
Special issue: *Third space roles and identities in educational settings*

Research article

Researcher developers: an emerging third space profession

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Abstract

Following the publication of Sir Gareth Roberts's *SET for Success* in 2002, the UK government invested millions of pounds in universities to improve the readiness of doctoral researchers to work in universities and beyond. Many universities hired what have become known as researcher developers to design and deliver suitable programmes to develop generic and transferable skills. In 2008, Celia Whitchurch identified the concept of third space as an emergent territory between academic and professional domains, which is colonised primarily by less bounded forms of professional. This article demonstrates how the researcher developer is an example of a third space profession in higher education, and specifically an example of what Kehm calls new 'higher education professionals', being highly qualified professionals who are not primarily active in research and teaching themselves, but who are generalists and experts – rather than specialists – working within higher education institutions.

Keywords third space; researcher developer; doctoral; postdoctoral; researcher skills development; Roberts Money

Introduction

The emergence of the researcher developer role

In March 2001, as part of the UK government's productivity and innovation strategy, Sir Gareth Roberts was commissioned by the UK government to produce a review of the supply of science and engineering skills in the UK. In March 2002, *SET for Success: The supply of people with science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills* was published, with 37 recommendations for maintaining and developing the supply of researchers for academia and industry, and with recommendations aimed at all stages of education and training (Roberts, 2002). The UK government accepted all 37 recommendations and provided substantial funding to support the implementation of Roberts's recommendations, stating that 'The Government will therefore take the lead in providing a new dedicated capital stream and enhanced research funding to enable the science and engineering base to restore, maintain and grow the infrastructure for research' (HM Treasury, 2002: 4). Overall, an extra £1.25 billion was provided to support research, with approximately £100 million made available to implement Roberts's (2002) recommendations, which became known as Roberts Money. The then Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris, said that the investment 'will boost teaching skills, fund increases in pay in higher education and provide exciting new training opportunities' (Curtis, 2002: n.p.).

Approximately £20 million per year of Roberts Money was provided to institutions, primarily universities, based on the number of Research Council-funded doctoral researchers and research staff for all disciplines, broadening out from the initial report to include researchers in the social sciences and arts and humanities. These payments were made from 2003 to 2011, and they were ring-fenced to develop the career and transferable skills of all early career researchers within these institutions, that is, not just those funded by Research Councils. In addition, institutions were supported in their development of early career researchers by Vitae – part of the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Ltd – who were funded by Roberts Money.

To deliver transferable skills, many institutions used some of their Roberts Money to employ dedicated staff to work with these groups to develop them as researchers, rather than focusing on supporting their research. Evans (2011: 77) notes that it is 'remarkably difficult to find an explicit, stipulative, definition of researcher development', but suggests that researcher development comprises three main elements: behavioural development, attitudinal development and intellectual development. Over time, these staff dedicated to researcher development have become known as *researcher developers*.

Researcher developer remit: career and transferable skills

In 2001, the Joint Skills Statement (JSS) was published jointly by the UK Research Councils setting out the skills that doctoral research students funded by the Research Councils would be expected to develop during their research training. It was therefore also setting out an expectation for what researcher developers needed to deliver. The JSS contained seven domains: Research Skills and Techniques; Research Environment; Research Management; Personal Effectiveness; Communication Skills; Networking and Teamworking; and Career Management. The JSS stated that it existed 'to give a common view of the skills and experience of a typical research student thereby providing universities with a clear and consistent message aimed at helping them to ensure that all research training was of the highest standard, across all disciplines' (UK Research Councils and AHRB, 2001: n.p.). Since the skills are considered to be discipline-independent, although implemented within a disciplinary context, they are also referred to as generic skills. In 2010, the doctoral-focused JSS was replaced by the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF), alongside the Researcher Development Statement (RDS), which addressed the needs of researchers at all career levels, from doctoral candidate to senior academic. The RDF provided the operational framework and the RDS the strategic statement to support

implementation of the Roberts Report, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Code of Practice for research degree programmes (QAA, 2007) and the *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers* (Vitae, 2008). The RDF (Vitae, 2010) has four top-level domains, each comprised of three subdomains:

- Knowledge and intellectual abilities (knowledge and intellectual abilities needed to be able to carry out excellent research)
- Personal effectiveness (personal qualities, career and self-management skills required to take ownership for, and engage in, professional development)
- Research governance and organisation (knowledge of the standards, requirements and professional conduct that are needed for the effective management of research)
- Engagement, influence and impact (knowledge, understanding and skills needed to engage with, influence and impact on the academic, social, cultural, economic and broader context).

Within the subdomains are a number of descriptors, totalling 63. Each descriptor can be evidenced at between three and five different levels, or phases, indicating the individual's personal expertise. Only the first domain has descriptors focused on what might have been considered to be core aspects: Subject knowledge; Research methods – theoretical knowledge; and Research methods – practical application. The JSS and, more recently, the Vitae RDF provide a personal development tool that enables the researcher to identify areas for their own development appropriate to their current development as a researcher. It is also a tool that enables the researcher developer to identify what development needs they should address.

Researcher developer remit: Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

During the period of Roberts funding, the *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers* (Vitae, 2008) was published, outlining the expectations on, and responsibilities of, institutions employing research staff, and on research staff themselves, regarding the professional and career development of postdoctoral research staff. Implementation of the *Concordat* was linked to the award of the European Commission's HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) award, with UK universities starting to gain this award from 2010. The 2008 *Concordat* covered expectations and responsibilities linked to seven principles: Recruitment and Selection; Recognition and Value; Support and Development (adaptability and flexibility); Support and Development (personal and career development); Researchers' responsibilities to proactively engage; Diversity and Equality; and Implementation and Review. Given the overlap of the *Concordat's* support and development specifically for research staff with the RDF describing the skills that needed to be developed, and with the aims of the Roberts recommendations, the responsibility for the implementation of large parts of the *Concordat* operationally fell to researcher developers, often along with the reporting responsibilities on behalf of their institution. As well as supporting the development of researchers, implementing the *Concordat* included work on research culture. The nature of this work required liaising with other teams across the institution (for example, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion teams), as well as with senior colleagues and decision-makers. To measure *Concordat* implementation, the sector body Vitae developed the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) and Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS), with the responsibility for administering and analysing these often sitting with researcher developers as part of their responsibilities overseeing and reporting on the implementation of the *Concordat*. CROS is targeted at research staff, and PIRLS at research-active academic staff.

The 2008 *Concordat* was revised, rewritten and relaunched in 2019 (Universities UK, 2019), along with replacing CROS and PIRLS with the Vitae Culture, Employment and Development of Academic Researchers Survey (CEDARS; see Vitae, n.d.).

The embedding of the researcher developer role

With the Roberts funding coming to an end in 2011, a review was commissioned by Research Councils United Kingdom (RCUK). It identified 'major improvements all enabled by "Roberts' Money"', including:

- improved understanding of the importance of more formalised training and career development for all researchers

- improvement in the way career development and transferable skills training is provided for researchers, whether funded by RCUK or not
- research organisations contributing to this 'Roberts' Agenda', typically with senior manager responsibility for it and specialist individuals [for example, researcher developers] involved in delivery. (Hodge et al., 2011: 5)

In addition to noting the need for continued funding for the development of transferable skills of researchers and their careers, the report highlighted that 'Specialist staff are essential for this and research organisations should ensure that such skills remain available', with one of the nine recommendations being the maintenance of expertise in such specialist roles. The report also observed that the provision 'is not yet an embedded part of staff development practices and is therefore more vulnerable' (Hodge et al., 2011: 6).

The *Concordat* implementation work was also gaining traction at this time, with 29 UK institutions having already been awarded the HREiR award by the end of 2011, and many more with reports in progress and awarded in 2012. A follow-up report was produced in 2013 by Vitae using survey responses from 75 institutions, representing a 44 per cent return and 91 per cent of the £120 million Roberts Money distributed by the Research Councils between 2003 and 2011. It found that 'researcher development is fully embedded in institutional strategies', with 'the majority of respondents ... looking to maintain previous levels of provision' (Vitae, 2013: 4). Internal expertise was prioritised, with 'Several institutions mention[ing] a reduction in use of external experts in favour of using existing staff' (Vitae, 2013: 20). However, 'many detailed a much more distributed model than in previous years and described an expectation that academic staff will do more delivery', although some reported 'heavy academic workloads as an impeding factor' (Vitae, 2013: 19). Despite the cessation of Roberts Money, researcher development had been embedded in research institutions, and the specialist staff – that is, researcher developers – continued to be employed, centrally funded by universities (Pearce and Metcalfe, 2016).

From the emergence and evolution of the researcher development role, there was commonality in remit between researcher developers from different institutions – for example, generic skills training provision for researchers and implementation of the *Concordat*, and also interesting differences in what other activities might be within the remit of researcher developers. In addition, they are frequently structured within different parts of their institutions (for example, within human resources, doctoral schools and research offices).

Types of staff and roles within higher education institutions

Traditionally, universities were seen as having two domains of activity: academic and administrative/managerial, with these two types of activity being delivered by two different groups of staff with little crossover. However, more recently, with the increasing complexity and scale of higher education, there has been the emergence of what Celia Whitchurch (2008) has called third space professionals. The third space here is an emergent territory lying between academic and professional domains, where less bounded forms of professional can be found. The work in this space comprises aspects of both academic and professional activities, and it is carried out by blended professionals with mixed backgrounds and portfolios. Characteristic of the third space is the existence of mixed teams whose members can be considered higher education professionals (HEPROs) (Whitchurch, 2008).

Bruce Macfarlane (2011) refers to staff who specialise in one element of academic practice as para-academics and notes that this category includes upskilling of formerly professional support staff and the deskilling of formerly academic staff. Barbara Kehm (2015) has noted that HEPRO roles mostly do not include specific training and that the career progression is unclear, with those roles becoming increasingly distinct. Entry into those roles is mostly from an academic role, and the roles are often similar to project-based work, with fixed-term contracts, which only become open-ended contracts when the need is ongoing. The self-understanding of HEPROs more broadly as professionals is still weak, and professional identities vary. They are generalists and experts, rather than specialists, who work at interfaces, and who often shape new fields, for example, doctoral education, alumni work and graduate surveys, having higher level qualifications compared to administrative staff, with doctorates not uncommon. A particular challenge for HEPROs is that they are often stuck in their role, which raises questions as to the sustainability of their roles because of uncertain funding, but also for the holders' career progression and the challenges of succession planning (Kehm, 2015).

Researcher developers working in the UK would appear to be examples of HEPROs working in the third space identified by Whitchurch (2008), and we wanted to produce a survey of them and their responsibilities and activities, and how they saw themselves. In addition, we wanted to interview a diverse sample to better understand the extent to which they should be considered to be an identifiable third space profession, rather than simply professionals working in the third space.

Researcher developers could be seen as part of professional services, that is, a subset of research managers and administrators. The Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP-3) Survey includes 309 respondents who identified as working in the area of 'training/internal communications (researcher development)' (Kerridge et al., 2022), and these respondents provide a comparison with our results.

Method

The project was titled *Discovering the Professional Identities of Researcher Developers: Roles responsibilities and representations*. The first phase was an online survey, with target participants being anyone who self-identified as a researcher developer (in whole or in part). The online survey ran concurrently with the 2015 *Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS)* and *Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS)* – both surveys that are often administered by researcher developers within their institution. Participants were told:

We are inviting anyone whose role (in whole or in part) involves researcher development to respond to this online survey ... The project aims to provide a 'census' of researcher developers in the UK with the aim of beginning to define their professional identities by asking those who identify, at least in part, as researcher developers to complete an online questionnaire with questions on their past roles, present roles and aspired future roles.

Recipients were primarily invited via emails to the two Vitae institutional contacts in each institution, and they were asked to forward the invitation to any colleagues within their institution who they believed might also be within the target group. Confidentiality was assured, with only aggregate results from the survey published.

Respondents were asked in the survey to indicate whether they were willing to participate in the second phase of the project: follow-up interviews (online, by telephone or face to face), and 53 agreed and supplied contact details. Of these, a sample was chosen to provide a representative mixture of characteristics: gender, whether or not they held a doctorate, ethnicity, disciplinary background, designated role type, length of experience as a researcher developer, and whether they were based at a Russell Group university. The latter was used as an indicator of the more research-intensive universities.

The 14 interviews were carried out in 2016 by the two authors using a semi-structured design, with interviews recorded and then transcribed before being thematically analysed in the six stages set out by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings

Who are the researcher developers?

The online survey was completed by 102 respondents. Table 1 provides a comparison of the proportions of different characteristics across the survey respondents and the interviewees, showing the interviewees to be broadly representative of the larger population of survey respondents. For gender, 75 (74 per cent) identified as female, 22 as male and 5 did not respond, similar to RAAAP-3, where 85 per cent identified as female. Of those who indicated their age, there were 3 of 30 years of age and under, 42 of 31–40 years of age, 19 of 41–50 years of age, 10 of 51–60 years of age, and 5 of 61 years of age and older. Three respondents indicated that they considered themselves to be disabled. Of the 86 who responded to the question, 79 described their ethnicity as White, and 7 each self-described their ethnicity uniquely. There were 87 UK nationals, 8 European Union and 2 non-Europeans, and 5 did not respond.

Table 1. Percentage of survey (N = 102) and interviewees (N = 14) for a variety of categories

Category	Survey	Interviewees
Gender (female)	74	64
Nationality (UK)	90	93
Age (30s)	53	38
Ethnicity (BAME)	8	14
Qualification (doctorate)	69	71
Science	46	43
Social sciences	29	43
Arts and humanities	25	14

For the highest academic qualification, 70 indicated that this was a doctorate, 22 a master's degree, 7 an undergraduate degree, 2 a postgraduate diploma and 1 a Higher National Diploma. The disciplinary areas were varied, with 29 biological or biomedical sciences, 16 physical sciences/engineering or mathematics, 28 social sciences and 24 arts and humanities, with 5 not responding.

The mean length of time that respondents reported being in a researcher developer role was 5.7 years and 4.7 years at their current institution, with 79 respondents giving the same response for both questions. Almost all respondents were on an open-ended contract (90), with just 10 indicating that they were on a fixed-term contract, despite the cessation of the Roberts Money over four years previously. Just over half (52 per cent) were on a salary in the range £35,000–£45,000, with none earning less than £25,000 and 10 (10 per cent) earning over £50,000. The majority of respondents (75 per cent) felt that they were paid the same 'relative to other staff in my institution with a similar level of responsibility', with just 21 per cent believing that they were paid less.

Respondents reported that their role was categorised by their institution as professional services (57) or administrative (11), academic-related (14) or academic (9), with a very wide variety of job titles. A minority (37 per cent) had formal line management responsibilities, but most (58 per cent) had budget responsibilities.

When asked about the qualifications, skills and experience that they think are necessary to be a researcher developer, 45 explicitly referred to a PhD, and a further 5 referred to a doctorate, with 18 referring to a graduate qualification. In contrast, when asked what people within their institution think is necessary to be a researcher developer, those numbers all fell – just 28 explicitly referred to a PhD, and none referred to a doctorate, with just 8 referring to a graduate qualification.

Compared to the UK academic population, the survey sample was more female, notably more British, and relatively young, and the proportion who indicated that they came from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community was rather low. However, the proportion with a doctorate was high (69 per cent) compared to data for all UK academic staff (51 per cent: full time, 63 per cent; part time, 27 per cent) (HESA, 2016). In RAAAP-3, 44 per cent have a doctorate, and for UK research managers and administrators, the figure drops to 40 per cent (although these percentages are arguably much higher than might be expected). The higher percentage seen in our sample appears to reflect the transition from a research career into researcher development as the typical – although not only – route to become a researcher developer. The background of respondents showed that sciences were under-represented compared to those studying for doctorates, where they represent more than two-thirds of all doctorates.

From the 53 survey respondents who agreed to be interviewed, we selected 14 who were representative of the survey respondents. The interviewees were a mix of regions and mission groups, with almost equal numbers in the three bands (0–5, 6–10, 10+) of years of experience as a researcher developer, and of those in academic, professional services and hybrid roles. Table 2 provides the characteristics of each interviewee.

Why did you become a researcher developer?

There were two main routes into the researcher developer role: from a research background (that is, after doctoral completion or from postdoctoral employment) or from a professional services background. None of the interviewees spoke about this transition as being a consequence of failure in their existing

role. Indeed, for those from a research background, becoming a researcher developer was seen as an active step away from 'research', often following positive personal experience of participating in researcher development activities while a researcher and a search for stability in employment. For both routes, there was a strong sense of serendipity, including using their existing skills and experiences, as well as funding for the researcher development role being available. In addition, there was a desire to support researchers' development, combined with a personal desire to remain in the university environment. The decision to become a researcher developer seems similar to the results of RAAAP-3 Question 18 on the 'importance of various factors to your move into research management and administration', with 'It was a profession I felt my skills would be a good match for' scoring 5 on a 5-point Likert scale (1 being low; 5 being high). For those working in researcher development, 38 per cent chose 5, and 34 per cent chose 4, but for those in the UK not working in researcher development, the scores were similar: 37 per cent choosing 5, and 38 per cent choosing 4. Poli et al. (2023a) note that serendipity is also often reported by research managers and administrators for their career path into the profession. Researcher developers responding to the survey mostly agreed that they were satisfied with their work-life balance (74 per cent), which was similar to the research staff responding to CROS (69 per cent), but notably higher than for established academic staff (46 per cent) responding to PIRLS.

Table 2. Interviewee characteristics

Number	Gender	Doctorate	Ethnicity	Discipline	Role	Experience (years)	Group
1	Female	Yes	White	Science	Professional	6–10	Other
2	Female	Yes	White	Science	Hybrid	6–10	Russell
3	Female	No	White	Soc. Sci.	Professional	6–10	Other
4	Female	No	White	Soc. Sci.	Professional	10+	Russell
5	Female	Yes	White	Science	Professional	0–5	Other
6	Male	Yes	White	A&H	Hybrid	0–5	Russell
7	Female	No	White	Soc. Sci.	Academic	0–5	Other
8	Female	No	White	A&H	Professional	0–5	Other
9	Male	Yes	White	Science	Professional	10+	Other
10	Male	Yes	White	Soc. Sci.	Academic	10+	Russell
11	Male	Yes	White	Science	Academic	10+	Other
12	Male	Yes	White	Soc. Sci.	Hybrid	6–10	Russell
13	Female	Yes	BAME	Soc. Sci.	Hybrid	6–10	Russell
14	Female	Yes	BAME	Science	Academic	10+	Other

Do you think that your role requires the holder to have a doctorate?

With survey respondents being a mix of those who did and did not hold a doctorate, it was illuminating to hear that the interviewees did not see the issue of whether their role required a doctorate to be straightforward, giving much more nuanced responses, with a focus on the opportunity to shape their role in light of their particular skills and experiences. There was a general recognition of the value of a doctorate to a researcher developer, but there was also value seen in being 'PhD-free', with the intensely personal experience of studying for a PhD/doctorate being restrictive.

Regarding the value of being 'PhD-free', interviewees said:

Every discipline has a different PhD experience, every individual has a different PhD experience, and whilst you can make general assumptions and there will be similarities between individuals who are doing the PhDs, they are not going to be the same, and so for me I don't have prejudices or biases based on my own PhD experience ... So, I think that for me it has certainly been a positive not having a PhD.

In a sense, some people with doctorates might be more blinkered about that than people who don't.

It may be because again I don't have to have the academic rigour around something that I can utilise my knowledge in a more – how can I ... – a more free-form way.

Possession of a doctorate was seen as having three main advantages to the researcher developer: perceived credibility, competence and empathy.

Perceived credibility

Having a PhD/doctorate was seen as giving credibility to a researcher developer (both by those who held a doctorate themselves and by those who did not) when interacting with doctoral students and academic colleagues, and not just when delivering training to them:

I think it gives credibility being able to use a knowledge and an insight into the actuality, the reality of being in a research environment, which I haven't been in. I have observed and I have listened to my clients, and I pick up a lot of things. As one of my PhDs told me one time, 'You speak doctorate very well.'

It makes conversations easier to begin and to maintain. It is not impossible to do the job without a doctorate, I know plenty of researcher developers who don't have a doctorate who do a fantastic job and all that kind of stuff, but I think they have to work harder on the credibility front.

I think you have not only a credibility gap, but you actually have a gap in your ability to perceive what some of the challenges and activities that you are in charge of are trying to achieve.

I think it helps with credibility when talking to other people, when talking to the researchers and talking to the academics ... being able to give those research examples, and being able to be questioned on them and all of that is helpful.

I am doing some research at the moment on employer perceptions of doctoral skills, and one thing that has come out from the 17 interviews that I have done very strongly is the credibility that a PhD brings ... But those without a PhD that I interviewed, employers, also mentioned the credibility factor.

I mean, just to stand in front of PhD students on a range of things, to have 'doctor' in front of your name just gives you legitimacy ... someone came in late to one of my sessions, and when I said, at the end, I said at the end, 'Have you got any...', his hand went up and he said, 'Yes, have you got a PhD?'

Competence

Related to how they are seen by others is how the researcher developer sees themselves, and the personal experience of going through a PhD was seen as valuable by holders to their practice, and also recognised by those who did not have a doctorate:

... having the examples that I give them being research examples, so you know, from my point of view, being able to give those research examples, and being able to be questioned on them and all of that is helpful.

I think it does hinder to a certain extent the ability to understand the full expectations, processes, feelings, experiences of those going through the PhD, you haven't got first-hand experience.

I know, I have been out there, I have worked there, so what I am doing delivery with them, or when I am working on those kinds of important policies kind of things, I know how it kind of works in faculties.

... because of understanding the pressures on people and how the workload, and also something of the approach in specialism, and also part of the expectation that you might have of having put in that amount of work really.

And I think the problem is that you have that danger if you haven't done research, you haven't experienced the frustrations, you are just saying, 'OK, when you go to write a paper, blah blah blah', and you don't get this kind of how important psychology is.

I think you can have expertise in writing, so I work with writers, published writers and authors and journalists, and absolutely they have expertise to offer, but because they don't have a doctorate, they haven't been through the process and sometimes give the wrong advice.

Empathy

The value of a researcher developer having engaged in doctoral study was seen as valuable beyond the skills acquired, in that it enabled the researcher developer to empathise with the challenges of doctoral study and research more generally (including developing a research career):

I suppose it is the empathy it gives you.

... actually understanding some of the struggles that they are facing in their careers, so it is one thing to have an academic understanding, to be told that it is important to have publications and funding and all of that, but to actually have been there and write some of things yourself, it gives you a really different perspective on what it is like.

I think it does hinder to a certain extent the ability to understand the full expectations, processes, feelings, experiences of those going through the PhD, you haven't got first-hand experience.

You know, I can talk to someone from the faculties at the higher level of what they are doing, and I get what their research is, and I get what struggles that they are dealing with are.

I don't think the role requires a doctorate, but it does require understanding of the doctoral process and the doctoral experience.

Instead of seeing having a doctorate as a personal requirement of a researcher developer, there was more nuance, with a focus on having such experience and expertise within the team of researcher developers within the institution:

I think all units should have a mix of people, because the people coming from different backgrounds bring different things with them.

I don't think all our trainers need to have it, as long as they can have expertise in the thing that they are training in.

It is a hybrid role, but I feel that in terms of the development I am offering it is not just on the professional side, if you like, on how to write your CV. In fact, I don't do that; the careers people do that. So the academic development is very academic

There is absolutely no way I could have fulfilled my role without a doctorate. But it's also – one could say – is it a chicken or egg situation. Which came first?

Additional activities of researcher developers

Given the research backgrounds of many researcher developers, interviewees were also asked about whether they currently participate in any research activities, and all but one interviewee reported that they engaged in 'research' of some kind, but not necessarily in the form of 'peer-reviewed publications'. For example, some were producing, or had produced, reports for professional bodies. However, none of the interviewees had time allocated within their workload for doing such research-oriented scholarly activity; the activities were seen as independent of their role, which also meant that there was no formal recognition of their achievements in those domains:

Most of my research activities are serendipitous, and quite often they are under the radar.

Yes, I do. But not related to my post.

What continuing professional development would you see as useful to you?

In essence, the researcher developer role is about facilitating the personal professional development of researchers, so it would seem reasonable to assume that they would be able to clearly articulate their own professional development needs. However, when asked in interview, the typical response was a lengthy pause, followed by an uncertain response that provided lengthy descriptions covering their past, present and future, as well as team members' and/or colleagues' development, but not demonstrating planning of their own professional development. In particular, the future-focused responses tended to be non-specific, that is, not related to the development required for a particular post. There was little interest in courses or formal qualifications – combined with an observation that there was little or no funding available for them to pursue such opportunities.

In the online survey, respondents noted good 'access to training and development opportunities', with 90 per cent agreeing, compared to 83 per cent of CROS respondents. However, despite 87 per cent reporting that they had been 'appraised in last two years' (CROS: 67 per cent), 90 per cent that they were 'encouraged to engage in personal and career development' (CROS: 75 per cent), and that 70 per cent 'maintain a formal record of [their] continuing professional development activities' (CROS: 56 per cent), less than half (46 per cent) agreed that they 'have a clear development plan' (CROS: 52 per cent).

What do you hope to do in the future, professionally?

More generally, when it came to their own career progression, there was a lot of uncertainty among interviewees. In particular, they could not see a clear career path available to them, but they expressed a desire to continue to learn and develop. For their next step, they tended to describe something that was already happening. In the survey, the most popular response for career aspirations was to 'increase seniority' as their next step, and in the longer term (27 per cent and 19 per cent), with not sure (16 per cent and 17 per cent) and no response (6 per cent and 20 per cent). For next step, simply 'continue to develop' was also popular (15 per cent). Interviewees were looking for flexible roles that could be shaped in line with their personal interests and values. It was striking that interviewees planned to build on the wide variety of skills and experience from their researcher developer role, but that they were seemingly comfortable with ambiguity.

The biggest challenges highlighted were the need to be reactive in their career and having to wait for jobs to be advertised or for opportunities to become available. Within their existing role, there was a scarcity of promotion opportunities, in contrast with the 'academic ladder' and its clear hierarchy of lecturer/senior lecturer/reader/professor (and equivalents). Instead, it was seen as necessary to move between institutions to advance on to a higher pay scale or into a more senior role. More generally, there was the perception of a lack of clarity about career progression options and what is needed to pursue them. Poli et al. (2023b) note a similar absence of career paths for research managers and administrators, reflecting a problem for such professional staff more generally.

Despite this, the interviewees seemed content with their personal situation, enjoying their practice and working within a university setting:

What else is good about the job? So many things.

And it is just really interesting to hear the wide range of stuff going on, and how excited they all are by their various projects.

I really like that I work with such a range of people in the university, so I am still on the ground working with the researchers, but that I am available to influence things higher up in the university.

the people I work with are the source of my job satisfaction, and what pushes my buttons.

Conclusion

He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches. (From an appendix to George Bernard Shaw's 1903 stage play, *Man and Superman*)

Researcher developers are now an established part of the higher education sector, as well as in some of the larger research organisations. Although our study reveals that many are engaged in research, they are not employed to do research. Similarly, although administrative roles are part of their practice, their roles are not focused on administrative tasks. Rather, their role contains a substantial element more akin to teaching, but, in contrast to the lecturer role, the focus is on generic and transferable skills to facilitate the professional development of 'researchers', including those studying for a doctorate, those who are early career staff and, in some cases, extending beyond to more established researchers. There is additionally a more strategic element covering research culture for the researcher populations that they serve, through activities related to implementing the *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers* (Vitae, 2008) and other similar initiatives.

Researcher developers are highly skilled – typically, they have a doctorate – and they have made an active decision to engage in the role of supporting researchers in their professional development and remain highly motivated in their activities. They enjoy the freedom within the role, as it does not have the explicit structure that would be normal for a lecturer or researcher role, but that lack of definition can lead to them being overlooked and their expertise misunderstood.

A marked contrast became apparent in our interviews, where researcher developers expressed personal comfort with their own career path so far, but a concern at the lack of an obvious route for researcher developers more generally. With researcher developers occupying the third space between academic and administrative staff, there is a requirement for institutions to ensure that suitable progression routes are identified, and that time is allocated in workload models, together with funding to support their own continuing professional development needs. The allocated time is both for scholarship (including for those researcher developers who have been researchers, ensuring that their knowledge about research processes is up to date) and to enable the researcher developer to prepare themselves for their next role.

Universities in the UK currently face serious financial challenges and government pressure on sources of income, such as proposed reductions in international student numbers. In such a context, it is uncertain whether similar results would be obtained in a similar survey run today. Would the flexibility within the roles endure? Would researcher developers remain satisfied with their work–life balance, especially compared to academic staff? Would career pathways have developed? We plan to run the survey again shortly to address these questions.

There are also responsibilities for researcher developers. As noted in the interviews, training is often held in even lower esteem than teaching, with scepticism from attendees as to whether the trainer has relevant expertise. There is a challenge for academic developers more generally to ensure that their professional practice is evidence-based, with a need for critical evaluation of theories and tools that might be shared with researchers.

Having postulated that the role of researcher developers could be considered to be a subset of research managers and administrators, the data we have collected suggest that researcher developers may not be so easily categorised. A key difference between researcher developers and research managers and administrators is that the former work primarily supporting the *researchers* (their skills development and the research culture), whereas the latter primarily support the *research* (including processes and procedures). Researcher developers appear to have commonalities with a range of roles, and they may be closer on the third space spectrum to academics than research managers and administrators are. The similarity in having a teaching/training component, a research component and a strategic/administrative component to their roles supports this, along with the very high prevalence of PhD holders within the profession. Furthermore, the skills that researcher developers are supporting researchers to build include those that would have previously been taught by academic supervisors, such as academic writing and presentation skills.

Shulman (1986: 14) responded to Shaw's quotation, writing 'With Aristotle we declare that the ultimate test of understanding rests on the ability to transform one's knowledge into teaching. Those who can, do. Those who understand, teach.' Given their role in supporting the next generation of researchers to develop the key skills required as researchers and as leaders, and in building a positive research culture (particularly given the increasing importance of this to funders and the Research Excellence Framework), it is incumbent on researcher developers to ensure that their practice is underpinned by understanding.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by King's College London ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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