

Research Councils UK (RCUK) response to independent review of researcher skills development (Hodge Review)

January 2011

Research Councils UK (RCUK) announced, on 6 January 2011, the outcomes of a review led by Professor Alison Hodge MBE to consider the progress made in implementing the recommendations related to researchers' skills and career development made by Sir Gareth Roberts in *SET for Success* in 2002.

The Hodge Review report *Review of progress in implementing the recommendations of Sir Gareth Roberts, regarding employability and career development of PhD students and research staff*, recognises the progress made by research organisations in providing support and training for researchers is encouraging. There is a clear message in the report that both funders of research and research organisations should continue to stimulate and reinforce skills and career development opportunities.

The following is a detailed response from RCUK to each of the recommendations made by the Hodge Review.

Recommendation 1

Future funding should aim to move from a quantified starting point to clearly defined end points. Progress needs to be monitored and any appropriate realignment implemented.

Response: The principle of identifying the distance travelled from a defined starting position is recognised as good practice.

RCUK required research organisations to provide outline strategies in 2004, followed by annual reports. To inform the Panel's review we procured a comparative analysis of the 2009 reports and the outline strategies. A copy is available¹.

RCUK has indicated² that the key aspects of future reporting are likely to be: progress towards sustainability of the researcher development agenda, and the impact of the activities undertaken as part of this agenda, particularly with regard to employability.

In developing any future reporting requirements, RCUK will take account of the Panel recommendation, the learning from the comparative analysis and other sources of information including the RCUK Assurance programme, benchmarking projects and other information relating to Concordat implementation and the QAA's audit of postgraduate programmes.

RCUK also expects that ROs will wish to monitor the outcomes of their investment in skills development and ROs are encouraged to use the Framework³ produced by the Impact and Evaluation Group to assist this.

¹ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/researchcareers/Analysis20042009RobertsReports.pdf>

² FAQs on the Statement of Expectations section 6: <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/researchcareers/faqs.pdf>

³ Commonly referred to as the Rugby Team Impact Framework (RTIF) <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/1418/Rugby-Team-activities.html>

Recommendation 2

RCUK needs to ensure that specific funding and other initiatives continue to stimulate and reinforce the development of the transferable skills of researchers, using mechanisms that are efficient for the whole higher education sector and other stakeholders.

Response: RCUK recognises the continuing importance of researcher development and has made this clear in its 'Statement of Expectations' regarding researcher development⁴. RCUK expects research organisations to ensure that the cost of researcher development is fully included within their calculation of fees levels for postgraduate research students and the full economic costs of research - using the indirect cost rate calculated using TRAC methodology. These changes to funding mechanisms (including cessation of separate, ring-fenced payments and providing funding through normal training and research grant mechanisms) emphasize that researcher development should be embedded in the normal practices of research organisations.

Recommendation 3

All funders must contribute financially (directly and indirectly) to the skills development of PhD students and research staff.

Response: RCUK welcomes this recommendation, and has introduced changes to the mechanisms by which researcher development is funded, which should allow and encourage research organisations to recover funding for researcher development from all funders of research and research students.

RCUK will work with the co-signatories of the 'Concordat to support the career development of researchers' Strategy Group to 'align their support for transferable and career development skills' thus taking forward this recommendation.

Recommendation 4

Research Organisations must ensure that expertise is maintained in specialist roles dedicated to maintaining the skills development of researchers, even following changes in funding mechanisms.

Response: RCUK recognises that expertise in researcher development has grown significantly since 2004, and strongly supports the recommendation that research organisations consider how to capitalise on this expertise to maintain the quality of their provision for researchers.

⁴ The Statement of Expectations and related documents can be found at <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/ResearchCareers/Pages/CareerDevelopment.aspx>

Recommendation 5

Research organisations should continue to find ways of sharing provision and best practice to minimise duplicated effort and support researchers more effectively.

Response: RCUK recognises the importance that both sharing of practice and research organisations' willingness to contribute to national projects have had on the national progress in researcher development.

RCUK will continue to encourage the sharing of provision and of best practice through the Vitae Hubs and database of practice, and by working with the sector.

Recommendation 6

Research organisations, employers and other relevant stakeholders such as Vitae, should develop systematic and frequent interactions such that the focus on employment needs is the driver for future developments of transferable skills training. Mechanisms for this and the blocks that prevent it happening must be understood and improved.

Response: RCUK recognises that an effective interaction between the HE sector and employers is essential to maximise the value from its investments in research and people.

RCUK welcomes the recommendation that there should be more systematic interaction with employers to inform the development of transferable skills training, and that mechanisms and barriers must be understood and improved. Vitae and the regional hubs provide many routes for sharing of practice and RCUK would see these routes as key in further exploring with the sector the identification and involvement of relevant employers. We also recognise that new systems and structures should not be created unless there is reasonable expectation that they will add value.

Recommendation 7

Vitae could be instrumental in providing a relatively independent and centralised coordinating function to establish a baseline, monitor progress and communicate widely about the benefits of the development of the generic skills of researchers. Recalling the low level of engagement with employers, the panel believes that Vitae could take a more proactive and visible role as an intermediary between research organisations and other organisations such as employers, recruitment organisations, careers services, and related stakeholders.

Response: The Vitae programme is a key element of RCUK's implementation of the recommendations of the Roberts report and we are pleased that the panel has recognised its value.

We anticipate that the panel's views will be an important input to the Vitae programme in the latter part of the current contract. RCUK will also give serious consideration to the views and recommendations of the panel in determining RCUK's future support for researcher development and managing the transition of the Vitae programme towards a self-sustaining position.

Recommendation 8

To achieve greater stability of the transferable skills training and career development of researchers, it is recommended that all research organisations should recognise and reward appropriate behaviours such as good supervision of PhD students and career development of all research staff through their human resources policies and practices.

Response: RCUK welcomes this recommendation and notes that there are several sources of guidance or support aimed at helping staff to develop post-graduates and research staff effectively. It will be important to ensure that these work well and together.

The *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers* (to which RCUK is a signatory) states that “Institutions will wish to consider how research managers’ performance in these areas is developed, assessed and rewarded, and how effectively this supports good research management.” (Principle 2, paragraph 3).

The Vitae programme (supported by RCUK) places significant emphasis on building the capacity of staff developers in research organisations. Vitae has also developed and led a process for UK Universities (23 so far) to gain the HR Excellence in Research badge from the European Commission which recognises good HR practice in supporting researchers.

Precept 11 of the QAA Code of Practice for postgraduate research programmes addresses the expectation that supervisors will demonstrate their continuing professional development in activities to support their work as supervisors.

RCUK will continue to work with Vitae, the QAA, UUK, the Funding Bodies and other signatories and supporters of the Concordat to review the impact of these measures and implement this recommendation.

Recommendation 9

Wide communication and promotion of the standing and value of the UK doctorate both within and outside the UK is vital. In addition it is recommended that international activities in the development of researchers’ skills is monitored and shared systematically by RCUK and Vitae.

Response: RCUK also recognises the importance of promoting the value of the UK doctorate internationally. We are pleased that the panel sees a link between our implementation of the researcher development agenda and the UK’s attractiveness as a destination for research and research training.

We are aware that Vitae has begun to build a reputation outside the UK and that this also reflects positively on the UK approach to researcher development.

We agree with the panel on the importance of monitoring and learning from international developments and we will consider the appropriate role that RCUK and Vitae can play in partnership with the HE sector.