

The role of early career researchers in defining mass higher education (0170)

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The roles of researchers in the UK higher education institutions are changing. There are increasing numbers of researchers who will not join the mainstream academic tenure and academic staff are teaching increasingly larger classes. In many institutions throughout the UK, researchers are responding to these changes by setting up research staff associations (RSA). Even though they are often rooted in supporting the career development of researchers, RSA are also shaping the policies, nature and the roles and interactions of researchers in their host institutions. However, with the activities and aims of RSA varying between, and also within, institutions it is important to catalogue and understand their differing approaches and impact. Our study addressed this by collecting data on the activities and impact of current RSA with the aim to inform, shape and encourage future RSA and make the most of the opportunities they present.

Research staff play a leading and significant role in the cutting edge research of many UK higher education and research institutions. This role can, if properly managed, both prepare them for their future career and enhance their institution's reputation.

Research staff are primarily focussed on their ongoing research project, and as such their success is evaluated on the basis of research productivity through peer-reviewed publications, grant applications and conference presentations. However, in reality the strong emphasis placed on this narrow measure of a researcher's impact neglects a range of other important 'invisible' contributions that researchers make to their department and the University as a whole. For example, research staff are actively involved in the teaching and supervision of students, which not only eases the teaching and project supervisory load of senior academic staff, but can also benefit students directly through the injection of fresh energy and enthusiasm into these practices. Research staff can also benefit the wider community through outreach activities designed to disseminate their research to the public and raise the public's awareness of their subject. Other research staff may use their research and subject expertise to engage in consultancy and research commercialisation, which can generate additional revenue streams for their departments and universities and in some cases can create jobs in the local economy.

Despite these important contributions, research staff remain especially vulnerable to job losses, typically as a result of the short term nature of much of their contracts, and by working under a principle investigator. The transitory nature of the job often means that researchers are poorly

represented on institutional committees. Furthermore, the focussed nature of their jobs often means that they find it hard to attend training sessions and other events like research seminars that support tenured academics. These difficulties are often confounded by feelings of isolation and the lack of a 'community' of researchers.

The Concordat (Research Councils UK, 2008) in the UK has gone some way to addressing these concerns. The concordat is a contract between the employers, research funders, and researchers that describes the responsibilities of each of the parties. The Concordat states that institutions will provide training and career development opportunities and release research staff from their research duties so that they can attend them. Importantly, the Concordat also requires researchers to take responsibility for their own career plans and recognises the importance of researcher engagement and researcher-led initiatives. One major impact of the Concordat is that issues affecting researchers are becoming increasingly recognised both by institutions and researchers themselves and one initiative taken on by both parties is the setting up of Research Staff Associations (RSA).

At present there is no overriding model for RSA in the UK, but they all have similar aims and a common theme is that they seek to empower research staff within their host institution. A key role of many RSA is to address the issue that, despite the concordat, there remains anecdotal evidence that researchers still do not take up the available opportunities, perhaps because the correct ones are not offered. Therefore, a significant role of many RSA is to canvas the staff, make them aware of the concordat, career opportunities, and feed back to the host institution what further provision is required.

In order to make the most of the opportunities RSA present it is important to catalogue the differing approaches currently undertaken by various RSA and analyse the advantages and disadvantage of these approaches to identify successes and common themes that will enable RSA to have the biggest impact. Our study attempted to address these issues by collecting data on the activities and impact of current RSAs and we will present the results of a survey of many of the existing RSA that illustrates the structures that they use, and the impact that they are having on concordat implementation. We assessed the impact of the RSA by framing our measurements within the Rugby Team Impact Framework (Bromley, Metcalfe, & Park, 2008).

We broadly encountered three types of RSA, inter institutional, whole institution, and departmental. Inter institutional are often subject focused providing opportunities for knowledge exchange and networking between remote researchers. Whole institution groups are necessarily focused on feed back to the university, and are perhaps less likely to organise their own events, however they have strong representation on institutional committees. Departmental groups are subject focused and often active in arranging a range of events that are particularly relevant to researchers in their discipline.

In our presentation we will provide rich case studies of the organisational models employed by the RSA and the impact they have had in their institution.

References

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