Careers in Research Online Survey 2011: How your opinions make real changes

The University recently participated in the national Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2011. The results are now being analysed and will be printed in our next issue. The survey gathers anonymous data from researchers at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the country about working conditions, career aspirations and career development opportunities for research staff. The survey results are analysed and made available to respective HEIs allowing the University of Manchester, and other participating institutions, to produce real changes supporting researchers’ work and career progression. For instance, you may or may not be aware that Incite was developed as a result of the CROS 2006!

The 2009 survey was the start of a different format to the CROS; it aimed to identify how the participating institute was addressing points outlined in the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, drawn up to ensure researchers at HEIs are properly supported. The data gathered from the 2009 CROS for this University has proved invaluable for implementing better processes and procedures to help support our research staff, and for benchmarking our performance against the performance of other Russell Group Universities.

Direct action as a result of CROS 2009 includes:

- Formation of the University’s Research Staff Development Working Group (RSDWG), chaired by Prof Matt Lambon-Ralph, Associate Vice President for Research. The primary aim of the Group is to identify and encourage University wide best practice in relation to the employment management, training, personal and career development of the University’s research staff;
- Extensive consultation with all Schools across the University to assess existing procedures and practice in place to support the career development of research staff;
- The development of a University Concordat Implementation Plan that comprises a series of actions to ensure the full implementation of the Concordat across the institution. The plan will form the basis for the institution’s application for the European Commission’s HR Excellence in Research award.

This year, researchers at our University produced 8.7% of the total responses from 44 universities; however, only 25.8% of University of Manchester researchers completed the form, emphasising the influence that one person’s answer can have.

The results of the 2011 survey are being analysed by a team at the University consisting of the University’s Skills Development Coordinator, the Internal Communications Office, the RSDWG and Faculty Researcher Development Teams. The results will be used by the RSDWG in particular to continue its work to develop institutional procedures and practices that support the career development of research staff.

Thanks to those of you that completed the survey! If anyone has ideas on how staff training at the University can be improved, please contact your faculty’s Skills Training Co-ordinator (contact details on the back page).
There is a real opportunity in peer-reviewed publishing for aspiring academics. Ideally, our peer-reviewed publications mirror our academic potential and achievements. They help us disseminate our findings to interested audiences. They give us formal recognition for our work. They can be entered in the REF and turn our thoughts into research funding. At its best, publishing is a great opportunity to show off our talent and helps us in getting academic positions. At its worst, peer-reviewed publishing can be disheartening and frustrating.

Publishing processes have their pitfalls, and some are particularly dangerous to those of us in fixed-term research positions. These pitfalls are 1) the length of the peer-review process, 2) submission strategies, 3) pitch and fit, and 4) an element of randomness or luck.

Journals in my field (social sciences) aspire to provide a decision in three months. But it is not unusual to wait for much longer. For example, with one piece I waited for 10 months to see it rejected and then to yield a ‘revise and resubmit’ from another journal after a further eight months had passed. Such time lags are widespread and affect research staff’s submission strategy.

Specifically, we may find ourselves trading off speed of acceptance with the quality of the journal. For example, you may think that your article has a chance of getting into a top journal while being confident it should get into a mediocre journal without too much trouble. Now, would a selection panel for a lectureship or for a research fellowship prefer a published piece in a decent journal or a piece under review with a top journal? This may well depend on your complete publication profile and, ideally, a senior colleague could offer further advice on specific situations.

Journals have a particular tone, literature, and audience. Well published scholars seem to develop a gut feeling for the right journal for a particular piece. But during our first adventures of publishing, there is likely to be some trial and error. This element can be reduced by researching journals – readership, aims and scope – but is still likely to take us just this little bit of extra time and energy to identify the right journal for our work.

Finally – and perhaps arguably – there remains a random element in getting published. For example, you might have a new idea but fail to convince the journal and reviewers of its greatness. On one occasion, a journal offered to publish my article if I agreed to take out a particular novel idea which was judged ‘unconvincing’. Do you scrap the idea or try to take it elsewhere? Again, considerations of how quickly the publication is needed can be a deciding factor. Most irritating, but not unheard of – at least in the humanities and social sciences – is when reviewers just ‘don’t like’ your piece. The trick seems to be to recognise when your article really has little potential and when to persevere with the publishing quest through rewriting and submissions to other journals (remember that even Harry Potter was rejected many times before becoming a blockbuster).

Having a scholarly piece published after peer-review can be rewarding in disseminating our ideas, getting recognition and in helping us to get an academic job. But these rewards are only harvested by those adventurous enough to embark on the journey as well as brave, skilled and perhaps fortunate enough not to get caught out by the pitfalls along the way.
I carried out my PhD at the University of Manchester in the school of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering (MACE), for which I invented a laser optical sensor to measure the instantaneous angular speed (IAS) of rotating machinery. I then spent a few months as a post-doc investigating the reliability of wind turbines and carbon capture storage systems, before I joined EDF Energy.

During my PhD I developed professional competencies, such as team working, communication and networking during social activities, where I made friends as well. For example, I was an international students tutor for the International Society, a residential students tutor, and a postgraduate and mature students officer in the Students Union in the International Society. I was also Chairman of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association and secretary of the UN Youth and Students Association. These experiences gave colour to my PhD time.

I joined EDF Energy in 2009 as a graduate trainee and I am currently working in industry as the Acceptance Test Coordinator of the simulator replacement project in Heysham 2 power station. The application process for EDF Energy’s graduate training programme is similar to that of other big firms. After the online application, there was a psychometric test, including evaluations of verbal and maths skills. The first round interview was focused on competencies, such as team working, communication skills and business awareness. After being successful in these two steps, I was invited for a two-day assessment centre (AC) in Gloucester. It was one of the toughest ACs I have ever attended. All the candidates were asked to do six activities on the first day, followed by an interactive business dinner, where you could chat with company staff and socialise with peers in the group. The offer in principle was made in two days after the AC, but the final offer on paper was only received when I passed the British national security check.

As a trainee I received a well-developed and structured training programme, focused on the fundamentals of nuclear generation technologies and project management. During the first 12 months, I held a number of positions in various nuclear power stations in England and Scotland. This enabled me to apply what I had learnt during classroom-based training and I gradually built up knowledge and experience of nuclear technology and safety.

In Jan 2011, I started a new role as a project coordinator in a team of 35 engineers. The simulator replacement project is a multi-million pound project with significant impacts on nuclear safety. I monitor the project’s progress and present the results of tests and test phases to senior management and relevant committees. All in all, it is an excellent opportunity, where I learn and practice project management skills and people management skills in an intensive project.

Currently, I am working towards becoming a chartered engineer through the IET. I write up a report of my continuing professional development every 3 months, and I also have regular meetings with my mentor to discuss and amend activities of my career development. I find it very useful and helpful. My mentor has given me tools to manage my career and advice to solve problems when I am in a tough situation. I believe that it is extremely important for young professionals to receive career tips at an early stage of their career paths.

My goal in the next five years is to become a chartered engineer and to play an active role leading a multi-million pound energy change project in the future.
The Researcher Development Framework

In September 2010, Vitae (www.vitae.ac.uk) launched the national Researcher Development Framework (RDF). The RDF is designed to help empower you as a researcher and engage you in more effective personal and professional development planning. By being more aware of your skills and having a plan for future development, it will help you to make the right choices at the right times in your career.

The RDF describes the knowledge, behaviours and attitudes of researchers at all stages of development, from first year postgraduate researchers through to high profile research leaders. It has been developed from first principles through interviews with successful researchers in a range of disciplines and is fully endorsed by Research Councils.

What does the RDF look like?

The RDF is structured in four domains (A-D), which encompass what researchers need to know to do research and how to be effective in their approach to research, when working and in contributing to the wider environment. The domains are further divided into sub-domains (e.g. A1, A2 and A3), each with descriptors and phases (1-5; representing a progressively higher level of skills in that area) which seek to capture the knowledge, behaviours, and attitudes of a typically ‘good’ researcher at different stages of development.

How to use the RDF

You might want to use the RDF to:

- prepare for one-on-one reviews with your supervisor, research manager or principal investigator where you will be discussing your professional or career development
- identify strengths and areas to focus on
- prioritise the most appropriate formal and informal development opportunities provided by your institution and/or external bodies
- consider skills and experiences that will enhance your prospects of success in particular career areas.

Vitae have also launched a personal CPD tool to help you map yourself against the RDF. The self reflection tool is available to download now from www.vitae.ac.uk/rdftool. It uses Microsoft Excel as a platform and allows you to:

- select which areas of the RDF you are interested in
- record where you are currently and what your next target for development is
- record evidence of your current skills and experience
- complete an action plan to reach your target
- save individual versions at different time points to track your own progress

For more information or if you have any feedback or ideas for future developments using the RDF, visit www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf or email rdf@vitae.ac.uk

Your Research Staff Association Needs You!

The University of Manchester’s Research Staff Association (RSA) is run by a group of researchers from different Faculties at the University. It was officially launched in April 2010 at the Research Staff Conference. Since then we have set up a web page and blog to increase our visibility, and a listserv to communicate with interested research staff. Our aims are still under discussion and are very much shaped by the needs of the research staff who get involved.

We hope that the RSA will provide a forum for researchers to share their ideas and concerns about issues relating to both work and social life.

Most members of research staff are employed on fixed-term contracts, which means that our needs are often different from other academics at the University. While some departments have a good provision for research staff, many others provide very little dedicated support. It is common for researchers to move from one project to another, changing departments and institutions without much career guidance.

Meeting with other researchers across the University can help us to identify the common problems we as researchers face and to find avenues to meet these challenges. We hold monthly meetings at the University and social events in the pub quarterly. See our webpage for the venues and dates: www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/rsa.

If you want to be informed about the RSA, email rsa@manchester.ac.uk to be included in the RSA listserv or simply pop in to any of our meetings or social gatherings. The RSA is currently organising a come-together in the pub to give new research staff the opportunity to meet other researchers from across the University and discuss any issues they might have. This will take place at 5.30pm, 13th October 2011, at Sandbar (on Grosvenor Street off Oxford Road). We hope to see you there!
The theme of the annual Research Staff Conference was “Your research career in a challenging environment”. This was chosen to align with the strategic aims of the University and to equip research staff with key professional attributes highlighted by the Researcher Development Framework. Specifically, the aims were to maximise researcher effectiveness and to increase personal confidence, influence, and research impact. The conference programme was also designed to align with the ‘Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers’ principles 2, 5, and 6 [1].

The programme attracted more researchers than ever before. There were 119 registrants from across the University and from external institutions, including the Universities of Salford and Sheffield. The conference was opened by Professor Lambon-Ralph, who highlighted the University’s commitment and support for research staff, and who set the scene for researchers to ‘take the challenge’ and fully engage and take ownership of their research career development.

Through a series of panel discussions by experienced academics and workshops facilitated by professional developers, research staff were given some of the tools and practical skills to help them work through the local and (inter)national challenges that they might face as a 21st century researcher. Sessions included how to succeed in academia; building your resilience; succeeding in the networking challenge; making public engagement work for your career; making a difference in society using social enterprise; thriving through University changes; challenging stereotypes in academia; using technology to raise your profile; the challenge of engaging with the media; the funding challenge – an insider’s guide; and realising your potential using the Researcher Development Framework.

Throughout the day, an information fair was available to signpost research staff to relevant support services including the Careers Service and newly launched ‘Academic Career’ toolkit, Universities and Colleges Union, Vitae, Library, MEC, UMIP, Faculty Researcher Development teams, Methods@Manchester, Research Computing Services and Manchester Beacon for Public Engagement.

Careers specialists were available to offer one-to-one careers advice and CV guidance and 43 researchers took advantage of this service. Research staff were also encouraged to complete the Careers in Research Online Survey, and responses to the survey increased by around 5% in the days following the conference. The conference closed with a drinks reception to promote cross-faculty networking and to officially launch the University of Manchester Research Staff Association.

Initial analysis of the feedback shows that researchers valued the conference, with 95% rating it as very good or excellent. Respondents reported increases in their confidence, self-reflection, flexibility, assertiveness, empowerment, and understanding of the research environment and career development strategies, as a result of the conference.

Full details of the conference programme are available through the conference website www.21centuryresearcher.manchester.ac.uk.

The conference was also captured by video and audio-recording. To add value, promote future conferences and to provide a lasting resource for all research staff, we hope to make these resources available online.

[1] www.researchconcordat.ac.uk

Report on the Research Team Leadership Course

By Dr Gillian Farnie, Research Associate and Breast Cancer Campaign Fellow

I started the Research Team Leadership (RTL) course at the beginning of 2010. I had been awarded a research fellowship 12 months earlier and felt it was the right time to attend the RTL course; I now had a research assistant and was starting to build my own independent group.

The RTL course had also been personally recommended to me by a colleague who had found the course beneficial to their development as a group leader. The breadth of topic areas covered by the workshop was also a factor in my decision to enrol. The workshops cover not only your own personal development but also aim to improve your understanding of the University and its systems as a whole.

Many aspects of the course have been useful: skills and techniques learned in workshops for time management, supervising research students and career development in particular have had an impact on my approach to work on a daily basis. Other elements have helped me to understand policies concerning HR, employment issues and finance more thoroughly. Although I had been at the University for a number of years before commencing the fellowship, a refresher on who did what within my School was time well spent.

I particularly valued the presentations by a cross section of University staff – the insight I gained into their experiences, both good and bad, was fascinating. A wide variety of people in the workshops meant debate and discussion was lively and engaging, providing an excellent opportunity to meet people from varied positions but with a common aim to develop their leadership/management skills.

I would recommend that new group leaders, postdocs and independent research fellows enrol. Although it may cover some areas in which you are already proficient – and reinforcement is never a bad thing – overall it will give you a rounded skill set, and a deeper knowledge of the University, that you can use to aid the development of both you and your research group.
We Would Like Your Feedback

Are we covering the issues you want to read about?

- Who would you really like to hear from in our Q&A slot?
- Could you write a short article about your experiences or opinions to feature in Incite?
- Have you been to any interesting conferences or heard any research news that you would like to see highlighted?

We would like to expand Incite, ‘the research newsletter written for you, by you,’ so we would like to hear from you regarding issues that you would like to see covered. Even if you don’t want to write a whole article, we would like to hear your ideas about what you would like to see featured in your Research Staff Skills Training newsletter. We will make it a priority to follow up your leads and address the topics that are relevant to you, the reader.

We also encourage input from budding journalists wishing to gain writing experience. The style and content of input is open to experimentation as we would like Incite to be led by, and respond to, our community’s needs.

You may want to discuss funding issues, managing your research manager/collaborators, the dilemmas of fixed term contract research, or you may like to write a gonzo-style conference report.

The deadline for contributions to Incite issue 13 is 15 October 2011.

For further information about submitting contributions, to subscribe or to give us your feedback on this newsletter, please email the editor at incite@manchester.ac.uk

Incite also has a blog; check us out at: www.manchesterincite.wordpress.com

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email: itservicesdesk@manchester.ac.uk
tel: 0161 306 5544
Counselling Service
email: counselor.service@manchester.ac.uk
tel: 0161 275 2864

Faculty Research Staff Developer Contacts

Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences
Research Staff Training Contact
Dee Ann Johnson: Dee-Ann.Johnson@manchester.ac.uk
tel 0161 306 4155
Human Resources
tel: 0161 306 4058
www.staffnet.eps.manchester.ac.uk/hr

Faculty of Life Sciences
Research Staff Training Contact
Dr Sarah Ashworth: flstraining@manchester.ac.uk
tel 0161 275 1683
Human Resources
tel 0161 275 2030
www.intranet.ls.manchester.ac.uk/hr

Faculty of Medical and Human Sciences
Research Staff Training Contact
Dr Rachel Cowen: rachel.cowen@manchester.ac.uk
tel 0161 275 2326
Human Resources
tel 0161 275 1358
www.mhs.manchester.ac.uk/intranet/admingroups/humanresources

Faculty of Humanities
Research Staff Training Contact
Dr Claire Stocks: Claire.Stocks@manchester.ac.uk
tel 0161 306 1116
Human Resources
tel 0161 275 2038
www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/humnet/facserv/humanresources

incite@manchester.ac.uk