

**Working with PhD graduates and
former research staff to support career
development for researchers.**

Sharon Gordon
Robin Bowden
Skills Development Advisers

Career Tracking Project



Track the career paths of PhD graduates and post-doctoral researchers employed at the university 2000-2007

Career Tracking Project



1. Use contact information collected by the Alumni Office
2. Access any information principal investigators (PIs)/supervisors have on the careers of researchers, who have been part of their research teams, and to use this information to locate current contact details of our former researchers
3. Send a career tracking questionnaire to former researchers
4. **Make the best use of any contact we have with former researchers**

Questions to consider:



- How can we identify former researchers?
- How can we contact former researchers?
- What can we ask of our former researchers?
- What can we do to ensure former researchers keep in touch?

Identifying former researchers



Actions:

- Employed a summer student (July-October 2007)
- Identified target group of 1231 PhD graduates and 362 post-doctoral researchers employed at the university 2000-2007
- Student interviewed 124 supervisors across the university who provided career details for 599 of our early career researchers 2000-2007 (159 post-docs and 492 PhD graduates, including 52 individuals counted in both categories)
- Using this information we sourced potential email addresses for 315 of these individuals via the web
- The Alumni Office provided email addresses for a further 310 former PhD students.

Contacting former researchers



Career Tracking Questionnaires:

- Email survey to Alumni mailing list - 22% return rate - 59 career histories
- Online survey for the 315 individuals for whom we found contact details in the public domain - 54% return rate – 130 career profiles

- What can we ask of our former researchers?

We asked former researchers about:



- **Skills Training** - at University of Aberdeen; since leaving; and what would have been useful with hindsight?
- **Current Job** - title; employer; main responsibilities; how long?
- **Previous Jobs** - title; employer; main responsibilities; how long?
- **Agreement to be involved** – career case study on the web; potential contacts and mentors for researchers?

- How can we get former researchers involved?

Benefits of engaging former researchers:



- Maintaining a link
- Sharing experiences with current researchers
- Broadening career aspirations
- External endorsement of skills training
- Career case studies
- Report success stories – good for recruitment
- Input into researcher development programmes
- Broadening contacts network and links with employers
- Mentorship
- Evaluation of impact of skills training

How can we ensure former researchers keep in touch?

Workshop Outcomes (1)



1. Acknowledgement that identifying/tracking/engagement with former researchers is time and resource intensive.
2. Be clear from the outset what you want to achieve by engaging former researchers.
3. We need to provide more than metrics on career destinations.
4. There are a growing number of career management initiatives/resources emerging or in development for researchers eg:
 - Beyond the PhD - University of Reading
 - VideoTips – University of Aberdeen and University of St Andrews
 - Career case studies
 - University databases of former researchers

Could these be developed into UK initiatives/resources?
– eg through the Hubs?

Workshop Outcomes (2)



5. Areas where former researchers can specifically help include:
 - Input to skills programmes
 - Mentoring/shadowing
 - Link with employers and possibly as part of a panel of employers
 - As visiting trainers / share experience / PhD examiners in some cases
6. We need new ways to encourage current/future researchers to engage with and make the best use of the developing career management resources.
7. Exit Interviews with a skills development/career management focus were thought to be a good way of encouraging researchers to provide further contact details.
8. Maintaining contact is difficult – encouraging academics to get their researchers to keep in touch with them would help on lots of levels eg. instant list of contacts for current researchers in same field; improve academic staff perception of jobs out with academic research; help broaden career aspirations of current researchers.