councils and other bodies). Applications to research councils should now reflect full economic costs, which has potential to change the way research staff are employed on projects
- **Concordat (2008)**<sup>3</sup> – implementation and review is an integral part of the Concordat, forming one of its seven principles
- **Vitae** – funded by RCUK, has championed research staff career development since 2008, building on the work of the UK Higher Education Researcher Development Group (UKHERD)
- **Careers in Research Online Survey**<sup>4</sup> – yields important information on the views of research staff which can be used to press for change
- **Roberts agenda** – ring-fenced funding for researcher development activities has seen a huge growth in local opportunities for research staff, including bespoke guidance<sup>5</sup> in some institutions
- **Researcher development framework** – a national researcher development framework for researchers in higher education has been drafted: research staff contribution to developing the framework is a high priority<sup>6</sup>

There are numerous players in the landscape: UK Government and devolved administrations, research funding bodies, employer bodies and trade unions ([Universities UK](#), [UCEA](#), [UCU](#)<sup>7</sup>), special interest bodies such as the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services and the National Research Staff Association. The backdrop of the economic downturn, whose effects are already being seen in universities, and government policy uncertainty in election year 2010, are, of course, of great significance.

## Implications for HEIs

Higher education institutions are responding to these influences in very varied ways; in their:

- research strategies, shaped by the RAE/REF
- use of fixed-term and open-ended employment contracts
- implementation of the Concordat (which will be monitored).

Key issues for the implementation of the Concordat are:

- continuity of employment for researchers
- sustainable training and career development – currently funded in many institutions by Roberts allocations (currently committed until 2011)
- support from and of research managers
- research staff involvement.

<sup>2</sup> See workshop ‘Employment Contracts – what’s going on?’, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> See workshop ‘How research staff can play an active role in the Concordat implementation’, p.8.

<sup>4</sup> See workshop ‘How to use the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) data’, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> See workshop ‘Researcher careers – statistics and resources to help you plan’, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> See workshop ‘Consultation on the development of the Researcher Development Framework’, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> See workshop ‘Building successful research staff networks’, p.7.

## Getting involved

How can research staff improve their personal situation and that of HE researchers as a whole? Some ideas for activity at institutional level are:

- find a strategic ‘champion’, for example your PVC research or someone in staff development
- feed in to institutional benchmarking activity: HEIs are required to undertake gap analyses as part of reporting their Concordat strategy
- take part in training and development opportunities. If provision does not offer what you want, suggest new ideas. It is a case of ‘use it or lose it’, so don’t put this off!
- take opportunities for giving feedback: respond to CROS if your university takes part; attend conferences and other fora; join research staff networks or help start a new one.

## Researchers: a vision for national engagement

**Dr David Proctor**, Chair and Divisional Representative, College of Life Sciences Postdoc Association

David Proctor argued that research staff networks have a vital role in developing researcher careers and identified opportunities for involvement with networks at all levels – local, national and international, both face-to-face and online. He described his experience of setting up and running a network at the University of Dundee, and drew out some lessons learned. Finally, he identified priorities that the Concordat signatories should address to achieve effective implementation.

## Why a collective voice is needed

Researchers come from different disciplines and institutions, but they have similar aspirations. Many aspire to a research career in academia. We need training for this and other possible careers: collectively we can better identify the training and development we need and get involved with organisations such as Vitae to help us achieve those aspirations.

## Network opportunities

Internationally, there are single-country focused research staff organisations such as [NPA](#) in the US and [CAPS](#) in Canada. The [UK’s National Research Staff Association](#) looked to such models when it started in 2006. Others are international networks, for example the [World Association of Young Scientists](#) and [Eurodoc](#). Online networks may have a broad focus and international reach, such as [ResearchGATE](#); be aimed at UK-based research staff, like Vitae; or have a special focus, for example [LabLit.com](#)

Institution-based research staff networks exist throughout the UK. This conference gives the opportunity to discover the communities of researchers that already exist, which ones are effective in engaging researchers in career development, and why.

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## Example: University of Dundee

The university is structured as four colleges, two of which have research staff networks. The [College of Life Sciences Postdoc Association](#) (CLSPA) has strong links to other organisations that support research staff career development. For example, the Association meets regularly with [Generic Skills Dundee](#) to discuss research staff training issues.

There are particular problems associated with maintaining research staff networks because high staff turnover among research staff is commonplace. When core members leave, knowledge is often lost. CLSPA has dealt with this by creating an association structure that separates knowledge retention from individual committee members and creates a reservoir of knowledge among partner organisations. The association has developed strong links to other university committees, has faculty members that serve as CLSPA advisers, and ensures that partners (such as Generic Skills Dundee) are integral to its own committee structure. Such partners also help provide continuity when research staff leave. Effective communication is supported by a well-maintained website, which records the association's history, activities, examples of practice, and how business is conducted.

## Successful Concordat implementation

An obstacle to successful Concordat implementation is lack of engagement by researchers and research managers/employers. To make a difference research staff need to engage. One solution is to structure research associations in a simple fashion and ensure associations represent the interests of researchers. Well-organised local research associations can play a major part in implementing Principle 5 of the Concordat: 'Individual researchers share the responsibility for and need to pro-actively engage in their own personal and career development, and lifelong learning'.

Facilitating interactions among researchers and encouraging involvement in career development activity and resources, offered by Vitae and other organisations, are prime methods of encouraging researchers to be pro-active in this way.

Principle 5.5 states that 'research managers and employers [have] a responsibility to provide honest advice and appropriate structures, and to equip researchers with the tools to manage their own careers'. The issue here is a perceived lack of support for researcher career development among principal investigators, often because there is a lack of perceived incentive to do so. Solutions could include: implement routine monitoring and evaluation (Principle 5.6); create a mentoring system to support researchers; provide leadership and management training at all levels. These are systemic issues that require systemic tools and concerted action by Concordat signatories; research staff networks have an important role to play in keeping up the pressure for change.

## Questions and answers panel session

### Participant questions focused on the challenges of implementing the Concordat:

- *in the current economic climate, won't all the progress of the last few years be reversed, despite the framework of support for research staff?*
- *how can the Concordat be implemented effectively while research councils and universities continue to 'play ping pong': each passing the buck as to how proper career structures might be created and funded?*

### Speakers made the following points in response:

- there is no doubt that there are and will be severe economic pressures on universities. Equally, the UK government (irrespective of the result of the general election) will continue the policy that the 'knowledge economy' is key to the UK's international competitiveness and hence recovery. Universities therefore have to show clearly the link between building research capacity and strengthening the knowledge economy
- there are no easy answers to the question of how to influence individual universities: by law they are autonomous institutions. Do not forget, however, the role your local MP can play in advancing your cause
- lack of 'ownership' for researcher careers has been as much a problem within universities as between universities and funders. The Concordat has been very useful in giving a common focus and 'getting people in the same room'. Research and human resource departments are starting to communicate better
- Vitae has produced a series of Concordat implementation briefing notes for stakeholders. One will be produced for research funders in the near future. Notes for different groups of staff in universities have already been published
- universities vary considerably in their policy and practice towards research staff, but in all institutions a well-organised research staff network can make a big difference to keep focus on the researcher development agenda.

“

*It has opened my eyes to many things and met my objectives*

”

# Workshop outcomes

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## Workshops: developing researcher communities

### A1: Building successful research staff networks

**Ronnie Kershaw**, University College Union (UCU)

**David Abbott**, University of Bristol Research Staff Representative

Chair: Dr Jo Rees, PdoC, University of Cambridge

#### Outline

This workshop explored different approaches adopted by successful research staff networks. David Abbott talked about the Bristol research staff representation model. UCU's presentation drew out some lessons from work to date on a major project to recruit, organise and campaign on behalf of research staff in UK higher education. Participants then compared experiences of local university research staff networks. This ranged from being unaware of any local networks to participation in networks with well-funded facilities and initiatives. The workshop then developed recommendations and next steps for a) building successful institutional and local networks able to influence both policy and practice and b) building the Vitae national network for research staff.

#### Recommendations

To Vitae:

- communicate information about existing staff networks to a) help foster links between current networks and b) assist the development of new ones by providing starting points. To do this Vitae should log information from all universities in a central resource.

To research staff networks:

- ensure that feedback on research staff needs is given to all relevant parties – including PIs.

To institutions:

- make induction compulsory for all new research staff and include details of the facilities, resources and support structures provided for and available to them
- ensure that contracts of employment are transparent and that provision is made for ensuring that research staff understand them, in particular contract terminology and arrangements for redundancy and redeployment
- consider how Roberts funding may be used to support research staff network development; explore the funded models that already exist, such as at Bristol.

To research staff:

- engage with local research staff networks, institutional support for personal and career development (eg staff development) and support bodies such as UCU and Vitae.

To institutions, RCUK and Vitae:

- seek research staff views and input into decisions on the allocation of Roberts funding, at institutional and national level.

### B1: Online researcher communities – who, what and why?

**Dr Emma Gillaspay**, Vitae North West Hub Manager, University of Manchester

**Dr Elizabeth Dodson**, Senior Researcher, Loughborough University

Chair: Dr Rebecca Cato, University of Lancaster

#### Outline

Researchers share many common issues across disciplines and institutions. With the growth of technology to enhance communication and the development of online communities comes the opportunity to connect more easily with other researchers. This session explored how researchers can use the digital world to develop their reputation, advance research and share experiences. It discussed:

- who is using online communities to their benefit
- what online communities can be useful for
- why researchers are using online communities to share experiences, raise issues and learn from peers
- the importance of networking, both nationally and internationally, and within and outside of academia.

There was particular focus on:

- developing a digital identity in the global marketplace
- the potential for development and use of online communities for research staff
- the characteristics of the ideal online community(ies) for research.

Participants identified a number of motivations for using online communities, principally for; sharing, advice, support, information, and to fight isolation. They considered that online communities should address a wide range of issues, including: isolation; gap in support (between postgraduate researchers and academic staff); job security; lack of defined career path; independence from supervisor (publications and funding); status and recognition; teaching load; poor pay.

#### Recommendations

To Vitae:

- scope setting up an online community for researchers. Any future decision whether to launch a new online community should be based on an investigation into what already exists. This would avoid 'reinventing the wheel', inform about successful models (eg mumsnet, Academia.edu), and identify weaknesses of and gaps in provision for researchers.
- an online community should be accessible, easy to use, with clearly stated intentions clear instructions/demonstrations. It should also be inclusive and flexible
- a researcher online community should cater for all levels: new to very established researchers; multi-disciplinary; across all universities; worldwide (but searchable). This would enable and encourage long-term use by researchers.

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## Workshops: how can researchers get their voice heard around national policy issues?

### A2: How to use the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) data

**Dr Jane Wellens**, Head of Researcher Development, University of Nottingham

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

Chair: Dr Anne Alexander, CRASSH, University of Cambridge

#### Outline

The Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) is a national initiative to gather the views of research staff in UK higher education institutions about their experiences of and attitudes to employment, as well as their career aspirations and career development. CROS was relaunched in 2009, attracting a record number of participating HEIs (51) and responses from researchers (almost 6,000).

This workshop presented an overview of [the aggregated UK results](#) (key findings and themes) and matched it against expectation and experiences of participants. The workshop:

- raised awareness of the availability of national/local data
- explored how institutions use the data
- stimulated a discussion on what factors may influence different responses
- discussed opportunities for research staff to get involved.

#### Recommendations

To research staff networks and individual researchers:

- read the national CROS 2009 report, and if available, institutional analysis. Consider the implications on a personal and institutional level: 'what does it mean and what can I do?'
- help ensure that your institution participates in future CROS surveys
- complete the survey when your institution participates in future surveys and encourage others to do so.

### B2: How research staff can play an active role in the Concordat implementation

**Thomas Papworth**, Research Concordat Implementation Coordinator, Universities UK

**Dr Dylan Sweetman**, Lecturer in Molecular Embryology, University of Nottingham

Chair: Dr Matthew Cliff, University of Sheffield

#### Outline

The Concordat provides a single, unambiguous statement of the expectations and responsibilities researchers, their managers, employers and funders have towards ensuring that research staff receive the career development that they need. Researchers have responsibilities, but they are also key to persuading their employers to prioritise and resource the career development of research staff. The aim of this workshop was to highlight the Concordat, outline some lessons for successful implementation and encourage researchers to engage with the agenda.

Following a brief outline of the Concordat, the workshop heard about an institutional case study: introducing a 'University Code for Research Staff' to the University of East Anglia. Participants were then invited to discuss experiences of the Concordat and practical ideas for implementation.

#### Recommendations

To research staff:

- become familiar with the Concordat and encourage others to do the same.
- network, use websites (Vitae, research staff societies) and share knowledge
- champion research staff issues. This need not be overly time consuming; much can be achieved in two to three hours a month.

To the Research Concordat Coordinator:

- give full and timely feedback on the progress of Concordat implementation, starting with the results of the benchmarking projects (eg the survey of HE implementation strategies).

“

*I just wanted to say thanks for organising the meeting yesterday. Certainly I enjoyed it and found it productive and I'm sure others did as well*

”

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## Workshops: careers and professional development

### A3: Consultation on the development of the Researcher development framework

**Ellen Pearce**, Director, Vitae

**Dr Sara Williams**, Training and Development Manager, Cardiff University

Chair: Dr Louise Horsfall, University of Leeds

#### Outline

This workshop described how the new [national Researcher development framework](#) for researchers in higher education has evolved; its purpose, scope, and how it has been developed. The guiding principles underpinning the development of the framework and the techniques used to identify its structure and content were explained. Participants then explored the draft framework, using example descriptors to illustrate how researchers progress through levels of proficiency. They gave feedback on the draft framework and descriptors, the appropriateness of the new national framework and its possible uses.

#### Recommendations

To institutions:

- explore links between the Researcher development framework and local processes for pay, funding and progression.

To Vitae:

- consider developing the Researcher development framework as a tool, including online resources to support researchers to move through the different phases of the framework
- consider how the framework can reflect the 'messy reality' of the research environment and the role of the researcher – rather than the ideal career – to better enable researchers to deal with imperfection
- encourage further research staff input into the development of the Researcher development framework. In view of time commitment difficulties, consider gaining such input 'on the back of' other events.

To research staff:

- recognise that there will be different ways of using the framework, including on your own (eg personal reflection, self diagnosis and planning), with your manager (eg review) and other settings (eg as a development exercise).

### B3: Researchers' careers – statistics and resources to help you plan

**Dr Tennie Videler**, Vitae Programme Manager: Researchers

**Dr Anne Forde**, Careers Adviser for Life Science Postdocs, Cambridge University Careers Service

Chair: Dr Deborah Holliday, University of Leeds

#### Outline

Researchers have a multitude of skills that they can use in a wide variety of careers. However, sometimes they lack information on their options and exposure to former researchers who have had successful careers outside academia. This workshop provided researchers with some useful statistics, exploration tools and career resources that are available to them to make informed choices. It covered:

- some highlights from first employment destination statistics of doctoral graduates from Vitae's 'What do researchers do?' publication and other trends for researchers' employment destinations
- other careers resources that are available to researchers
- several interactive exercises to explore career motivations and experiences.

#### Recommendations

To research staff:

The exercises used were designed to encourage 'out of the box' thinking about where participants might like their career to go:

- spend time thinking about your skills and interests. If self-assessment is difficult, ask your colleagues for feedback
- research your next career step: it may not be what you are doing now – keep your options open
- seek out local and online careers advice. Universities increasingly have careers advisers dedicated to research staff. Online resources such as Prospects can also be useful
- talk to people, ie network – the more people you talk to about your interests, the more likely opportunities are to come your way.

“

*I really enjoyed the conference and was pleased to help with the workshop*

”

# Workshop outcomes

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## Workshops: the changing research environment

### [A4: What the REF will mean for research staff](#)

**Paul Hubbard**, Head of Research Policy, Higher Education Funding Council for England ([HEFCE](#))

Chair: Dr Mike Chopra-Grant, London Metropolitan University

#### Outline

The [2008 Research Assessment Exercise](#) (RAE) will have been the last of its kind as it will be replaced by the [Research Excellence Framework](#) (REF). This session gave a brief overview of the RAE and the reason it is being changed to REF, followed by an overview of the current consultation on the REF. It then explored the role research staff can play in the assessment, giving participants the opportunity to input into the HEFCE consultation on the REF. Participants received clarification of some key issues in the REF: impact; research consultation/critical mass; equality and diversity. The relationship of the REF to government policy developments, notably the recently published [Higher Ambitions, Education Framework](#), was briefly considered.

Participants were invited also to become part of a group of research staff who will input to the Vitae response to the consultation and several volunteered.

#### Recommendations

To HEFCE:

- Paul Hubbard took away suggestions from participants regarding the REF, for example, that assessment of the research environment include comparative data about the gender/ ethnic profile, and grading of staff included in submissions and similar data for staff as a whole.

To research staff:

- contribute your views to the REF consultation, using channels such as Vitae's response.

“

*I really enjoyed it and feel quite fired up again about the whole thing. I have arranged to do a short presentation on the conference to the research staff group here*

”

### [B4: Employment contracts – what's going on?!](#)

**Dr Liz Oliver**, Research Fellow, University of Liverpool  
Chair: Dr Nicola Woodward, Institute of Food research

#### Outline

In 2002 a piece of legislation regulating the use of fixed-term employment was introduced. This has caused quite a stir within universities, particularly in relation to the employment of researchers whose posts are funded by external short-term projects or grants. A textbook on higher education law states, 'the law has now dealt with a long-standing scandal particularly felt in higher education: the use of fixed- or limited-term contracts on a continuous basis to preserve management flexibility'. But has it? The landscape is certainly changing and fewer fixed-term contracts are used to employ researchers. What has changed and how should the sector tackle the remaining issues?

Liz has been working on a Vitae funded study designed to work out how universities have responded to the legislation on fixed-term employment and what that means for the employment of researchers.

This session covered:

- a brief overview of the law on fixed-term contracts
- research findings on types of university policy responses to fixed-term employment (procedures/policy in institutions and the nature of various approaches)
- discussion – where does your institution/experience fit in? What are the challenges in this area? How can research staff influence institutions' policy relating to employment?

#### Recommendations

To institutions:

- examine how short-term contracts affect output. A far-sighted approach might take into account factors such as: loss of key skills; time already invested in recruitment and training; risk of losing staff before end of contract
- much of the policy development within HEIs has been around developing better systems for keeping track of researchers within universities, monitoring the funding situation and ensuring that the proper processes and procedures are followed should funding run out. There will be a lot of information to share about practices and approaches in this area
- improve communication and transparency so that individuals are aware of their rights from the outset and are informed about institutional policies.

To all stakeholders:

- recognise that not all fixed-term contracts are 'bad', just as not all open-ended contracts are 'good'. We should look beyond these labels and assess the quality of research posts thinking about how they fit in with the needs of departments and teams as well as researchers.

# Key conference outcomes and next steps

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## Feedback from workshops and action planning

Led by **Dr Patrick Hadoke** and **Dr Tennie Videler**

Presenters from each workshop reported the outcomes and recommendations shown above. Patrick Hadoke then invited participant feedback. Comments related to:

- how researchers view principal Investigators – are we in danger of making PIs 'The Other', forgetting that PIs were maybe once research staff and some research staff will become PIs in due course?
- the importance of choosing language carefully; 'research staff', not 'postdocs' as there are many research staff without doctorates
- the communication gaps in HEIs about the Concordat and Roberts career development provision. Negative gatekeepers may be one factor, another is information overload ('death by email')
- the importance of finding out about the 'big picture', in national and institutional policies.

### Ideas for action

Suggestions for follow-up action by conference participants were:

- make this conference part of raising awareness / 'nudging' in your institution – write to your head of human resources or PVC research and tell them what you have found interesting about the conference
- if you are not already aware of the policies of your institution that relate to your career development, find out

- find out about local training and development provision for research staff. RCUK/Vitae can help you find the right people to talk to
- participate in the REF and RDF consultations.

The programme closed with a short individual reflection and action planning session.

Examples of the individual actions committed to were:

- talk to other researchers about the conference
- work with others to reinvigorate the NRSA online
- bring up that researcher committees/consultations occur elsewhere and see if there are any plans at my institution
- find out what the university is doing to implement the Concordat
- write on the Research staff blog
- try to engage new researchers into understanding the benefits of CPD
- try to get researchers within different groups in the department talking to each other
- organise a response to REF through postdoc society/researcher group
- contact the careers service, think more broadly about career options, find out more about any post-doc/research forums
- will try to take more of an active role in engaging new research staff
- tell all the post docs about what Vitae does
- develop networks with other researchers.

A wine reception informal networking followed.

## After the event

The research staff conference on 5 November was just the start...

### Research staff blog

Many conversations were continued after the conference on the research staff blog, especially about [online communities](#) and several about the [REF proposals](#).

### UK research staff association (UKRSA), supported by Vitae

About a dozen participants volunteered to be part of this group, which first met in January. It has elected two co-chairs and is agreeing its terms of reference.

### Research Excellence Framework consultation

Several participants informed the Vitae response to the REF consultation with thoughtful input. There was much debate on the research staff blog as well, especially about the proposals for impact in the new REF.

### Researcher development framework consultation

Several participants indicated they would be responding to Vitae's call for researchers input into the development of the new Researcher development framework.



Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK,(RCUK), 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:

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

For further information about the range of Vitae activities go to [www.vitae.ac.uk](http://www.vitae.ac.uk) or contact [website@vitae.ac.uk](mailto:website@vitae.ac.uk)

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