

Realising Our Potential

RUSSELL
GROUP

Backing Talent and Strengthening
UK Research Culture and Environment

Case Studies



Introduction

Our report 'Realising Our Potential: Backing Talent and Strengthening UK Research Culture and Environment' examines some of the key drivers, challenges and unintended consequences relating to our research environment and culture. It identifies practical steps which stakeholders across the sector can use to help make the UK one of the best places in the world to do research.

To support this work, we have drawn together case studies from Russell Group universities highlighting a range of different approaches to supporting rewarding, purposeful and stable research careers, by enhancing the experience of working in research as well as promoting more diverse and inclusive workplaces.

We hope this will be a useful resource to share and adopt good practice more widely helping to drive positive and effective changes across the UK.



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University of Birmingham

Postdoctoral researcher contract extensions

The University of Birmingham used an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) “Inclusion Matters” grant to create a pilot scheme to support the career progression of postdoctoral researchers from underrepresented backgrounds working in physical science and engineering research.

Participants were provided with a three-month extension to their contracts and offered bespoke training packages designed to develop them as independent researchers. The postdoctoral researchers involved spent time away from their main project, working with an experienced mentor to write papers, develop individual fellowship proposals, and grow their academic and industrial networks. The mentor was someone other than the main project supervisor, and helped with working on proposals, providing introductions to key people in industry to support the creation of professional networks, and giving advice on how to pursue an academic career. The postdoctoral researchers met with their mentors regularly throughout the course of the pilot scheme.

Three female engineers, one of whom has a disability, were supported successfully in the first pilot phase of the programme. The participants reported increased confidence in their research ideas and said working with a mentor improved their understanding of the career options available to them.

The University of Birmingham is currently working with funders to identify opportunities to carry the successful pilot forward and extend this kind of support to individuals from a wider range of groups underrepresented within the physical sciences.

University of Bristol

Research Improvement Group

The University of Bristol has created a Research Improvement Group (RIG), directed by an academic lead for research improvement. The RIG takes the lead for a range of activities to enhance a positive culture of research integrity and improvement across all faculties.

The group brings academics at different stages in their research careers together with professional services colleagues working in library, research evidence, staff development and other areas, to ensure activity is aligned and coordinated. It has strong links to senior leadership within the university, reporting directly to the University Research Committee (URC) and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research. A member of URC attends RIG meetings.

Specific responsibilities of the RIG include:

- Developing integrated training and development activity for research staff at all career stages, in collaboration with colleagues from doctoral training entities, staff development, human resources, and the research governance team.
- Ensuring dedicated expert academic and research professional support and mentoring at all career stages, including support for and promotion of local UK Reproducibility Networks.
- Assessing current issues that lead to academic and research staff feeling pressured into taking shortcuts and exploring what wider culture changes need to be considered, including specific working practices.

This group has led the inclusion of open research practices in Bristol's revised promotion criteria, using wording that has been shared with a number of other institutions. Their work has built on Bristol's culture of data sharing, and the sector-leading infrastructure developed to support this across the institution.

University of Cambridge

Postdocs to Innovators

The University of Cambridge's Postdocs to Innovators (p2i) network is an international collaboration of higher education institutions and major global companies that supports early career researchers at all stages of the entrepreneurial journey - from those who know nothing about entrepreneurship and want to explore it to those ready to launch their start-up.

Supported by the university's Postdoc Academy, p2i helps researchers develop awareness of the wider UK research and innovation ecosystem and build understanding of how an entrepreneurial mindset and skills can support future careers in all sectors.

The p2i programme enhances existing provision in innovation and entrepreneurial training at partner organisations by filling a gap at the very early stages of the entrepreneurial life cycle. Since 2017, p2i has successfully engaged over 550 postdocs through six enterprise fairs, 18 residential courses, 11 entrepreneurship events, three new entrepreneurial postdoc societies, four Cambridge business plan competitions and the p2i online course. The participation of female researchers in the programme increased from 35% in 2017 to 50% in 2020.

Early evaluation of the programme found researchers who had never thought of themselves as entrepreneurs are now CEOs of start-ups or have joined start-ups. Others reported that they were more prepared and more confident when they transitioned to industry positions, and another set of researchers said they applied their newly acquired mindsets and skills to secure academic positions. Based on the success of the pilot programme, in 2020 the p2i partners renewed their commitment to the partnership for a further three years.

Cardiff University

Disglair Early Career Academic Programme

In July 2019, Cardiff University piloted a cross-university 'Darlithwyr Disglair/Brilliant Lecturers' programme that offered 18-month, fixed-term professional development opportunities for new early career academics to take up what would be their first or near-first lectureship.

This offered a clear transition from doctoral or postdoctoral research to a university lectureship and supported university research leave for permanent academics, giving benefits to both early career and more established researchers as an integrated scheme of research support.

Each applicant was appointed by school panels, some of which piloted interview questions explicitly embracing the principles of the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and responsible research assessment. These focused on the individuals' research outputs and their research vision and ambitions rather than proxy markers of research quality, such as journal impact factors. Successful applicants were appointed to areas that filled teaching and research needs in schools where colleagues had been awarded university research leave.

36 early career researchers have been appointed in 20 of Cardiff University's 24 academic schools as the Disglair cohort, working in cutting-edge research that spans bioarchaeology, novel therapeutics for eye diseases and better use of mobile technologies to support healthy habits.

Participants receive targeted development support, which includes a four-day leadership programme, mentor matching with a near-peer colleague and a £3,000 personal research fund.

The Disglair team has also rethought the content of the leadership programme to take account of the changing working practices of university life under lockdown and what life as an early career academic might look like in a post-Covid-19 higher education sector in the UK.

Durham University

Supporting postgraduate researchers' mental health and wellbeing

Durham University secured funding from the Office for Students to develop new online educational resources that are helping support postgraduate research students' mental health and wellbeing.

Working with three Doctoral Training Partnerships and the Durham Students' Union, the university created four training modules that identify and address mental health needs within the supervisory relationship to promote early intervention, recognise the specific role of supervisors in supporting mental health and wellbeing, identify the limits of that relationship for resolving wider mental health difficulties, and prevent the development or exacerbation of mental health symptoms by identifying the helpful and unhelpful relationship patterns that can emerge in supervision.

The training materials are designed to be accessible for students and supervisors, so that all parties have resources available to them at the point of need. They provide advice and information that helps individuals support their own wellbeing, and that of a peer or student. The contents of the modules are also being used as the basis for group training to increase awareness of the mental health support available for research students and supervisors.

Modules and course materials have been made open access, to help share best practice and enable other higher education institutions to improve the quality of the online mental health training available for research students, supervisors and university staff.

University of Edinburgh

Equipping leaders to create positive cultures

The University of Edinburgh used an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) "Inclusion Matters" award in 2018 to explore the factors which reduce diversity in large grant leadership. Senior staff worked with colleagues from across the university to build an evidence base to improve their understanding of the institution's environment and culture. While data on awards, populations and good practice were the project's first goal, a more lasting impact has come from connecting a diverse group of people, services and schools to better tackle culture issues that sit outside organisational structures.

Enhanced communication and openness have allowed the university to identify and tackle systemic issues that affect research culture across a devolved, complex institution. Connecting people to tackle culture issues has helped in overcoming resources being disconnected from those who can drive change, addressing issues of discomfort or defensiveness and moving away from approaches which seek to "fix" individuals rather than acknowledging systemic factors at the heart of research culture problems. Insights gained through the Inclusion Matters work were disseminated widely across the university alongside findings from an institution-wide research culture survey to increase knowledge and understanding of good practice.

Supporting leaders to recognise their power and freedom to drive change is a key part of the University of Edinburgh's plans to develop a more positive research culture. Learnings from the Inclusion Matters work are being applied through the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF) Development Network. Edinburgh leads a consortium of seven institutions from across the UK with broad resources and expertise to develop a new generation of 240 leaders.

Training and support for the FLF network is designed to equip these leaders to realise ambitious research goals while creating positive cultures. These resources will help normalise responsible research, collegiality and a healthy research environment. The university is also committed to making as much training material as possible available on an open access basis to support and enable other institutions and organisations to develop future leaders responsibly.

University of Exeter

Early career researcher networks

The University of Exeter has embedded the voices of early career researchers (ECRs) into academic departments by promoting the development of new peer group networks across most disciplines and all colleges.

Subject-specific ECR groups, initiated by researchers, for researchers, are supported by the Doctoral College. The Doctoral College also enables and promotes university-wide ECR liaison forums, which bring together researchers from different campuses to help improve coordination and ensure the shared requirements of ECRs working in different areas are understood fully by senior staff. The liaison forums meet monthly and provide ECRs with regular opportunities to raise issues of concern and give them a voice at senior university working groups, including the Research and Impact Executive group (RIEG), an executive-level body which oversees the delivery of the university's research and impact strategy.

Representation at RIEG provides ECRs with a direct link to senior staff that will facilitate engagement in strategic initiatives, enabling their views to help shape university policy and processes. It is through this combined grass-roots development of networks and buy-in from senior staff that ECRs have seen significant inclusion in university policy making, including the new research and impact strategy, and a revised research concordat.

In 2020, this process was streamlined with more strategically important issues being taken from the liaison forums to a newly formed ECR steering group, chaired by the Dean. This group will report directly to senior university managers and will allow more time at the ECR liaison forums for networking. This will ensure that the ECR community can continue to take an active role in the strategic support of their cohort whilst helping to enhance the associated research culture of the university.

University of Glasgow

Building a collegial research culture

As part of an institutional strategic plan for research culture drawn up following extensive consultation with researchers, funders and others, the University of Glasgow is working to help build an environment in which research colleagues can better support each other to succeed.

Specific changes include the introduction to the professorial promotion criteria of requirements for staff to demonstrate collegiality in engagement with other members of the university community, and a commitment to open research practices.

Since 2019, anyone being promoted to professor or wishing to advance across professorial grades has had to demonstrate collegiality in at least four of seven dimensions in which research performance is assessed. Accompanying guidance was also amended to include practical, clear examples of what collegiality might look like. Examples of positive behaviours included supporting early career researchers in their funding applications and passing on opportunities to give conference talks to colleagues.

Additional steps being taken to enable closer working between colleagues include significant new investment in digital support for networking, videoconferencing and virtual meeting attendance. Financial and technological support is also being provided to help networks of researchers collaborate and exploit research opportunities as they arise.

The University of Glasgow champions a culture of open collaboration with the sector and all materials and projects relating to culture are freely available to view, review and reuse. The contribution of individuals and teams to a positive research culture is also recognised and celebrated at an annual Research Culture Awards ceremony.

Imperial College London

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Seed Fund

Students, researchers, teaching staff and other members of the Imperial College community who have an idea on how to promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are able to apply to the university's EDI Seed Fund to make these ideas a reality. Up to £10,000 is available through the fund, with individual projects supported with between £300 and £2,000.

The EDI Seed Fund supports bottom-up, community-generated ideas aimed at promoting and improving EDI. It not only promotes local activity but helps to discover ideas and initiatives worth sharing across the university which, with longer-term support, will help Imperial to deliver on the commitments in its EDI strategy.

Projects supported in the first round of grants in 2019 included a one-day workshop led by PhD student Madina Wane (with support from staff) to empower Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) undergraduates who are considering research careers.

The Shifting the Lens project, which highlights and celebrates staff and students from ethnic minority backgrounds at Imperial College, also received support. This campaign was created by a project team on the 2019 IMPACT talent development programme for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff.

King's College London

Reforming the use of fixed-term contracts

In 2019, King's College London made sweeping changes to policies around the use of short and fixed-term contracts for academic staff that have helped provide teaching and research staff with additional career stability and better career opportunities, and reduced university bureaucracy significantly. The changes were introduced in order to help staff plan ahead, in both professional and personal terms, reducing pressures that over prolonged periods can impact negatively on staff wellbeing and can be detrimental to the academic quality of teaching and research.

Under the new policy, all non-externally funded staff on fixed-term contracts who had been employed at King's for longer than four years continuously were offered the opportunity to transfer to an open-ended, permanent contract. The use of fixed-term contracts of 12 months or less has been reduced significantly, with a new presumption that fixed-term education-focused or internally funded research appointments should be for a minimum of two years. The new guidance makes clear sequential fixed-term contracts should not exceed three years in total. Where the staffing need exceeds three years, appointments are now made on an open-ended basis.

In recognition of some of the wider contributing factors, King's completed a root-and-branch review and simplification of the curriculum. It is also looking closely at how research projects are planned and scrutinising approaches to business planning that in the past may have contributed to an overreliance on fixed-term contracts.

Fixed-term contracts are still part of King's staffing strategy but are used far more selectively. Circumstances in which they may be employed include covering a period of parental leave, sick leave, and in connection with external research grants. Since the new policy came into effect, more than 80 academic, research and teaching fixed-term contracts have been converted to open-ended contracts, the majority as a result of these new provisions. King's continues to work on implementing the new policy across the university.

University of Leeds

Careers support

The University of Leeds funded the creation of a Careers with Research Consultant role to provide postdoctoral researchers and other research active staff with enhanced targeted career development support.

Supported by senior university management, this new role was created following extensive consultation with researchers and is part of the university's implementation plan for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

One of the first projects the new Careers with Research Consultant will be undertaking is the relaunch of a Career Architect programme, which had previously been run successfully by the university. The Career Architect initiative was developed in 2013 as part of a joint project funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and Wellcome supporting postdoctoral researchers to explore career opportunities outside of academia that would make use of their research backgrounds in preparation for the end of grant award periods.

The programme is built around career development strategies, practical support for applications and interviews, identifying opportunities and most importantly enabling researchers to understand that their skills and experience make them highly employable with numerous career options. Since it was established, it has successfully supported 150 researchers with 78% of participants transitioning out of postdoctoral research roles, the majority moving into industry.

The Careers with Research Consultant will now work to make Career Architect available to a larger number of participants with the project due to relaunch in 2021. Alongside the programme, a bank of case studies using previous Career Architect participants will be created to show researchers what career options are possible.

University of Liverpool

Prosper: unlocking postdoctoral career potential

Based at the University of Liverpool, Prosper is a new approach to career development that unlocks postdoctoral researchers' potential to thrive in multiple career pathways.

Supported by £3.6 million from the Research England Development Fund, and an additional £800,000 from employer partners and local leadership, Prosper works directly with employers to provide postdoctoral researchers with real-world insight into careers beyond academia.

Prosper was designed to address attitudes and assumptions toward careers beyond academia revealed through early discussions with postdocs, Principal Investigators, and employers. These showed that postdocs are often unsure of the career options available to them and how they "fit" into other occupational settings. It also revealed concerns over a lack of parity of esteem for roles beyond the academic career track. One way Prosper is helping address this is by developing and sharing case studies, in which former postdocs discuss how their perceptions of roles beyond academia have changed.

Prosper staff have established relationships with over 120 stakeholders, both nationally and internationally, and in June 2020 launched a prototype postdoc career development resource portal. The team is now working with employers to create a series of career clusters that will support more targeted career development interventions. These will be piloted with a group of 50 postdocs at the University of Liverpool in 2021, and the scheme will be rolled out to the University of Manchester and Lancaster University in summer 2021.

London School of Economics and Political Science

New Research Staff Career

In 2015, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) established a new career track, the New Research Staff Career (NRSC), with the explicit aim of providing a comprehensive framework for career development and progression of research staff.

Introduced after extensive consultation with research staff and their representatives, the NRSC has three levels equivalent to LSE's standard academic career levels: Assistant Professorial Research Fellow, Associate Professorial Research Fellow, and Professorial Research Fellow.

The NRSC provides enhanced salaries and personal research time funded by the School where necessary, and bridging funding to support career progression. It is a central plank of LSE's response to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. The criteria for promotion on the New Research Staff Career focus on quality of research outputs, management of research activity and other contributions to the work of the School. The LSE Promotions Committee engages in detailed scholarly evaluation of the publications submitted by each NRSC promotion candidate, drawing on reports from distinguished referees and experts at peer institutions.

In 2018, LSE also established a parallel Policy Fellow Career track, for staff who specialise in policy work. This track has four levels: Policy Officer, Policy Fellow, Senior Policy Fellow, and Distinguished Policy Fellow. This provides a distinctive career path and values those dedicated to research and its application in policy. Criteria for promotion on this track focus on the quality and extent of the policy-oriented work and engagement activities, and the contributions made to policymaking, public debate and impact.

For both tracks, LSE provides a wide range of career development support, including through its programme of career development reviews. The LSE Appointments Committee monitors the promotions process for both tracks, and appointments onto them, in relation to equality and diversity.

University of Manchester

President's Doctoral Scholar Award

The President's Doctoral Scholar (PDS) Award scheme at the University of Manchester is a three-year programme which provides outstanding research students from across the UK and around the world with access to bespoke training in areas such as leadership, collaboration, public engagement, publication, sustainability and commercialisation.

Each year up to 100 of the university's postgraduate research students receive the PDS Award, with selection criteria based on academic excellence and leadership potential. The first cohort of PDS Award scholars commenced their studies in September 2012.

Specific training activities include leadership in action, where participants have the opportunity to consider relevant theory and practice their unique leadership styles. Award holders also play a role in managing a number of schemes funded by the university, giving doctoral students the chance to gain valuable transferable skills in planning, organisation, negotiation and collaboration.

Example of PDS-led initiatives include Anything but Research, where students can apply for the university to fund students' non-research ideas with the aim of improving the overall doctoral experience. Successful projects include sporting activities, clubs and competitions. Additionally, the Postgraduate Summer Research Showcase is organised by PDS Award holders, when postgraduate researchers across the university are encouraged to promote their research on posters, providing opportunities to disseminate their research to a wider audience.

The PDS Awards are open to prospective candidates across all research areas. Successful applicants receive funding for their doctoral studies as well as an additional £1,000 enhancement to the annual living allowance.

Newcastle University

Action for Impact

Newcastle University developed Action for Impact, a programme which provides research active staff across the North East with the support they need to develop the personal, societal and commercial impact of their research.

The scheme, which is supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Wellcome, is open to researchers at higher education institutions that are part of the Northern Accelerator: Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria and Sunderland universities.

Through a series of workshops primarily targeted at early career researchers, participants receive training that helps them articulate innovative novel ideas, develop plans to explore the feasibility of research proposals, understand and explore opportunities for Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, develop their presentation and pitching skills, and much more. In addition to joining a network of like-minded academics, participants gain understanding and knowledge of core competencies that will support their career progression inside or outside of academia.

Course materials and the format of training modules have been adapted to reflect the ongoing situation with Covid-19. All sessions are interactive, focused on building a supportive cohort in a positive researcher community and all at a pace that considers new working environments. In addition to group work, researchers are able to take advantage of one-to-one coaching appointments with course leads to discuss any issues or share successes they may be having.

University of Nottingham and University of Birmingham

Team Science at the Centre of Membrane Proteins and Receptors (COMPARE)

The Centre of Membrane Proteins and Receptors (COMPARE), established by the Universities of Nottingham and Birmingham in 2016, is helping transform the way individual contributions to research are recognised by promoting a 'Team Science' approach to complex, interdisciplinary research challenges.

Analysis from the Academy of Medical Sciences has shown there has often been a perceived lack of recognition of researchers' contributions within teams. This acts as a major deterrent to collaborative or joint working, making it difficult to successfully build a team approach to tackling multifaceted problems. From the outset, COMPARE's reward and recognition systems have sought to drive collaboration and incentivise researchers to take a Team Science approach to their work. These initiatives have helped improve individuals' experience of research, promoting collegiality and contributing to a healthy research culture.

The delivery of this approach, led by Professor Jeanette Woolard, Deputy Director of COMPARE in Nottingham, has involved a number of Team Science activities which include the development of networking opportunities across the two universities, the establishment of an Early Career Researcher Team Science Committee with a significant budget, and supported conferences, workshops, collaborative projects, and training events.

This collaborative research environment underpinned Wellcome's award of a new PhD programme in 'Drug Discovery and Team Science'. This will recruit four students each year, over a five-year recruitment period, with the first cohort having started in October 2020. Projects are fully funded for four years, with funding in place for a 'transition period' following completion of the PhD programme. This additional support will allow students to explore career development opportunities before making crucial decisions about their futures.

University of Oxford

Careers Conference for Researchers

The University of Oxford's annual Careers Conference for Researchers offers research staff and PhD students the opportunity to explore a range of rewarding career pathways beyond or alongside academia.

The aim of the conference is to help researchers build understanding of trends in key employment sectors, the skills sought by each, and of how to make practical preparations for transitioning from academia, or into the interface between academia, applied and/or policy work. Participants have the opportunity to meet and hear from employees who moved from a PhD or research position into jobs in other sectors that make the most of their research training and experience.

The range of speakers reflects the diversity of Oxford's research environment, with participants hearing from individuals who are applying their expertise in social sciences, the humanities and sciences to a range of work sectors and influential roles.

Sessions have covered policy roles in heritage, medical science and social development, working with data in a business context, careers in sustainability, and professional and strategic roles in business. Outside of formal sessions, the conference also offers targeted networking opportunities with employers who are actively seeking research-trained applicants including, for example, NHS England, the British Museum and the National Trust.

Queen Mary University of London

Postgraduate mental health support

Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) used funding secured through the Office for Students and Research England's Catalyst Fund to improve support for the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers.

The project, delivered by QMUL's Advice and Counselling Team and Researcher Development Team, marked a step-change in mental health services at the university, providing postgraduates with wraparound support which included access to weekly support groups for PhD students, training to help researchers manage emotional strain, new training for supervisors and staff working with postgraduate researchers, and wellbeing campaigns and events.

Evaluation demonstrated clearly the PhD support groups were effective, with participants reporting reduced feelings of anxiety and isolation, increased satisfaction with their work-life balance and a higher degree of confidence they could complete their PhD within the institutional timeframe. The groups operate within the Advice and Counselling Service's existing clinical and risk procedures, ensuring timely referrals into alternative support according to need. Anonymised feedback has also been used to help identify challenges that may require intervention at an institutional level.

The training provision developed with the help of the Charlie Waller Trust for PhD supervisors included new material to help staff recognise the first signs of deteriorating mental health and additional guidance on responding to a student in crisis. Key elements of this training have been included within the mandatory training all new supervisors complete before working with PhD candidates.

QMUL also worked with the Charlie Waller Trust to develop training sessions for PhD students in their first, second and third years to help them manage emotional pressures, acknowledging that this is as important as academic skills training in navigating the PhD journey successfully.

The PhD student and supervisor training resources are available on an open access basis and include notes for instructors and participant workbooks.

Queen's University Belfast

Queen's Fellowship Academy

Early career researchers (ECRs) at Queen's University Belfast receive targeted career development support through the Queen's Fellowship Academy.

The Fellowship Academy provides support across three main themes: research funding, leadership development, and networking and impact. Specific training modules include programmes that help ECRs communicate their research and its strategic impact to audiences, develop their understanding of grant award processes, project management techniques, networking skills, and research team leadership. Key business, academic and community leaders work alongside professional services staff to deliver training and Fellowship Academy activities are designed to help ensure research fellows can play a full and active role in the university community and wider society.

Created in January 2020, the Fellowship Academy brought together and enhanced existing resources to address specific challenges Fellows can face in their career progression. It also helps individuals improve their understanding of academic career paths and gain transferable skills that can help them transition to jobs in other sectors if they choose.

Support delivered through the Fellowship Academy is tailored to the individual, with Fellows collaborating with managers and mentors to create their own bespoke and active professional development plan. In addition to academic mentors, Fellows are also offered the opportunity to have an institutional sponsor within the university. The sponsors are typically senior managers who can provide Fellows with access to wider internal and external networks and offer a different professional perspective that can help develop leadership knowledge.

ECRs from across the university who have successfully applied for internal and external fellowships are invited to join the Academy. The Academy is highly diverse by demographics and disciplines which adds to the dynamic nature of its activity. The Fellowship Academy is a crucial element of the university's commitment to create an environment that empowers all employees to take control of their career development.

University of Sheffield

Research on Research Institute (RoRI)

The University of Sheffield joined forces with Wellcome, the company Digital Science and the University of Leiden to establish a new Institute working with research funders, publishers and others to undertake transformative research on research systems, culture and decision-making.

Launched in 2019, the Research on Research Institute (RoRI) is supporting interdisciplinary research into how research is funded, practiced and evaluated, and how research cultures and systems can be made more efficient, open, inclusive and impactful. Partners in RoRI include research agencies and foundations from 14 countries, which together invest over £15 billion a year in research. With these partners, the RoRI team is co-designing projects and sharing data to inform comparative analysis of research systems and cultures.

The Institute's research is helping develop, test and evaluate novel approaches to decision-making, prioritisation, allocation of resources and other elements of the research process which can support a more open, diverse and healthy research environment. Specific activities include partnership projects, a rolling programme of research seminars and webinars, as well as regular reports, working papers and think-pieces. All research methodologies and findings will be made openly available.

Research careers is a priority area of investigation, with work underway to examine how funders and institutions can better understand and support diverse career pathways, avoid precarity and prevent the loss of skills and talent from research systems. Other research work includes projects looking at current incentive structures and how they might be changed to reduce bureaucracy, and better recognise and reward diverse contributions within research ecosystems.

University of Southampton

Concordat Champions

The University of Southampton has appointed “Concordat Champions” who work to create opportunities for researchers to be heard and involved in the development of policies which affect them.

Guided by the principles behind the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, faculty-level champions work alongside school-level concordat representatives to ensure researchers at every stage of their career and groups underrepresented within the research workforce are engaged, supported and actively involved in decision-making processes. They are driving institutional policy and working to build a positive research culture and sense of researcher community across the university.

Concordat Champions have helped shape the university’s response to Covid-19, with concordat representatives based at the School of Health Science leading an early career researchers (ECR) Covid-19 survey that helped identify how the pandemic was impacting ECRs, and actions that should be taken to ensure staff were being supported appropriately. The Champions led the development of survey questions and worked with senior university leadership to ensure key recommendations were implemented as quickly as possible.

The work of the Concordat Champions complements extensive additional measures taken to boost the visibility and engagement of ECRs within the university. This includes ECR representation within school executives, operational committees and groups, regular ECR surveys highlighting career development needs and training, and comprehensive online skills resources aligned with priorities set out in the Vitae Researcher Development Framework.

University College London

Co-creating research supervisor training

Students at University College London (UCL) worked in collaboration with faculty graduate tutors, deputy graduate tutors, Digital Education services and the UCL Doctoral School to update online training resources for research supervisors.

Students played a central role in developing content that was engaging for supervisors who were completing training modules. This included the introduction of an interactive timeline with all the key milestones of the PhD process, and the use of digital flip cards to challenge preconceptions about the role of the PhD. The materials co-created with students formed the basis of a new online training course accessible to new and existing supervisors throughout the academic year. Previously, supervisors had been required to attend mandatory briefings that were scheduled three times a year. The new system provides additional flexibility and easy access to high-quality training materials that are responsive to supervisors’ needs.

The training course was introduced at the start of the 2018/19 academic year and is mandatory for all members of academic staff wishing to be appointed as research supervisors, including those with experience of research supervision at other institutions. Supervisors are able to refer back to training materials at any time to refresh their knowledge, and on completing the online course are eligible for additional Continuing Professional Development provision to enhance their understanding of the role of a supervisor.

As part of the development of new training materials, 11 UCL faculty graduate tutors were interviewed by students to learn about common challenges facing supervisors and examples of best practice. A UCL PhD candidate used insights gained through these in-depth interviews to develop The Good Supervision Guide, a new document highlighting what good supervision practice might mean for individual research supervisors that has been made available to staff working in universities across the UK.

University of Warwick

Accolade programme

Accolade is the University of Warwick's flagship academic career training and events programme for early career researchers and visiting research fellows.

The Accolade scheme was developed by the university's Institute of Advanced Study (IAS). Based on an innovative combination of competency training and support from an interdisciplinary community of practice, it aims to help postdoctoral and research fellows develop the skills necessary to build a successful independent academic career.

Accolade provides early career researchers with access to an extensive range of research webinars, training events and panel discussions that are co-created, facilitated and constantly updated with Fellows, Warwick staff and external consultants. Sessions run twice weekly and for the 2020/21 academic year all activities have successfully moved online to minimise disruption to professional development support resulting from the pandemic.

The programme is open to all IAS Fellows, international postdoctoral scholars and Warwick-based early career researchers. Through a new Associate Fellow programme nearly 60 additional postdoctoral researchers from across the university are engaging with an expanded Accolade programme to enhance their research careers. In 2021, Accolade will be the core of researcher development for 76 postdoctoral fellows across the five European universities of an EU-funded international science and innovation fellowship scheme.

Accolade operates alongside additional academic career development activities within the IAS and is a core element of the wraparound support provided to researchers. Other measures include an Early Career Fellowship scheme which helps researchers refine and maximise the academic outputs and impact from their PhD research, develop fellowship and funding applications and build wider skills in academic leadership.

University of York

Unconscious bias observers

The University of York's Department of Chemistry has developed a scheme which seeks to address the underrepresentation of women and other groups in research positions by introducing unconscious bias observers to job interviews and shortlisting meetings.

The aims of the programme are to reduce unconscious bias at all stages of recruitment and to promote good practice, which benefits all applicants. The role of the observers is to act as a critical friend by listening to and reflecting back to the panel any instances of bias at the point of decision-making. The scheme was piloted with key academic appointments in 2014 before being expanded in 2016 to cover researchers, then all staff groups and postgraduate student recruitment.

To expand their pool of observers, the Department of Chemistry ran an unconscious bias observer training workshop at the end of 2018 that was open to all staff groups including academics, support staff and postdoctoral research associates. The workshop was made available to members of other departments as a way of sharing good practice. Training included a brief introduction to unconscious bias, an overview of the scheme, common types of bias to look out for, tips on giving constructive feedback, and a Q&A. Trainees were also encouraged to shadow a trained observer.

The new efforts to tackle unconscious bias, alongside other measures, have led to significant increases in the percentage of female researchers employed within the department, with women now representing 40% of the research workforce. There have also been improvements in the recruitment ratio of women to men for teaching and scholarship staff. Analysis of recruitment trends since the introduction of the unconscious bias observers has shown female and male appointment rates for researchers are now equivalent, indicating a gender-neutral recruitment process.



Image credits

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Nuclear Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre

Page 2: University of Nottingham

Female student working at the Centre for Dairy Science Innovation, Sutton Bonington Campus, University of Nottingham

Page 14: University of Nottingham

Female researcher working in the new Biodiscovery Institute, University Park, University of Nottingham

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