

How can we develop a better career path for young researchers?

Sir Graeme Davies
Vice-Chancellor, University of London

The Context

Career Researchers are needed to ensure that the higher education sector, Government establishments and industry are together equipped to deliver the Government's science and innovation agenda.

However, this requires that there is career path that will enable the recruitment, motivation and retention of the best researchers.

For some years this has been a preoccupation of many but progress to date, while significant, has been disappointingly slow.

What is a career ?

There are many definitions

- the **progression** of your working or professional life ;
- a **chosen** pursuit; a profession or occupation ;
- a life-work **chosen** by a person to use personal talent and contribute to society ;
- a **lifelong process**, unique to each person which includes career development - a career choice should be an **informed** decision.

Comments on the legal position

Since the first serious complaints about the position of contract researchers and, especially the '**sequential post-doc**', Employment Law has moved on and changed significantly.

Researchers on fixed term contracts now benefit from some employment protections after one and two years and accrue **the rights of permanent employees** when they have been in post for **two** years. However, while this might be seen as reassuring it is not a substitute for having a proper career path.

Progress towards equity

Various bodies –the Funding Councils, the Research Councils, Universities – have in recent years made very real efforts to define **protocols intended to secure much improved career prospects for contract researchers**. These are embodied in a number of published documents such as

- HEFCE – *“The management of Contract Research Staff”*
- RCUK – *“Research Careers and Diversity Strategy”* and *“Research Careers: A strategy for success”*
- UniversitiesUK – *“A Concordat to Provide a Framework for the Career Management of Contract Research Staff in Universities and Colleges”*

UniversitiesUK – “The Concordat”

The parties to this Concordat accept the **core proposition** that those recruited to work as contract research staff should be able to benefit from the experience and use the period of employment to test out their suitability for further research inside or outside academia and to acquire a wider range of competencies and experience.

It was recognised that while some may have the potential to become **research leaders** or to obtain a longer-term **university or college post** which combines teaching and research others may be employed by a university or college over the medium to long-term to work on a **succession of research projects**.

UniversitiesUK – “The Concordat”

There was also a group that have an important role to play **deploying their expertise and skills in a variety of employment**, not only research and development, in industry, commerce, and the wider public sector.

However, it was recognised that an established career in academia or, exclusively, academic research, is realistic for only a minority.

It was accepted that institutions needed to have in place and apply effective policies ensuring standards for the following aspects of the **career management** of contract researchers

- recruitment
- performance management
- in-service training
- career guidance and development.

RCUK – “Research Careers and Diversity Strategy”

The Strategy addresses the goals of the Science and Innovation Investment Framework and takes forward key aims of the RCUK and Councils’ Delivery Plans.

In that context RCUK noted that the Research Councils support over **30,000 researchers** at any one time, including:

- 15,500 doctoral students;
- 10,000 research staff in universities;
- 4000 research staff in research institutes; and
- 2000 research fellows.

RCUK – “Research Careers and Diversity Strategy”

It had **three overarching aims**

- To ensure that the best potential researchers are attracted into research careers;
- To help universities to improve the quality of their research training and improve the employability of early stage researchers; and
- To improve retention of the best researchers by promoting better career development and management of research staff in research organisations;

and **two cross-cutting aims**

- To promote diversity within the research workforce at all levels and in the governance of research; and
- To enhance the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for the best researchers.

RCUK – “Research Careers: A strategy for success”

The strategy had **five** aims:

- to **attract** the most creative minds into research
- to **encourage** researchers to get the training they need
- to **help** research organisations manage their staff and develop their careers
- to **encourage** people from all groups of society to take up research careers
- to **enhance** the international reputation of UK research training.

A Development Model

The 'Management of Contract Research Staff' programme was HEFCE-funded, led by the **University of Sheffield and involved 17 other universities** (Loughborough, Aston, Birmingham, Coventry, Warwick, Central England, De Montfort, Leicester, Nottingham, Nottingham Trent, Manchester, UMIST, Manchester Metropolitan, Salford Leeds, York, Southampton). The project also had input from the Office for Science and Technology.

Its aims were simple but comprehensive :

"This project will research, promote and embed improved personal management of the 26,000+ contract research staff employed within HEFCE funded institutions."

GMP64 - Management of contract researchers

Initiated in 2000 the aim was to promote better management of contract research staff (CRS) particularly in four key areas:

- **continuing professional development** (CPD) and research management skills
- **staff review and development** – developing training materials for HEIs to conduct staff appraisals for CRS
- **career tracking** – preparing a series of case studies to examine examples of the career progression of contract research staff
- **employment skills** – writing handbooks on employment skills to help CRS recognise their current skills and the transferability of these skills.

GMP64 - Management of contract researchers

The project identified the main aspects of 'good management practice' to be:

- attracting / recruiting the right people
- effective induction
- motivating / setting of goals
- regular monitoring and reviewing
- ongoing support
- use of exit strategies.

It determined a **framework** that can be used by institutions to embed the processes developed by the project into their own existing policies and practices.

GMP64 – The Framework

FIRST 3 MONTHS Induction Process to include: Staff Review Meeting concentrating on the planning of development

CORE RESEARCH TIME Regular Staff Review Meetings (monitoring of project process and development of personal and professional skills) using The Research Career Builder &/or Employability Skills Guidebooks. Leads to Research and Employability Skills development and recording of such.

4 - 6 MONTHS BEFORE CONTRACT END Pre-end of Contract Review to flag up any major skills gaps that development can be targetted at in the last few months. Can lead to a 'skills boost'

CONTRACT END Exit Data next destination, opportunities whilst employed, and reason for leaving. Useful for tracking purposes for use by individual universities or possibly at a national level

See - <http://gmpcrs.group.shef.ac.uk/>

How can we develop a better career path for young researchers?

By ensuring that all those involved with responsibilities for young researchers are fully aware of the codes and commitments that exist and follow the best practice protocols and procedures.

And this means not just at officer level in institutions but all the way down to the Principal Investigators!

Furthermore, the funders need to ensure that they have in place mechanisms for monitoring the performance at the lower levels.