

Event summary - Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) Practice sharing



Last month, Vitae members came together online to learn more about the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) and to share practice on engaging research populations with surveys. With the CEDARS benchmarking window set to open on 1 March, it was a timely opportunity to reflect on how CEDARS can support institutional strategies.

The event, chaired by Rachel Cox (Head of Membership and Engagement, Vitae), started with an overview of aggregate CEDARS 2021 results by Dr Janet Metcalfe (Principal, Vitae). CEDARS 2021 data covered 12,594 responses across 48 institutions, and provided insights into researcher experiences of environment and culture, employment, and professional and career development across the sector.

This year sees CEDARS move onto a new Online Surveys Platform so invited Darren Colquhoun (Client Support, Jisc) to provide information on the new platform and to answer any questions. Anyone who required additional support in setting up the survey on the platform was encouraged to email Darren at help@jisc.ac.uk.

Following the presentations, we turned to community practice sharing, asking participants to share their experiences of setting up the survey, strategies for engaging researchers, top tips, and pitfalls to avoid. These opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and sharing of best practice are what we value within our Vitae member community and this session did not disappoint.

These discussions can be summarised as follows:

1. Developing the survey

- Involve target audiences in the survey development. This might include running a focus group to develop the institution-specific questions
- Think about what extra institution-specific questions will be helpful for your Researcher Development Concordat reporting and if you are working on research culture
- Avoid adding too many additional questions on the institution-specific page – CEDARS is already a relatively long survey
- Carefully consider if you intend to add departments or research area-specific questions to the institutional questions page. While this can be helpful in adding granularity to the data, it could identify respondents from small departments
- Make the text of the front page of the survey as impactful as possible for your institution

2. Engaging survey populations

- Build trust – make those connections with researchers to show what has changed or will change as a result of the survey
- Be open and transparent – share how long the survey will take to complete, consider research staff concerns about anonymity, and be honest about who will have access to raw data
- Considering flagging that there are ways of following up on issues raised (e.g. harassment) not through the survey but through formal routes (e.g. harassment reporting tools)

3. Sharing the survey

- Use a range of routes to share the survey, combining central and local promotion. This could include an email from the Vice-Chancellor or Pro-Vice Chancellor to target audiences, follow-up emails from a researcher development group, key messages for Heads of Schools/Deans to share in meetings, and use of PGR and research staff representatives
- Consider awareness-raising events. This could be a 'CEDARS roadshow' or visits to staff meetings to explain what CEDARS is, why it is important, and to suggest ways of talking about it
- Send progress updates to Heads of Schools/Deans to encourage healthy competition.

4. Encouraging uptake

- Consider incentives, such as a prize draw or (taking inspiration from the recent University College London campaign), plant a tree for every response
- Use 'what's in it for you' messaging: this is your opportunity to influence policy and if you want to have a voice you need to complete the survey. In other words, without the data we can't make your argument for you
- Describe CEDARS as a national survey, making it clear that we are asking questions so we can benchmark with the rest of the sector
- Carefully consider when the best time to run the survey is for your institution and your respondents

5. Making the most of your data

- Think about who leads on this in your institution. Much of this is about Human Resources processes, so it is important to have buy-in from your Human Resources department
- In addition to national comparisons and standard benchmark groups (e.g. Russell Group), it is possible to set up private benchmarking groups between a group of similar institutions. All will need to give permission for this
- Consider using researchers (paid) to support analysis, though it will be important here to ensure they are working with anonymised data sets.