

## Achieving a work-life balance

### For this project...

We interviewed eighteen academics in leadership positions from five UK universities about the things that they wish they had known when they started out. We have used this information to develop guidance and training materials for the development of the next generation.

### Advice from academic and research leaders

- Don't read or do everything – learn to delegate to other people, ask for help and say “no”
- Take time out of work on a regular basis
- Put family first and acknowledge that having a family will impact on career decisions
- Create a boundary between work and home
- Develop a strategy for dealing with emails and competing demands
- Learn the “strategic yes”

Many of the leaders interviewed for this study commented on how important it was to put appropriate boundaries in place in their lives to stop work from consuming everything. This section identifies top tips from our leaders about things they do to help with this. Aspiring research and academic leaders are encouraged to think early on about how to manage competing demands and prevent overload.

### **Don't read or do everything – learn to delegate to other people, ask for help and say “no”**

Our interviewees reflected on the steep learning curve that they encountered when they stepped into a leadership position and found that the workload increased exponentially. In particular, most of them made reference to the fact that you can't do everything and that prioritising and not saying “yes” to everything were important skills to learn.

“I thought I had to read every document ... when we had to generate some random new document when I came into the new position, it never occurred to me to ask the people who had done the job in the previous year, or to ask for someone else to edit it for me. Or... I wouldn't have time so I would leave it too late to give someone else time to give me editing help. So start early and get other people to help you with editing, contributing.”

“You need to be writing grants, you need to do community service and by that I mean reviewing papers, sitting on grant panels and all these things. Sitting on college committees, administrative work, supervising and mentoring people, so these are all demands whether you are a leader of a lab or a small research team or in my position and these are so many demands and it is very difficult to manage them all. So your own time management is really, really important and prioritising the different demands and learning to just juggle because most of them, no researcher is prepared for.”

### **Take time out of work on a regular basis**

Our leaders also recognised the importance of taking time out of work to prevent burn out – although it was clear that work overload was the norm and pressures on a daily basis made this hard to do. They also mentioned the importance of communicating positive messages to other people about taking time out in order to support their staff and set a good example.

“take time out....That’s my other real lesson, because otherwise you burn out from it and it just becomes too much...making sure you take a lunch break and that is really, really important, make sure you do some exercise every day, you know, even if it’s just making sure you walk; leave this office...I think that’s really important to make sure other people are doing that as well, and that’s a really, really important lesson to say, “Right, I’m switching off now. Alright, if I’m going to play a game on my computer at home that’s fine, if I’m going to do the ironing it’s fine,” but don’t feel guilty about it because there is another life outside of here.”

### **Put family first and acknowledge that having a family will impact on career decisions**

Several of our interviewees talked about balancing family and home life with work demands. In addition, several of our female leaders mentioned that you can’t have everything at the same time and that being a leader and having a family can involve having to make some difficult decisions.

“I was invited to go to [US university], I was also headhunted to go to Australia and also move to [a UK Russell Group university], but I’ve got a family and the children were at a critical stage at school and I didn’t feel the upheaval of moving was really in their interest.”

### **Create a boundary between work and home**

It came through strongly in the interviews that creating a boundary between work and home was considered to be very important. Many people mentioned that it was far too easy to take work and problems home with them, and that learning or creating strategies to prevent this from happening is important.

“I think my most important advice would be to make sure that the responsibilities and the tough things that you have to take on are something that you can leave at work and you don’t take home with you. That would be my most important piece of advice. Stay human. And actually by doing that you don’t grow too thick a skin to actually do the job effectively.”

### **Develop a strategy for dealing with emails and competing demands**

The interviewees felt that academic life had become increasingly demanding over the past 10-20 years and that there wasn’t adequate support within the existing structures to help academics to balance competing demands. They commented on this and also on how they developed their own systems to help them manage. Aspiring leaders should think early on about whether they are prepared for the large workloads and competing demands and whether they would be able to devise effective strategies in order to cope.

“I don’t think it’s really clearly enough defined within the university structure about how you can manage those 2 parts, the essential elements of an academic’s role if you like.”

“I think what I’ve learned subsequently is I’ve got systems in place now which will allow me not to kind of fire through every single email before 10.00am, all the emails which had come through overnight, I can kind of find time during the day to do it. So I’ve developed mechanisms to help me balance that”

### **Learn the “strategic yes”**

We identified the “strategic yes” from what our leaders were telling us about choosing strategically the additional activities that they wanted to be involved in, whilst acknowledging that they couldn’t do everything. Their advice to early career researchers is to think strategically about being involved in activities that will contribute to career progression and are interesting – rather than trying to do everything.

“In this role you have to let stuff go I think. And I think there’s power in letting stuff go.”

“there’s so much pressure on us to do things and to not speak up about it. I was on a research council panel meeting last week and I didn’t mind the fact that I had very long days associated with it, but when they were sending me paperwork at midnight the night before the meeting I took the view that I wasn’t going to read it. And I went to the meeting and said, “I haven’t read this therefore I can’t comment on it” and I was the person actually leading that section. And my advice was that they would have to defer it until the next meeting. Because there’s a lot of pressure on people to do things and I just said, “Sorry that’s not reasonable. You’re asking me to do a job with integrity”.”

## Mapping to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

### B2 Self-management

Your reflections on achieving a work / life balance