

A brief guide to career conversations with research staff

For research directors, principal investigators and all who support the professional development of research staff

Are career conversations part of my role?

If you have line management responsibility for members of research staff, you will probably also have responsibility, on behalf of your institution, for supporting them in their professional and career development.

As a line manager and/or mentor you are likely to be in an influential position with research staff. Mentoring might come naturally where an individual aspires to follow a career path similar to your own and has the appropriate attributes for it. However, we know that the majority of those trained in academic research go on to 'other' careers and that these individuals contribute in many different types of job and in all areas of the economy². It's therefore important to be broadly aware of the wide range of career paths taken by those trained in research, so that any advice you give has appropriate perspective.

While it's unlikely that you will be in a position to give your researchers all the information and advice they need, you can introduce them to other sources of support which might include online advice and information, one-to-one advice services, outside mentoring or coaching opportunities, professional networks and specific development opportunities.

About this guide

When it comes to career conversations, individuals can be affected by good and bad experiences for years¹. If having career conversations with researchers is part of your role, whether or not you have extensive experience in this area, you may sometimes find that they can take you out of your comfort zone or area of expertise.

This brief guide highlights major considerations plus some of the tools available to help make career conversations with researchers successful.

Vitae is led and managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation. Between 2013 and 2015 we were supported by Research Councils UK (RCUK) and UK HE funding bodies.

¹ Practical tips for effective career discussions at work, 2001, NICEC.
http://www.crac.org.uk/CMS/files/upload/nicec_practical_tips_effective_discussion.pdf
² www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd

What are career conversations?

The type of career conversations you have with research staff should take into account the individual and their needs. They might include:

- Insight into self - including what an individual wants from a career and what they bring to it (attributes, expertise, potential etc)
- Identifying options - including potential job roles and how the current climate (economic, social, technological etc) impacts opportunities
- Planning – actions to help the researcher to understand themselves, identify their options or move closer to achieving career goals.

Only about 30% of respondents to the UK **PIs and Research Leaders Survey 2013**⁴ felt fully confident in giving careers advice.

Respondents identified 'creates opportunities and nurtures researchers' careers' as the second most important behaviour overall for excellent research leaders.



When to have career conversations

Your institution's formal process for staff review can offer one opportunity, however an annual appraisal does not always represent the best opportunity to focus on career, as it's also about performance and written reporting. Make use of those elements of your organisation's staff management processes that you and your researchers find genuinely useful – remembering that everyone has different needs and preferences.

You may judge that informal or more frequent career conversations are appropriate for a researcher at a particular point in their career, or a member of your research staff might request your help. If career conversations are on-going, they can become part of everyday interactions and may not always mean a large amount of 'down-time'. Although you can provide support and encouragement, the onus will be on the individual to take action to forward their own career.

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We have moved on a long way from the days when only those who aspired to an academic career embarked on the doctoral path

Professor Nigel Vincent, Vice-President for Research and HE Policy, The British Academy³

Do

- Listen to your researchers
- Encourage them to look at real examples of careers from others with a research background.

Don't ...

- Be directive in your approach to career conversations
- See it as a loss or a failure if a researcher you manage wants to move out of academia or even away from research.

³ In forward to What Do Researchers Do? Early career progression of doctoral graduates, Vitae 2013

⁴ www.vitae.ac.uk/pirls

If you manage researchers you can...

- encourage a pro-active approach to professional development
- avoid assumptions about what an individual researcher wants to do
- create opportunities for open and honest discussion and respond positively to researchers
- be ready to help researchers consider all the options
- mentor individuals within your areas of expertise
- help in finding information or advice when looking beyond their (or your) area of expertise
- support researchers to develop the knowledge and skills they need for a chosen career path
- make introductions to collaborators/ professional networks
- think creatively, for example delegating some of your work might be a development opportunity for one of your team
- take advantage of relevant training or networks available to you as a line-manager, supervisor, or PI.

UK Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, principle 5

Individual researchers share the responsibility for and need to pro-actively engage in their own personal and career development, and lifelong learning.



The sense of moving forward in our working lives is important - it motivates and inspires us.

Nicola Linkleter⁵

Helpful links and services

Information

- What do researchers do? www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd

Advice

- Developing individual researchers. www.vitae.ac.uk/developingindividuals
- Equality and Diversity: Actions for All. www.vitae.ac.uk/actionsforall
- Preparing for professional development conversations for research staff. www.vitae.ac.uk/achieveyourbest
- The career-wise researcher. www.vitae.ac.uk/careerwiseresearcher
- Career management for researchers. www.vitae.ac.uk/careermanagement
- Leadership development for new and aspiring PIs. www.vitae.ac.uk/leadershipforPIs

Mentoring or coaching

- Approaches to coaching and mentoring. www.vitae.ac.uk/coachingandmentoringapproaches
- Using coaching with researchers. www.vitae.ac.uk/coachingcasestudies

⁵ Guardian Careers blog: <http://www.theguardian.com/careers/careers-blog/how-to-constructive-discussions-career-progression>

Opportunities

- Benefits of professional placements for researchers. www.vitae.ac.uk/benefitsofplacements
- The value of networking. www.vitae.ac.uk/valueofnetworking
- Taking advantage of opportunities. www.vitae.ac.uk/takingadvantageofopportunities

Tools

- The Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF) www.vitae.ac.uk/RDFformanagers
- Lenses on the RDF. www.vitae.ac.uk/RDFlenses

Examples

- Researcher career stories. www.vitae.ac.uk/careerstories
- Researcher CV examples. www.vitae.ac.uk/cvexamples



Vitae, is an international programme led and managed by CRAC, a not-for-profit registered UK charity dedicated to active career learning and development. Working in the UK since 1968, when we ran our first project to support transitions of doctoral researchers to industry, Vitae has great expertise at enhancing the skills and career impact of researchers locally, within a global context.

We work in partnership with UK and international higher education institutions, research organisations, funders, and national bodies to meet society's need for high-level skills and innovation.

Vitae aims:

- **Influence effective policy** development and implementation relating to researcher development to build human capital
- **Enhance higher education** provision to train and develop researchers
- **Empower researchers** to make an impact in their careers
- **Evidence the impact** of professional and career development for researchers

Vitae and its membership programme is managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation.

Further information on our activities with HEIs, researchers and employers may be found on this website, www.vitae.ac.uk