

UK Research Staff Association



supported by Vitae

A Guide to Research Staff Associations

A Guide to Research Staff Associations

A Guide to Research Staff Associations – published by The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Ltd

A Guide to Research Staff Associations has been written by **Dr Robert Hardwick**, University of Leicester and UKRSA committee member.

Acknowledgements

UKRSA and Vitae would like to thank all those who responded to the surveys, participated in telephone interviews and contributed case studies. This project would not have been possible without their willingness to share their experiences, insights and expertise.

We would like to thank colleagues from UKRSA and Vitae for their contributions to the project. In particular:

Dr David Proctor, University of Dundee and Co-Chair of UKRSA

Philippa Storer, Vitae

Dr Chris Thomson, University of Hull and Co-Chair of UKRSA

Dr Tennie Videler, Vitae

Dr Daniel Weekes, Kings College London and UKRSA committee member

The UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA), supported by Vitae, provides a collective voice for research staff in the UK, working with local research staff associations and informing policy. It continues and extends the work of the National Research Staff Association. Vitae provides resources, courses and events for research staff, including a research staff blog and annual research staff conference. Vitae works closely with the UKRSA to deliver projects, and provides administrative support and continuity.

ISBN: 987-1-906774-17-2

Material from this document may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes providing 'A Guide to Research Staff Associations' is acknowledged. If material is required for commercial use, please contact Vitae in the first instance.

Vitae®, © 2010 The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited and the UKRSA

Contents

Introduction	2
Why set up a Research Staff Association?	3
Practical considerations	4
Establishing a Research Staff Association	4
Sustaining a Research Staff Association	6
RSA models and case studies	7
RSA model: faculty and departmental level	7
Case study 1: Little France Postdoctoral Society, University of Edinburgh	8
Case study 2: College of Life Sciences Postdoc Association, University of Dundee	10
Case study 3: Early Career Network, University of Leeds	12
Conclusions: Faculty and departmental RSAs	13
RSA model: Institutional and multi-institutional level	14
Case study 4: Research Staff Representatives Committee, University of Bristol	14
Case study 5: PdOC, University of Cambridge	16
Conclusions: Institutional and multi-institutional RSAs	17
Case study 6: UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA)	18
Concluding remarks	20

Introduction

A Guide to Research Staff Associations (RSAs) by the UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA) and Vitae is the first publication of its kind to set out viable models for Research Staff Associations. It explores the benefits that RSAs bring to their research staff constituents and the wider university community, the reasons why successful RSAs thrive, and the common challenges that RSAs face for their long-term sustainability. Most importantly, it shares practical tips.

The term 'research staff' describes a broad spectrum of higher education employees who actively engage in the delivery and direction of research projects, but who are not on tenured positions as academic staff. This definition encompasses research technicians and postdoctoral associates and fellows.

A research staff association (RSA) can be any group of research staff working together to represent the views and experiences of their constituents on a range of issues or organise social events. These can be related to any national or institutional policies which impact upon researchers in the workplace, or to other aspects of researcher welfare including the provision of training and support.

Our intention is for this guide to serve as a core resource for anybody wishing to set up or sustain an RSA, and to provide the evidence needed to sell the benefits of an RSA to both your host institution and your potential members. Importantly, its content has been informed and shaped by the committee members of successful RSAs and the institutional staff that support them.

Data was initially gathered from a pair of surveys that we issued to 55 RSAs over the summer of 2010 to capture the collective experiences and opinions of those who run RSAs. The first survey 'Tell us about your RSA: Representative' (for chairpersons) collected data about how each of the RSAs was set up and the duties and events of the RSA. The second 'Tell us about your RSA: Committee member' collected the benefits and experiences that individual committee members had as a result of their involvement. In total we received 80 responses to these surveys. This guide reflects these collective experiences, with case studies to illustrate the different models in use. The surveys were also used to inform the joint UKRSA and Vitae report 'Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact'.

¹ 'Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact' (2010)

Some key findings:

Impact and influence

We have gathered convincing evidence here and in our report 'Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact' which clearly demonstrates the level of impact and influence existing RSAs are achieving within their institutions, and how being actively involved in an RSA can influence an individual's personal and career development. RSA committee members are motivated by a drive to influence the research staff experience, have their voices heard on research staff issues, expand their networks and develop new skills.

The surveys portray a positive landscape where many RSAs formed successful communities that improved the career prospects and workplace experience of their members. This was made possible through the groupings of dedicated and enthusiastic research staff who were delivering real benefits for themselves and their colleagues. The key to a successful RSA appears to be adopting an appropriate model to meet the objectives of the RSA, with appropriate succession planning in place to enable its long term sustainability.

Structures

A committee was at the heart of each RSA:

- committee sizes normally range from 4 to 10 people, with some exceptions
- departmental RSAs (the most commonly occurring type of RSA) have relatively low numbers of constituents (typically 10-20)
- faculty and university RSAs have larger constituencies (the latter can exceed 1,000)
- committees tend to assign roles and responsibilities to their different officers
- other committees function informally as peer support groups.

Functions

RSAs primarily exist to help shape and promote the welfare and career development of their constituent researchers. They do this mostly by holding meetings (sometimes with invited speakers) and by sitting on committees with policy-making powers. The nature of their activities varies depending on the RSA model:

- university and multi-institutional RSAs mainly veer towards advisory roles on university and faculty senior management groups
- faculty and departmental RSAs tend to be more intimately involved in the organisation of activities for their constituents.

Challenges

Respondents to our survey cite common challenges in initiating and sustaining their RSAs:

- general apathy towards them from researchers and senior staff
- time management issues for committee members
- long-term stability of the RSA committee is compromised by research staff turnover.

Potential solutions

Various measures may remedy these problems, such as offering researchers incentives to attend events, dividing committee duties fairly across members, and being flexible in response to changing research staff demographics and needs. Support from permanent staff gives RSAs continuity and the establishment of the UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA) will provide additional support for local RSAs.

Why set up a Research Staff Association?

Our surveys revealed different reasons why RSAs are founded. The support they offer to research staff fulfils many different aspects of 'The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers'² for both committee members and constituents alike. Here are some examples of the motivations given to set up an RSA.

To provide practical support to research staff

68% of RSAs reported improving the range of professional development activities available to research staff.

Many RSAs offer their constituents a range of resources to complement their personal skills training and welfare. RSAs have supplied continued professional development (CPD) planners, and created guides to employment rights, research funding and more. For new constituents, RSAs have written accommodation handbooks and introductions to university and departmental structures and practices to help them acclimatise to their new working environment. You may wish to emulate such approaches with your own RSA.

To create networking and collaborative opportunities

93% of committee members felt they had expanded their personal networks and expanded their personal profile within their institutions.

Research staff can form a transient and fragmented community, working in different laboratories, offices, universities, faculties and departments. A well-connected RSA can act as a cohesive agent for your research community, and create a platform for inter- and intra-departmental networking. These interactions are conducive to a more productive research environment in which researchers gain greater awareness of local equipment and expertise, and the means to initiate research collaborations.

To influence university policy

73% of RSAs reported they had increased the profile of research staff issues at their host HEI.

Links to groups such as the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), careers service and other researcher development staff, and senior management committees open up numerous other avenues for your RSA to influence and enrich the workplace experience of research staff. It is vital that you gauge the opinions of researchers on institutional and departmental policies and relay these to the relevant policy makers. As examples, respondents to our surveys have cited their input into the restructuring of pay scales, the delivery of research staff mentoring schemes, and the tailoring of effective programmes of researcher development.

To develop the core competencies of committee members

76% of committee members indicated they had developed new skills and 70% reported that they were more informed about career opportunities as a result of their involvement in their RSA and its activities.

Running an RSA will broaden your career outlook and transferable skills. Combining committee membership with a research project requires effective time management, teamwork, communication and event organisational skills. Teamworking skills in particular are not always developed when working on an independent research project (only 30% of doctoral graduates employed in universities work regularly in teams according to a recent longitudinal study on careers of doctoral graduates³), but are needed on an RSA committee. RSA membership also provides you with the chance to voice your concerns on research staff matters, raise your profile and make a real difference to the research experience.

'The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers'

'The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers', signed in 2008, is a national agreement between funders and employers of UK researchers. The aim is to equip researchers with the transferable skills necessary for flexibility and mobility in a rapidly evolving global economy. To achieve this, it defines the roles that researchers, their managers, employers and funders play in realising this goal.

Throughout this guide you will encounter many examples of how RSAs meet the objectives of the Concordat. A more comprehensive account though can be found in our report 'Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact' which accompanies this guide.

² The Concordat to Support the Careers Development of Researchers (2008), www.researchconcordat.ac.uk

³ What do researchers do? Doctoral graduate destinations and impact three years on (2010)

Practical considerations

Establishing a Research Staff Association

Our surveys revealed a number of steps people have taken when founding an RSA. We recommend that you define the objectives of your RSA, find an appropriate organisational structure to meet these objectives, establish good working contacts with a number of stakeholders, and publicise your RSA.

Defining your RSA objectives

As a founding committee member you should carefully consider what you want the RSA to achieve for its constituents. Think about:

- who forms your constituency?
- what are the needs of your constituents?
- what kind of events and resources would be beneficial to them?
- what is the local environment in terms of policy making and available support?
- what can your committee and its budget realistically deliver?

Choosing your RSA model

Once your objectives are clear, decide on the best mechanism to deliver them. RSAs within HEIs can be university/multi-institutional, or faculty/departmental-based, with each model having different attributes to consider when matching a model to your objectives. Practical consideration should also be given to the geography and distribution of your constituency e.g. travelling across a large campus or town could be an obstacle in terms of getting people to attend regular meetings.

University/multi-institutional RSAs

- represent a greater diversity of research backgrounds and experiences
- tend to function more in advisory roles.

This model could be a viable option if you are from a small department with very few research staff. By setting up cross-departmental associations you can reach out to a larger constituency and attract more people to your committee. These RSAs are more challenging to set up from scratch than smaller ones, but this can be alleviated with assistance from careers service and researcher development staff and faculty administration.

Faculty/departmental RSAs

- run by 'local' researchers for their colleagues
- only viable in larger departments (normally found in scientific disciplines).

This model is best suited to departments or faculties with a significant research staff community. It is an effective structure for understanding and responding to members' needs through the physical proximity and familiarity between constituents and committee. However, outside the host department or faculty these RSAs are less likely to receive as much recognition.

More details on RSA models can be found later on in this guide.

Committee members

Finding research staff who are prepared to juggle the demands of an often intensive research project with the commitment of running an RSA is not always easy. However, you can build a committee on the foundation of only a handful of researchers motivated to make an impact on the experience of research staff.

An effective way to assemble like-minded individuals is to arrange an initial research staff meeting and form the committee from its attendees. Our surveys suggest that the willingness of many researchers to get involved in the committee was related to career aspirations and contract stage; those researchers nearing the end of a contract or who are actively seeking alternative employment to academia are generally more inclined to get involved. The evidence provided in our report will hopefully provide inspiration and motivation for colleagues to make this initial step!

Partnerships

To meet your core RSA objectives it may be necessary to invite members other than your constituents onto your committee. For example, experienced RSA members from other departments and permanent staff in administration, researcher development or careers services. They can help your RSA shape university and departmental policies, and can provide additional channels of communication to other networks and decision makers in your institution. Permanent staff can also act as an important reservoir of knowledge and experience while committees undergo change. Making contacts in other research groups within the department can help galvanise support for the RSA and encourage more researchers to get involved.

Communication

Establish mechanisms for the dissemination of RSA news and materials. Consider opening up different channels to communicate with your constituents:

- access email lists by forging links with university administrative staff
- create web pages
- use social networking sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook.

Do not lose sight of your constituents' needs; responses to our surveys by successful RSAs indicated they consulted their constituents to establish what they wanted and acted on these requests. Documenting the events and impact your RSA is having on your constituents will provide evidence of your achievements, and help to encourage continued and wider participation from your constituency.

Support and funding

Direct funding for events may not be necessary, but where required, most RSAs have used Roberts funds. The future of Roberts funding is uncertain at present, but many popular social RSA activities will incur no direct costs. Universities and departments may be able to fund some RSA activities or provide support in kind, such as administrative help, and supportive academics will add gravitas to messages sent out by your RSAs.

Staff working in university offices such as human resources and staff development also gave some common benefits of having relationships with RSAs. RSAs are:

- valuable points of contact within the research staff community
- an important source for consultation on research staff policy.

Support staff may be involved as committee members or act in an advisory role. In addition to their knowledge and experience, support staff can assist RSAs in many different ways:

- advertising RSA events
- identifying funding opportunities for researchers
- speaking at RSA meetings and workshops on specific topics.

Relationships between RSAs and university support staff are mutually beneficial and we recommend establishing them when founding an RSA.

Top tips

- Gauge the opinions of researchers on institutional and departmental policies and relay these to the relevant policy makers
- Permanent support staff can act as an important reservoir of knowledge and experience
- Supportive academics will add gravitas to messages sent out by your RSA
- Open up different channels to communicate with your constituents
- Keep a record of activities that includes not only what was done, but how it was done

Sustaining a Research Staff Association

Once an RSA has been established, several common challenges are encountered for its long-term sustainability. These are apathy from staff and constituents, time pressure on committee members, and high turnover of committee members.

Engaging research staff

To help overcome apathy amongst research and academic staff, we recommend that you proactively collect feedback from your constituents on what events they enjoyed, which they disliked, and the sorts of activities they would like to attend in the future. Be flexible enough to prioritise what your constituents want, especially when faced with a constantly changing constituency of research staff starting and finishing fixed-term contracts. It is advisable that a record of these activities is kept for future committee members to refer to, and also as evidence of the importance of your RSA within the university. This information could be persuasive in demonstrating the value of your RSA.

Offering incentives to attend your meetings (e.g. food and drink), or combining meetings with a social event have proved successful. One way to engage with constituents and the wider department is to host an annual symposium for researchers, academics and postgraduates. These events can be communicated and supported by the head of department.

We also recommend that you formulate strategies to secure your university's participation in the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS)⁴ and other similar surveys and help increase the uptake of such surveys among research staff. This will convince both research and academic staff of the importance of your RSA's activities.

Time management

Sustaining the initial enthusiasm to form an RSA can be a challenge, particularly when time constraints on an often intensive research project and leisure time become apparent. Most RSA committee members surveyed commit an average of 3 hours or less a week to RSA activities, but in other cases committee members reported putting in up to 10 hours a week.

To manage time pressures, we recommend that you:

- optimise the number of events you organise, depending on the size of your committee and constituency
- be realistic about how much time each event will take to organise
- ask for administrative support from your institution
- agree a workable amount of time committee members should devote to the RSA
- share the chairperson's role between two co-chairs
- consider keeping the RSA informal with no fixed responsibilities on committee members as this can create a relaxed RSA environment and encourage more involvement

Committee turnover

The transient nature of most research staff contracts is a common grievance of researchers, and also presents a challenge to RSA committees. Finding volunteers to dedicate time and effort to running an RSA can be difficult, and this is magnified by the frequent relocation of committee members. Overcoming this challenge requires planning to ensure that replacements are available ahead of a committee member's intended departure (succession planning). Failure to do so could potentially lead to the dissolution of your RSA. Considerations could include:

- asking each committee member to find their own replacement before they leave
- inviting permanent members of staff onto the committee to provide continuity
- documenting activities and responsibilities of each committee member to prevent your successors having to reinvent the wheel.

Top tips

- **Collect feedback from your constituents on your events**
- **Consider hosting an annual symposium for researchers**
- **Share the chairperson's role between two co-chairs**
- **Ask for administrative support from your institution, this will create continuity as well as reduce time pressure**
- **Proactively engage in succession planning for your committee**

⁴ Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) www.cros.ac.uk/. CROS was originally developed in 2002 as part of a project funded by HEFCE, the Scottish Funding Council, and DTI/OST (now BIS). CROS is now supported by Vitae. The survey is aimed at anonymously gathering data about working conditions, career aspirations and career development opportunities for research staff.

RSA models and case studies

RSA model: faculty and departmental level

The most common form of RSA in the UK resides within a host department or faculty. These RSAs organise meetings and other events for research staff employed exclusively in those sections, and represent the views of their constituents on various departmental and faculty committees. See Table 1 for RSAs described in this way in response to our surveys.

According to our research, faculty and departmental RSAs are more commonly found in scientific departments: biomedical and biological sciences (13), physical sciences and engineering (4), social sciences (1), but none in arts and humanities departments.

Institution	Research Staff Association
King's College London	James Black Centre Post Doc Forum Postgraduate Initiative at Guy's
Queen's University Belfast	Institute of Agri-Food and Land Use Society for Contract Researchers and Postdoctoral staff School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences Postdoctoral Society School of Electronics, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science
University of Dundee	College of Life Sciences Postdoctoral Association College of Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing Postdoctoral and Research Staff Association
University of Edinburgh	BioDocSoc Central Area Postdoc Society Little France Postdoc Society School of Engineering Researcher Staff Society School of GeoSciences Researchers Society School of Social and Political Science Researchers Society School of Social and Political Science Researchers Society
University of Leeds	Early Careers Network
University of Leicester	Early Career Researchers Group Genetics Postdoc Group
University of Nottingham	Engineering Research Staff Group
University of Sheffield	Medical School Postdoc Society Molecular Biology and Biotechnology Post-doc Society

Table 1: Known faculty and departmental RSAs

On the following pages are three case studies of examples of RSAs run from within their host faculties or departments:

- Queen's Medical Research Institute (Little France) Postdoctoral Society at the University of Edinburgh (LFPDS)
- College of Life Sciences Postdoc Association at the University of Dundee (CLSPA)
- The Early Career Network (ECN) at the Leeds Institute of Health Sciences, University of Leeds.

Case Study 1:

Little France Postdoctoral Society, University of Edinburgh

Case study contact:

Mark Miller

Overview

Structure

- Single committee formed from merger of smaller RSAs
- Links to internal (researcher development unit) and external (UCU, Nexxus, Vitae) bodies

Activities

- Regular staff meetings and scientific and career development meetings
- Social events
- Institute open-day

Outcomes

- Nurturing of collaborations (this has led to at least one successful grant application)
- Sharing of expertise and equipment

Challenges

- Apathy and scepticism from colleagues
- Turnover of committee members

Background

At the University of Edinburgh we have a well-established set of research staff associations (see Table 1). The impetus for the formation of these societies came from individual research groups within each faculty that over time began to interact through physical proximity or shared subject interests. At each stage in this process – from the initial formation of societies to the establishment of inter-societal links – university human resources and career development staff offered important help and guidance.

The size, structure, funding and activities of these societies vary between different groups. The description below is based on the Little France Postdoc Society (LFPDS); an amalgamation of several researcher groups from different research centres housed within the Queens Medical Research Institute (QMRI).

Structure and support

We (LFPDS) represent our constituents at both the research centre and QMRI level; we sit on senior staff meetings within each research centre, and on an all-inclusive QMRI staff committee that meets monthly to agree a yearly programme of events for its research staff. These events include:

- career events
- presentations on communal facilities
- social events
- guest lectures from high-profile speakers to tell the audience 'how they made it'.

We have strong links with the university researcher development unit, human resources and careers service, as well as external organisations such as Vitae, Nexxus and UCU. This gives us access to external events and resources.

Activities and funding

We organise various events but generally they fall into the following categories:

- regular staff meetings within the relevant unit
 - important for staff to assimilate, and to disseminate news and peer support.
- scientific meetings
 - provide overviews of important communal scientific facilities
 - useful for initiating inter-departmental collaborations.
- career development Meetings
 - we invite speakers to focus on issues such as: 'How to develop a research career', 'How to obtain research funding', and 'Alternative careers to Academic Science'.
- social occasions
 - sports days and quiz nights are a great way to get people interacting.
- QMRI PhD open day
 - we organise public open days to showcase research and PhD programmes
 - this has the added benefit of highlighting QMRI research capabilities to senior management.

Impact on research staff

We offer QMRI research staff the immediacy and responsiveness of a local RSA for departmental training and welfare, and the translation of these discussions to institutional policy advice via our seats on the QMRI staff committee.

One important impact we have made is to help create an inter-linked postdoctoral community within and across research centres. This has nurtured an ethos of networking, collaboration and sharing of equipment and expertise, which in one instance has led to a successful grant application between junior researchers in different centres.

Challenges and future direction

We have faced general apathy and scepticism amongst QMRI researchers (both junior and senior) towards our activities, but we have countered this by:

- providing evidence of practical changes we have instigated
- arranging social events to help build relationships amongst research staff.

Another challenge is the frequent flux of staff and the difficulty this places on maintaining a proactive committee membership. By asking more senior and administrative staff for their support, we have achieved greater continuity.

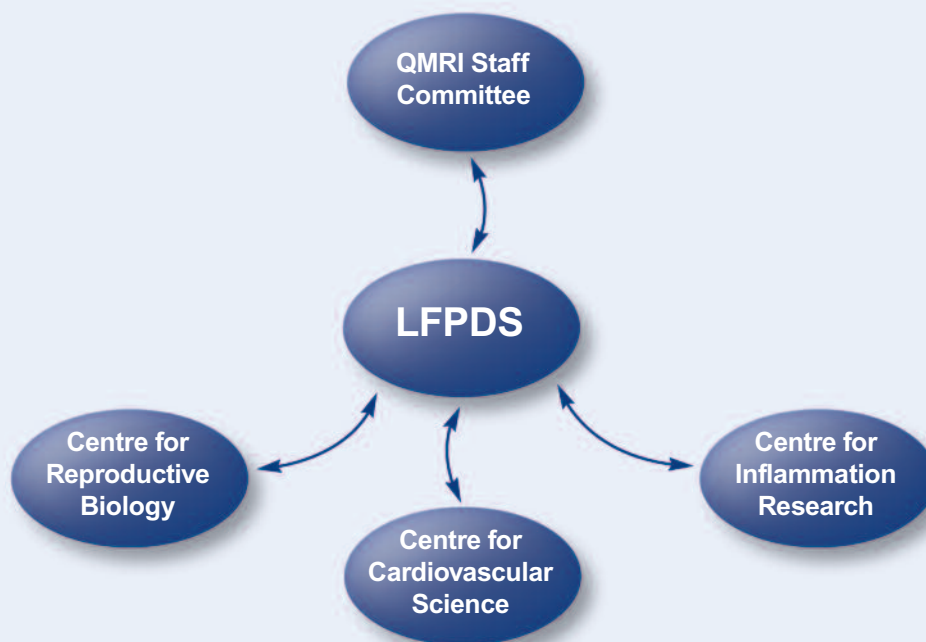


Diagram depicting how LFPDS is linked to local research centres and the QMRI

Case Study 2:

College of Life Sciences Postdoc Association, University of Dundee

Case study contacts:

David Proctor, Marouan Zarrouk

Overview

Structure

- Over 30 committee members with defined roles including: co-chairs, a treasurer, divisional representatives, and events coordinators
- Links with College Board, School of Research Board, university-wide Concordat Steering Group, and Health and Safety Committee
- Close relationship with external groups such as Generic Skills Dundee for the provision of transferable skills training

Activities

- Handbooks and web resources have been developed to help and inform our research staff
- Seminars and discussion forums
- A variety of networking and social activities

Benefits

- Almost complete representation of research staff in the College of Life Sciences
- Multiple links to partner organisations enhances networking prospects for staff
- Funds available for researchers travelling to external career development events

Challenges

- Engaging with reluctant research staff

Background

The College of Life Sciences Postdoc Association (CLSPA) was established in June 2005 to serve as a voice for research staff in interactions with college and university management. We engage with the:

- Library and Learning Centre
- Careers Service
- Human Resources department.

CLSPA is also partnered with regional and national organisations, including:

- Generic Skills Dundee (a transferrable skills training programme)
- Revealing Research (the University of Dundee public engagement office)
- UCU
- Vitae
- BioDundee (a local business development network).

CLSPA aims to help research staff establish themselves upon arrival in Dundee, and support their career development through a variety of programmes, often delivered in cooperation with the groups above. We encourage and facilitate researcher networking by organising and advertising seminars, workshops and social events.

Structure and support

Research staff in the College of Life Sciences are automatically CLSPA members. Our committee comprises postdocs, faculty administrative staff, and representatives from partner organisations, and we meet monthly to conduct RSA business. To widen participation we actively encourage all research staff in the college to get involved in our meetings.

Research staff on the committee are organised according to their roles, although most will serve in several different roles simultaneously. The roles include:

- officers (these include two co-chairs and a treasurer)
 - co-chairs are responsible for organising the committee and meeting agendas
 - the treasurer leads a budget working group and maintains the RSA finances
- coordinators
 - these are assigned to organise the website, seminars, and social activities
- faculty advisors
 - provide advice on career progression and opportunities
 - voice research staff issues with senior management
- divisional representatives
 - selected by researchers in each college division to represent their interests
 - hold divisional meetings and report back to CLSPA

Activities and funding

To support research staff in the college we use a combination of static resources and ongoing activities. Our static resources include:

- a website containing information on career development opportunities, funding resources, public engagement activities, jobs, conferences, seminars, and more.
- a handbook developed to inform new research staff in the college on housing, child-care, health care, getting a bank account, and more

Ongoing activities such as seminars and discussion forums are arranged in partnership with:

- Generic Skills Dundee
 - to provide tailored transferrable skills training for research staff in the college
- Revealing Research
 - to promote public engagement opportunities.

We organise a variety of networking and social activities together with our postgraduate counterpart, PhDs in the College of Life Sciences (PICLS), including:

- regular socials (e.g. sports competitions, pub quizzes, wine and whisky tasting)
- an annual ceilidh and barbeque
- a biannual welcome event for new researchers
- tea and coffee networking for researchers with children.

Most funding (85%) for these activities is provided by the college with the remainder provided by Generic Skills Dundee.

Impact on research staff

The structure of the CLSPA provides for almost complete representation of research staff in the college; 9 out of 11 divisions are represented, covering approximately 230 members of research staff. We impact on research staff variously:

- our links with other organisations open up numerous opportunities for constituents
- our college generously provides money to finance events and a fund for travel to conferences related to career development.

Challenges and future direction

The primary challenge facing CLSPA is the engagement of research staff within the college. It is rare that more than 10-20% of the research staff population will attend our events, although the annual ceilidh has nearly 200 participants, and the occasional high-profile seminar speaker will draw nearly 100 researchers.

We have attempted to address researcher apathy by offering both more and fewer activities, and both increasing and decreasing the size of the committee – neither has worked satisfactorily.

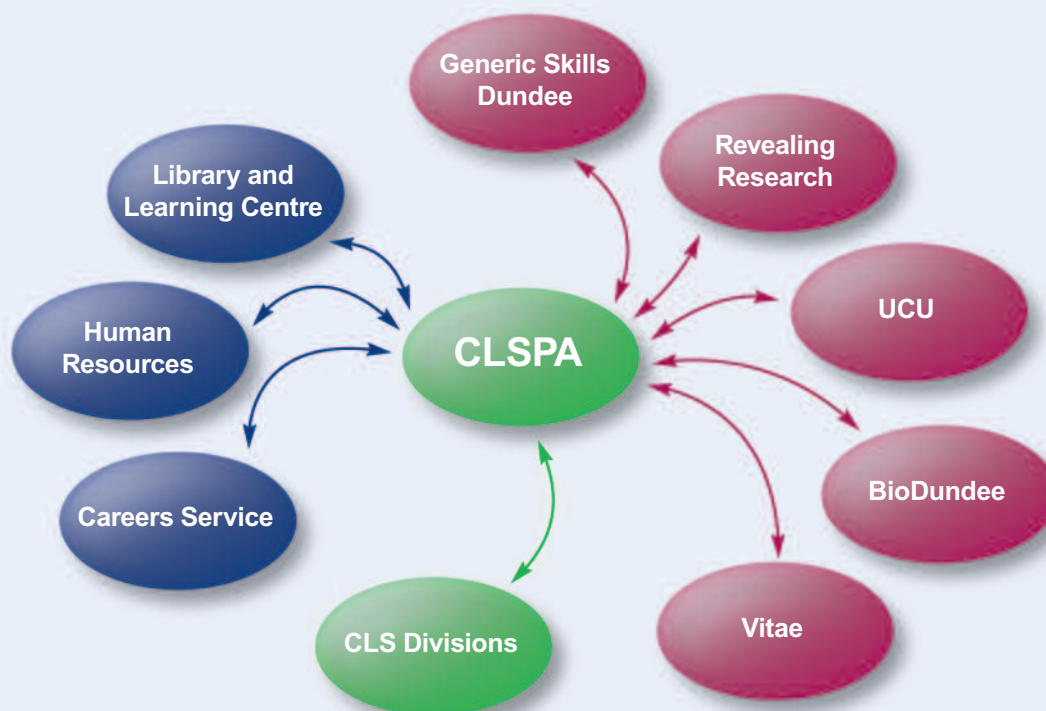


Diagram depicting how CLSPA is linked to local research divisions, university centres, and external organisations

Case Study 3:

Early Career Network, University of Leeds

Case study contacts:

Vicky Ward and Deborah Holliday

Overview

Structure

- ECN is divided by career stage: ECAN for aspiring academics, and ECRN for PhD students and junior postdocs
- ECAN and ECRN each have co-chairs but no formal committee – they have a core of active volunteers instead
- Links to senior faculty management have been established

Activities

- Meetings with guest speakers (invited internally and externally) to give them a particular focus

Benefits

- ECAN and ECRN sub-groups provide researchers with a focus on their relevant issues
- Provide a conduit for information between researchers and university policy-makers

Challenges

- Gaining greater recognition with other university committees
- Apathy amongst constituents

Background

The Leeds Institute of Health Sciences (LIHS) set up the Early Career Network (ECN) in January 2008 to offer peer support to its researchers. There are two arms to ECN:

- Early Career Researchers Network (ECRN)
 - This network is for PhD students, junior postdocs and technical staff
- Early Career Academics Network (ECAN)
 - This accommodates senior research fellows and junior lecturers.

This distinction by research career stage permits more focus towards the issues most relevant to each group. There will be times when these matters overlap and indeed, it is not uncommon for some research staff to be members of both networks.

Structure and support

Both ECRN and ECAN operate informally as peer support groups. We each appoint chairpersons on a voluntary basis: ECRN has two chairpersons who hold their posts for periods of 6-12 months, whereas ECAN has a single chairperson who stays in that role for 12-24 months. There are no other formal committee members (although a member of ECAN attends ECRN meetings to ensure interaction between the groups) and neither network is allocated a formal budget. To keep group memberships up to date, LIHS promotes each network through its faculty literature and at induction events.

Activities and funding

Members of ECRN and ECAN meet independently once a month. We each predominantly organise constituent meetings with speakers invited to give the meeting a particular emphasis. The speakers may be selected from within the LIHS, or from external departments and organisations such as the Staff Development Centre, Human Resources, and Vitae. Talks typically cover subjects such as:

- mentoring
- employment rights
- transferable skills training and career development
- the Concordat.

When no invited speaker features at a meeting, we hold unstructured discussion forums that allow researchers to freely speak with the group about any issues.

Impact on research staff

The ECN structure provides constituents with opportunities to converse with peers at similar career stages. Additionally, our sub-network ECAN has direct links to departmental and university senior management. This intermediary position between senior management and research staff has been instrumental in facilitating the exchange of views between the groups, resulting in ECAN being consulted on a range of issues including:

- writing a group statement on the re-appointment of the LIHS director
- providing feedback on a proposed writing course for research staff.

There is anecdotal evidence that the peer support offered by ECRN and ECAN has equipped current and former members with the confidence and skills to secure promotions as post-doctoral fellows, principal investigators, and in other careers.

Challenges and future direction

Although ECRN and ECAN hold some influence within the LIHS, we are not always accepted as legitimate groups by other university committees. One reason for this could be the informal nature of our RSA.

ECN also faces apathy from some of its constituent researchers and faculty management. We have partly overcome this by gathering and responding to feedback on events and the expectations of the RSA.

Going forward, ECN will maintain its informal approach to committee membership. We will continue to place no clear expectations on our members as we have found that this approach prevents our constituents from feeling compelled to attend meetings and events, and conversely this appears to improve our support.

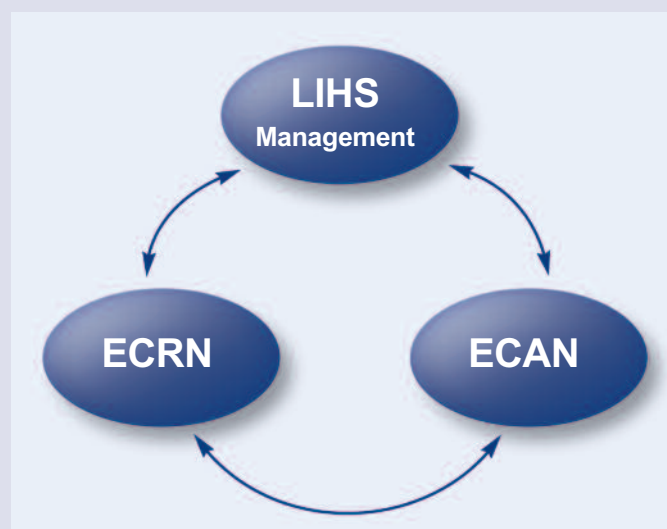


Diagram depicting how ECRN and ECAN interact with each other and LIHS senior management

Conclusions: Faculty and departmental RSAs

1. Faculty or departmental RSAs are formed by research staff working within the immediate surroundings of their constituents. This gives them an in depth understanding of the factors affecting that research environment and the implications these have on a researcher's personal and career development.
2. They are well-placed to produce specific resources and organise relevant events to their target audience. These materials provide researchers with the means to meet several Concordat objectives.
3. Faculty or departmental RSAs are able to extend the working and social bonds of researchers beyond the confines of their research cliques and into their neighbouring research groups. This facilitates a culture of greater interaction between research groups, and the expansion of opportunities to share in-house equipment, expertise and training.
4. Establishing effective dialogue between senior policy-making groups and individual researchers is mutually beneficial and a core objective of faculty and departmental RSAs. This can be done through hierarchical 'chain of command' committee structures within a faculty, and by concentrating RSA sub-groups on other factors such as career stage.
5. An important attribute to the success of most faculty or departmental RSAs is the division of roles and tasks amongst committee members. This can relieve the time pressures that may hinder the involvement of researchers in their RSA, and provide ownership of responsibility for those that accept committee positions.

Top tips from our case study contributors:

- Find enthusiastic, committed, capable members of research staff that can form the core of the organisation
- Identify the leaders, and ensure they delegate well
- Establish clear lines of representation to aid information dissemination
- Invite a member of an academic faculty to serve on the committee as a champion for research staff, and to feed information between research staff and administration
- Establish links with trade unions too
- Garner support from organisation management. This is critical for such reasons as money, respect, and gathering support for implementing changes
- Get a good website up and running as soon as you can, and maintain it regularly
- Recruiting someone to the committee who is politically minded and keen to pursue wider goals will provide some much needed energy and commitment to your RSA

RSA Model: Institutional and multi-institutional level

Some of the larger RSAs in the UK operate as institutional or multi-institutional groups. They draw research staff committee members from a variety of different departments and faculties, and have close ties to university management teams. Such RSAs are well placed to provide a collective voice for all research staff at the university. The following RSAs responding to our survey described themselves in this way:

Institution	Research Staff Association
Imperial College London	PostDoc Development Centre Committee (PDCC)
University of Bristol	Research Staff Representatives Committee (RSRC)
University of Cambridge	Postdocs of Cambridge (PdOC) staff Association
University of Warwick	Research Staff Forum and Representatives (RSFR)

Table 2: Known institutional and multi-institutional RSAs

These RSAs are necessarily broad in their reach to accommodate all researchers across the university. Consequently they will tend to have large constituencies: RSFR represents over 700 researchers, and PdOC, PDCC and RSRC each embrace over 1,000 researchers. However, these RSAs may not in practice have representatives from every university department. For example, RSFR currently has representation from 16 out of 31 university departments (some of these departments will have very few members of research staff). University-wide RSAs are always striving to be as inclusive as possible in their representation, but do not always achieve it fully.

On the following pages are two case studies of university-wide RSAs:

- Research Staff Representatives Committee (RSRC) from the University of Bristol
- Postdocs of Cambridge (PdOC) from the University of Cambridge

Case Study 4:

Research Staff Representatives Committee (RSRC), University of Bristol

Case study contact:

Liz Watkins

Overview

Structure

- A core committee with sub-groups developed around specific activities
- Links to senior management and other university committees

Activities

- Advises university policy-makers on the provision of researcher training and support

Outcomes

- Assisted with the development of a mentoring scheme
- Advised on a new pay-scale structure

Challenges

- Reluctance of PIs to allow committee members time to undertake RSA duties
- Time management
- Maintaining the enthusiasm of committee members

Background

The University of Bristol's Research Staff Reps Committee (RSRC) was formed 8 years ago to improve dialogue between researchers and the central university management structure. The aim is to enhance the welfare and career development of research staff by making their voices heard.

Structure and support

RSRC has 41 departmental representatives drawn from different departments within each faculty, and 5 of our members attend the university's Research Staff Working Party (RSWP). RSWP has 13 members from all sections of the university's community; it is chaired by the Pro-Vice Chancellor, comprises other senior figures from departments such as personnel, staff development and research development, and also accommodates a member of senior academic staff. With our presence on RSWP, we can give researchers a voice on relevant university policy changes.

In 2008 we formed sub-groups to oversee specific aspects of research staff welfare and career development. This was intended to streamline our responsibilities and improve the way we responded to specific issues. Six groups were created to offer an exclusive focus on:

- mentoring
- PI relationships
- networks
- representation/recognition/consistent best practice
- training
- career opportunities.

We selected postdocs with an interest in each of these areas to manage these remits.

Activities and funding

RSRC primarily acts as an information conduit between researchers and university policy makers. We do not always directly organise events for our constituents. Instead, we advise the relevant members of staff in policy-making positions on what activities should be provided. Our input is based on the requests of our constituents, which include:

- workplace or equipment inductions and training
- training events related to general career development
- transferable skills development.

In the main, we use Roberts funds to finance the bulk of these activities.

Impact on research staff

RSRC helps inform on university-wide policy and initiatives through its representation on RSWP. We played a key role in the planning and delivery of the university's mentoring scheme for postdocs, contributed to the process of pay scale descriptions, and provided input on a staff training programme. We have also been consulted on a fixed-term contracts and redundancy review.

In more general terms, the existence of RSRC has been invaluable as a source of discussion for research specific issues (such as working group dynamics and career progression) and for gaining the different perspectives of researchers situated in various departments. This cross-departmental interaction gives us a clear picture of the big issues faced by our constituent research staff.

Challenges and future direction

One obstacle we encounter is unwillingness on the part of some PIs to grant us and our constituents time off from research to participate in RSRC activities. However, this has been somewhat relieved by the publication of the Concordat and its requirement of universities to commit some of their researchers' time towards their career and personal development.

Time management is another challenge: our members sometimes struggle to achieve a balance between their primary research commitments and the requirements of RSRC. This time burden has been eased to some extent by allowing some members to contribute as 'corresponding members'. In this way, a researcher with an interest in the activities of RSRC is kept aware of any relevant news and can offer their thoughts on these issues. However, by not being a full member they will often be less engaged with group discussions that formulate our policies.

A final challenge is that of maintaining the enthusiasm of our representatives. To overcome this 'committee fatigue', we have made efforts to assign members with responsibility for tasks they value by restructuring the group into the six sub-groups described above.

RSRC will strive to maintain its influence as an advisory group to senior management and academics on issues pertinent to contract research staff. There may even be ways in which we could expand our influence. For instance, by forging additional connections with other university bodies that represent research staff, we hope to advance the cause of researchers' career and personal development and raise their profile across the university.

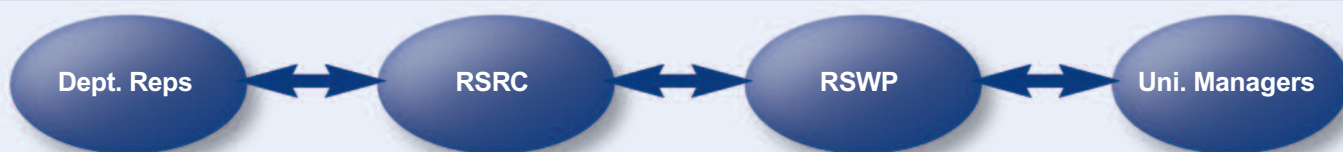


Diagram depicting how information moves from research staff to senior management via the RSRC and RSWP

Case Study 5: PdOC, University of Cambridge

Case study contacts:

**Jo Rees, Simon Lacoste-Julien,
and Aurora Cruz-Cabeza**

Overview

Structure

- A committee of researchers drawn from different departments
- Designated roles for each committee member
- Links to university policy makers by representation on other committees

Activities

- The provision of welfare and training support to researchers
- Social events

Benefits

- Advisory role with university policy makers
- A Google group for postdocs seeking accommodation in Cambridge

Challenges

- Apathy amongst staff
- Maintaining close contact with all university departments

Background

PdOC was formed 10 years ago as the official society for the University of Cambridge's postdoctoral research staff and junior research fellows. Over this period, PdOC has developed a number of web resources to help their members with their career development, and to aid prospective postdoctoral researchers in finding accommodation and college affiliation.

Structure and support

Our committee membership currently stands at 4 researchers, each drawn from a different department. Each member has defined roles, with responsibilities ranging from the society president, to treasurer and social and web page coordinators. This arrangement is beneficial for us as it allows us to delegate tasks across the committee and give members a sense of ownership of responsibility.

Outside the core committee, we provide a voice for postdocs on other university committees, and enlist the help of other university staff to raise our profile and promote our activities. This is achieved in the main by email alerts and by publication in institutional literature. We also publish our own newsletter to disseminate information.

Activities and funding

We typically organise up to 20 events a year and these usually attract 40 or more attendees. These range from social events such as 'Cook and Bring' to more career-oriented workshops on transferable skills and career development. Recently, in response to popular demand, we created a Google group for postdocs to search for new housemates, and we championed the appointment of a careers advisor for Arts and Humanities postdocs. We receive no formal or regular funding for our events, but we do occasionally benefit from the generosity of college masters.

Impact on research staff

With our links to numerous departments across campus, we have placed PdOC at the heart of the postdoctoral community; this brings research staff together from disparate departments to share their experiences. PdOC has connections with the wider network of university staff through representation on certain committees, and this keeps us at the forefront of relevant policy and strategy developments. We can then distribute this information to all corners of the postdoctoral community.

Challenges and future direction

We face apathy from some colleges and higher-level committees. We are trying to overcome this reluctance by continuing to try and get onto more university councils. This pursuit is worthwhile for PdOC because of the increased influence it would give us on university policy and strategy. More funding would also be welcomed to enable us to finance more expansive and ambitious events for our constituents and a communal area we have proposed for postdocs.

Another challenge for PdOC is staying in close contact with research staff from each department. We acknowledge that some departments have their own informal research staff organisations to support their postdocs, and to a large extent they try to maintain links with researchers' needs by interacting with these groups. However, for most departments there is no such help on hand, and we see our role as being able to fill those voids. Members of these departmental organisations will often attend our events to meet people from other fields and to tap into any additional services that PdOC provides.

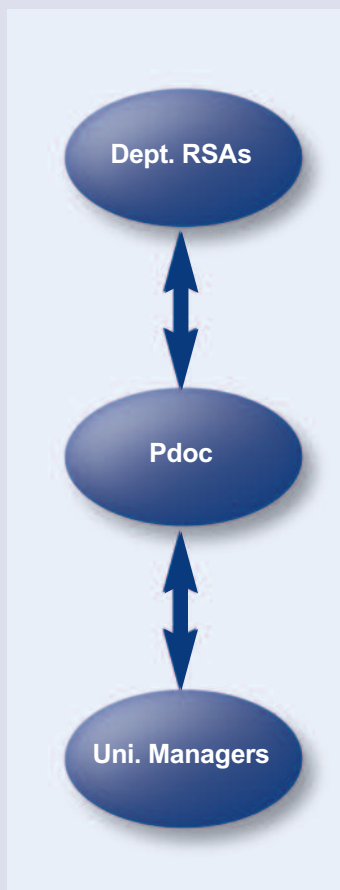


Diagram depicting how information moves from research staff to senior management via PdOC

Conclusions: Institutional and multi-institutional RSAs

1. University RSAs represent a greater number and diversity of researchers, and tend to function more as advisors to university and faculty policy makers. The diversity of researchers they cover enables them to act as cohesive agents within the wider research staff community.
2. Their university-wide remit and status often afford them greater recognition and authority amongst university committees as official representatives of all research staff. However, their breadth of reach comes at a cost: they may be less efficient at making a tailored impact at the local level, and consequently may be perceived by researchers as more detached from the research specialities and cultural quirks of individual departments.
3. University-wide RSAs are more prone to domination by larger departments, such as the sciences. That said, they may provide an opportunity for smaller communities of research staff (for example from the Arts and Humanities) to join an extensive network of researchers and make their voices heard.
4. Successful university RSAs learn to spread the RSA workload fairly across the committee. This gives committee members the space to conduct both their research and RSA duties, and allows them to concentrate on a sub-set of RSA activities that interest them.
5. Setting up an RSA model like this requires considerable help and input from university centres (e.g. staff development centres) with contacts in all the university research departments. It also relies on the ability to find willing volunteers in each department. However, if it can be achieved, this model provides a sound way of making the voice of all research staff heard on a variety of policy- and strategy-making committees.

Top tips from our case study contributors:

- Setting up an RSA requires enthusiasm and work. We are lucky to have support from within Personnel at the university, although this is likely to change with the ending of the Roberts Funding. The presence of the research staff reps committee within the university has had a huge impact on how research staff are viewed in our institution and as a staff group we have a presence and a voice
- Running a university-wide RSA can take a lot of time away from research projects, and so it is essential that a reliable and dedicated committee is built to share the load

RSA Models: Regional, national and international

A final model for RSAs is to build a national network of research staff and provide a collective voice for all researchers working in the UK. This is the vision that frames the structure of the UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA), supported by Vitae.

Case Study 6:

UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA), supported by Vitae

Case study contacts:

Robert Hardwick, Dr Chris Thomson, and Dr David Proctor

Summary Box

Structure

- A committee of researchers drawn from all parts of the UK and from diverse backgrounds to act as national champions of researcher training and welfare
- UKRSA has two co-chairs and a system of shared responsibility amongst the other members
- Links to national policy makers by inviting them to join as ordinary members

Activities

- Formation of a core and representative committee of UK research staff
- Forging links to national stakeholder organisations
- Development of web resources for research staff
- Research and publications

Benefits

- A national voice and point of contact for all research staff across the UK
- Advising national researcher training and support policy makers

Challenges

- To establish and maintain a growing network of stakeholders
- To ensure the committee is representative of all researchers by region and discipline
- Promotion amongst the UK's research staff community

Background

The UKRSA was formed in January 2010 from volunteers, mainly identified at the Vitae Research Staff Conference in 2009. With the support of Vitae we aim to champion the development and welfare of UK research staff and to give them a voice that will help inform the relevant policies and strategies of key stakeholder organisations. Its main objectives are to:

- develop a community of research staff in the UK
- support local and regional research staff associations
- provide advice on policy issues affecting researchers.

In this role, UKRSA continues and extends the work of the now dormant National Research Staff Association of the UK.

Structure and support

The UKRSA committee members are drawn from all parts of the UK and from diverse subject backgrounds. The committee includes two co-chairs and a representative from Vitae. We meet formally twice a year but keep in regular contact online via a discussion forum. The UKRSA considers all researchers based in the UK to be in its constituency. Several stakeholder organisations with an interest in the rights, employability and training of research staff contribute to online conversations. This allows UKRSA to contribute to the development of policy and to the strategic decisions of these organisations.

To support the sustainability of UKRSA, Vitae provides financial, logistical, and communication resources. UKRSA's focus is not restricted to Vitae's remit of supporting researcher development, and similarly its activities are informed by, but not confined to, Vitae's agenda.

Activities and funding

A stable committee has been established, stakeholder organisations have been identified and contacted, and a website have been developed. Representatives has been involved in national policy committees. Ad hoc support has been given to emerging RSAs and networks of RSAs, such as in London.

Vitae publish joint UKRSA and Vitae materials (such as this guide and the report 'Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact'), cover the costs of two annual meetings and provide web support and staff time.

Impact on researchers

The report 'Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact' highlights the impact RSAs have on the experience of research staff. By supporting the setting up and sustainability of RSAs, the UKRSA facilitates this impact on more researchers. Resources to support RSAs include this guide, the report 'Understanding Research Staff Associations and their impact' and the availability of committee members for advice.

UKRSA has already received recognition as the voice of researchers by being asked to provide representatives on a number of national committees dealing with matters ranging from the future of Roberts funding to the Careers in Research Online Survey. Such opportunities are expected to increase in the future.

Challenges and future direction

UKRSA is seeking to support diverse groupings of research staff, particularly through local RSAs, across the sector. Developing mechanisms to keep abreast of the national picture of research staff associations in terms of where they exist needs to be a priority.

UKRSA will continue to support RSAs across the country and advise on researcher development policy and strategy.

Conclusion

Nationwide RSAs provide a hub for all RSAs to pitch their ideas and views on policies relevant to the training and welfare of research staff. UKRSA is already forging links with stakeholders from a number of Government advisory groups on such matters, which in time will provide a means for researchers to contribute to important policy decisions. This has the potential to impact on a range of issues from research funding to employment rights and the strategy for supplying appropriate training on transferable skills.

Concluding Remarks

Research staff are a diverse group with varied interests and career ambitions. In the main they are pursuing their passion for making novel discoveries in their subject specialism, and aspire to a permanent academic or technical position, which are very competitive.

Forming an RSA is an effective way to develop core competencies and broaden your career outlook. There are a number of important challenges to overcome when embarking on such a project, but ultimately it is a worthwhile endeavour for all the skills and experience you will gain from it, and the opportunity it provides you to support and influence the recruitment, training, welfare and recognition of research staff.

Choosing a sensible model to deliver on your RSA objectives is central to the success of your RSA. The common thread that links all models is the chain of command structure they employ: the RSA, whether departmental, university-wide, or national, sits in between research staff and higher management and policy-making committees as an information conduit and a champion of research staff causes.

An additional model not covered in this guide is that of regional RSAs. Such a model has been successfully developed in Scotland and Northern Ireland whereby representatives from RSAs across the region coordinate meetings in conjunction with a regional group of research development staff (ScotHERD). Similar models, potentially supported by Vitae regional Hubs could offer another avenue for RSAs to share practice, ideas and resources to raise the profile of the careers and professional development of research staff and provide a cohesive voice.

We believe it is a wholly worthwhile pursuit to become involved on the committee of an RSA, and would recommend that anyone who is serious about their career considers it. This guide aims to provide you with the necessary tools and ideas to kick-start the formation of an RSA, to plan for its long-term future, and to demonstrate the importance of RSAs to your local research and academic staff, but how you use it is down to your own initiative.

Over to you!

UK Research Staff Association



supported by Vitae

About UKRSA

The UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA), supported by Vitae, provides a collective voice for research staff in the UK, working with local research staff associations and informing policy. It continues and extends the work of the National Research Staff Association. Vitae provides resources, courses and events for research staff, including a research staff blog and annual research staff conference. Vitae works closely with the UKRSA to deliver projects, and provides administrative support and continuity.

UKRSA activities are divided into two categories, communities and policy, which include the following components:

Communities

The UKRSA

- supports the development of local and regional research staff associations
- develops and maintains online social networking resources for research staff
- represents the interests and views of research staff in interactions with relevant national bodies
- maintains a collaborative committee comprised of members of research staff and representatives of stakeholder organisations

Policy

The UKRSA

- provides input on policy affecting research staff at UK institutions
- informs research staff of relevant policy issues

For further information about the UKRSA go to www.ukrsa.org.uk or contact ukrsavitae@gmail.com



About Vitae

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

Vitae works 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 for researchers.

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

Our 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 activities go to www.vitae.ac.uk or contact enquiries@vitae.ac.uk

Vitae c/o CRAC, 2nd Floor, Sheraton House, Castle Park, Cambridge, CB3 0AX