The More the Merrier: Approaches to the design and delivery of professional development for researchers in UK higher education institutions

Taryn Bell[1], Francina Clayton[2], Megan McLoughlin[3]

[1]Organisational Development & Professional Learning, Baines Wing, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; [2&3]Building Research and Innovation Capacity Team, The Stables, University of York, York, UK
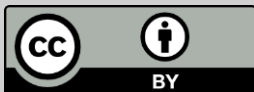Correspondence: [1]T.L.Bell@leeds.ac.uk, [2]Francina.Clayton@york.ac.uk
[3]Megan.Mcloughlin@york.ac.uk
Twitter: [1]@TarynLBell, [2]@FrancinaJane
LinkedIn: [1]Taryn Bell, [2]Francina Clayton, [3]Megan McLoughlin
ORCID: [1]0000-0002-1642-2588, [2]0000-0002-5956-5626

Abstract

Researcher developers today are expected to be able to support researchers at a variety of different career stages, all of whom have increasingly varying needs and identities. Some postgraduate researchers identify more as staff than as students, postdocs may struggle with transitioning to independence when they hold no independent position, while established researchers face the 'muddle in the middle'. For both researcher developers and for universities, this raises the question: is it better to develop provision, which is as inclusive as possible, or should we focus on tailoring provision to more specific needs and communities?

In this paper, we will reflect upon our own experiences developing provision for specific audiences (e.g., Research Fellows) as well as more general ones. We advocate for a 'more the merrier' approach, forging cross-institutional collaborations and networks to provide a breadth of opportunities including those for broad and specific groups.

Keywords: professional development; research culture; higher education

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

80

Introduction

Researcher development is, arguably, experiencing something of a 'golden age'. Universities and other research institutions, supported by initiatives such as the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (**Vitae, 2019**) and wider movements to transform research practice and culture (**e.g., Wellcome, 2020**), are focused more than ever on how to support researchers' continuing skills and career development. There is a wealth of opportunities available to researchers at many universities and research institutions, particularly those at an early career stage, supporting them whether they decide to continue with an academic career or move into another field entirely.

Provision for professional development within universities is often tailored to particular career stages, and it can be tempting to group so-called 'early' and 'mid-career' researchers together for the sake of career and professional development interventions. However, we also see on a daily basis the tricky nature of career transitions, and the difficulty in grouping together what can be very disparate groups. There is, for example, a great difference in how doctoral researchers see themselves and how universities view them. Are they staff, students, or both, and how does this affect their development needs (**Vulliamy, 2023**)? Further down the career line, postdoctoral researchers with varying levels of experience can struggle with the transition to research independence in the face of uncertain career prospects (**van der Weijden et al., 2016**). Even established researchers, who may have attained much-coveted permanent positions, still struggle with the 'muddle in the middle', and the feeling that their professional development has been neglected (**Gould, 2022**).

This identity struggle is further complicated by structures and policies whereby it may sometimes be beneficial to identify oneself using categories such as 'early career researcher', and other times not. For example, in order to access certain funding opportunities or development activities, researchers may only be eligible if they have never held a permanent position before, while other opportunities may only be open to those with the security of a permanent position.

In reckoning with the unclear boundaries of academic career trajectories, it quickly becomes clear that there are inherent problems with the terminology we use to refer to our researchers. Both 'early career' and 'mid-career' are poorly defined terms. In our discussions with colleagues at other institutions, we have found that the definition of an early career researcher varies widely, factoring in whether postgraduate researchers are 'early career researchers' or whether the number of years or positions post-PhD qualifies this status. Individual circumstances and life choices

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

81

add further nuance and necessitate careful application of these categories. 'Early career' often equates to 'young' in the minds of many, but increasingly this is not the case. Likewise, the 'mid-career' stage can be extended for some, particularly for those with caring responsibilities who may not be able to access opportunities to expand their experience in more senior roles. Such terms are therefore, at best, overly generalised, and at worst, risk tarring all with the same brush. Within these broad career stages, there are a myriad of differing situations, needs and wants. No two researchers are the same.

The broader context is that we are part of an ageing population, and as a result increasingly likely to navigate multiple career transitions across our lifetime (**Gratton & Scott, 2016**). Practically speaking, 'early' and 'mid-career' could in theory span decades. However, while academic research was once considered a 'career for life', increasingly the sector is recognising and facilitating movement in and out of academia. Inevitably, increased porosity between sectors and career paths will make it even more difficult to categorise researchers and their experience by 'career stage'.

From the perspective of researcher development, this poses a number of challenges. For us, there is one key question: is it better to develop provision which is as inclusive as possible, or should we focus on tailoring provision to more specific needs and communities?

In this critical reflection, we'll discuss our experiences of developing both general and targeted provision for researchers in UK universities. We'll consider the advantages - and disadvantages - of each approach, before making some suggestions for researcher developers looking to strengthen their offering for research communities at their institution.

General Provision for the Wider Research Community

What is most common in UK universities is the provision of more general professional development for researchers. At York and Leeds, for example, this takes the form of annual professional development programmes which researchers at all stages, as well as research enabling (or 'research adjacent') staff, can take part in, dipping in and out as they choose. The York Researcher Professional Development and Skills Programme offers training on a variety of different topics, originally inspired by the four skills domains outlined in the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (**Vitae, 2011**): knowledge and intellectual abilities, personal effectiveness, research governance and organisation, and engagement, influence and impact. At the University of Leeds, a similar programme, BOOST, runs throughout the year covering a range of topics related to career development, covering both academic and non-academic careers. Both

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

82

programmes are aimed at very broad audiences, focusing particularly on postgraduate researchers (PGRs, mainly PhD researchers) and early career researchers (ECRs) but often open to anyone. Attendees pick and choose which sessions they wish to attend based on their individual needs.

There are a number of clear advantages to this approach. Most importantly, it is inclusive by design and empowers researchers to select opportunities specific to their development needs and prior experience. Selecting your own professional development opportunities from a broad range of options is ultimately likely to lead to higher engagement and motivation as researchers are able to target specific areas where improvement is needed, choose preferred learning formats and adapt as needed to changing goals or interests. A caveat of this approach, however, is that it assumes researchers are motivated, or even able, to proactively identify their own development needs and browse a broad range of options.

General provision recognises that diversity exists even in groups of researchers who may be matched on specific criteria, such as years of experience, job title or funding status. As such, this approach avoids making assumptions about development needs based on narrow criteria. Opportunities open to 'everyone' also facilitate networking and knowledge exchange across disciplines and structural hierarchies, something that universities traditionally lack and that researchers often say they would like.

Practically, general provision is more resource effective. For smaller teams, or in some cases individual researcher developers, tailored provision is simply not an option. For this reason, general provision is the most equitable solution, avoiding exclusive opportunities for a specific group of individuals. This generalist approach is arguably more realistic in terms of time, resources and effort, allowing institutions to cater to as many researchers as possible, broadening access to such opportunities as far as possible. It also allows researchers not to get 'tied into' certain parts of their identity as a researcher, allowing them to think about broader opportunities. At Leeds, for example, the BOOST Programme allows researchers to consider a wide range of career opportunities, both within and outside of academia. Unfortunately, there is persisting stigma and many researchers struggle with the emotions associated with leaving academia (**McKenzie 2021**), such as feeling that it means that they have 'failed' in some way. With this in mind, offering a broader spectrum of opportunities for professional development allows us to signpost the different options at hand without making assumptions, seeming judgemental, or trying to guide researchers in one particular direction.

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

83

Recognising the many advantages of providing development opportunities for a broad audience, we suggest the following might help researcher developers make the most of the 'something for everyone' approach. Firstly, recognise that our true power lies in empowering researchers to help themselves and each other. Researcher developers can facilitate this by creating an environment for learners to be teachers through the exchange of experience and knowledge. This can be achieved in different ways, for example by facilitating regular group discussions as part of workshop design or through invitations to contribute more formally, such as on an expert panel. Arguably though, the most bespoke learning opportunities for researchers exist on-the-job, through informal and social exchanges. Therefore, one of the most powerful tools researcher developers can lend to researchers lies in being able to recognise and take advantage of 'everyday' on-the-job opportunities for professional and career development.

Embracing digital technologies and online learning is key to maximising the benefits of a 'general provision' approach to researcher development. While there are benefits to convening in person, post-pandemic researcher development shows no sign of exclusively returning to the full or even half day model of delivery, and it should not. Researchers unfortunately still face many different barriers when it comes to accessing opportunities for professional development; whether that be for example, the challenge of scheduling development opportunities around international field or lab-based work, or the challenges of getting onto campus when managing caring responsibilities and/or health issues and disabilities. Contrasting with in person delivery, online learning is inclusive by design, accessible to a larger group of researchers and also allows the learner to skip ahead and flexibly schedule bitesize sessions as needed. The Prosper Portal[i] provides an excellent example of this approach. Part of the wider Prosper project led by the University of Liverpool in collaboration with the University of Manchester and Lancaster University, the Prosper Portal is a freely available, online hub containing a range of learning and development resources for researchers, principal investigators/managers of researchers and for institutions. The overarching aim of Prosper is to take a new approach to postdoctoral career development enabling researchers to thrive in multiple career pathways. Recognising the huge time demands of creating high quality, self-directed resources, the Prosper project demonstrates a powerful approach to researcher development - enabling all stakeholders to benefit from shared expertise and collaborative strength.

Finally, in taking a generalist approach, researcher developers are extremely well placed to facilitate opportunities for peer, or social learning, for example using tried and tested initiatives such as coaching,

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

84

mentoring, buddying and action learning sets. Such development opportunities go beyond the skills and attributes that can be 'taught' in a formalised learning setting. The provision of social-learning opportunities, such as coaching and mentoring, is a highly effective approach to personalising and tailoring development at an individual level, recognising the diversity of researcher experience and variety of cultural 'pockets' that exist in higher education institutions (**Guccione & Hutchinson, 2021**). Facilitating opportunities for social learning also enables researchers to direct the focus and content towards topics and subject areas most relevant and pertinent to them, rather than taking a top-level approach designing provision based on what researcher developers and institutions perceive to be important or a current strategic priority (**Zacher et al., 2019**). Furthermore, social-learning initiatives create conditions for researchers to get to know others, join or build common communities and ultimately create a sense of belonging.

Targeted Provision for Specific Researcher Communities

General provision is the norm in most UK universities; however, by focusing exclusively on everyone, there is the risk of alienating or excluding certain groups, who may have particular development needs. As we have seen in our own professional experiences, targeted provision for specific groups of researchers, can also provide a vital source of support and development.

The University of York has piloted and implemented one such intervention: the York Fellowship Programme (YFP). Officially established in 2020, YFP offers a programme of pre- and post-award support for prospective and current Research Fellows at an early career stage. Supported by a full-time Researcher Developer with a focus on Research Fellows, this role provides support, guidance and advice at all stages of a fellowship.

YFP was established both to increase York's success with fellowship applications and to ensure that both prospective and existing Fellows' development needs were met. Before an application is even started, applicants can attend information sessions, make use of tailored resources for developing an application, access 1:1 support from the Fellows' Researcher Developer, apply for additional funding to bolster the Department/School's financial support, and receive detailed peer review. Applicants can also access mock interviews with senior academics with experience of the scheme at hand.

When an applicant is awarded a Fellowship, they become a member of the York Fellowship Community, a growing group of more than 100 early career Fellows across all three Faculties (Science, Social Science, and Arts and Humanities). Supported by the Researcher Developer, an Academic

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

85

Fellowship Lead, and Representatives from the Fellowship Community, Fellows receive regular communications and invites to meetups and social opportunities. The Community particularly benefits from a calendar of termly professional development events, tailored to Fellows' needs.

YFP also includes support for individual Departments and Schools, including both academic and research support staff. This includes support with internal selection processes, the sharing of best practice, and additional resources and guidance. All involved, from the applicants to those supporting them, are able to access bespoke guidance, support and resources.

YFP offers a more tailored approach to professional development, recognising the unique needs of research fellows and acknowledging the challenges involved. What all undoubtedly benefit from, too, is the sense of community engendered by the regular programme of communication and professional development. Fellows at York have noted that the feeling of support from the very beginning of the application process, through to the Fellowship itself, has helped them to feel that they are not alone. Putting time, money and resources into this particular community has allowed us to acknowledge their wants and needs, and provide the kinds of professional development resources and support that is most beneficial. From a researcher developer perspective, too, being able to focus on one particular audience is also incredibly useful, building expertise and focusing efforts on thoughtful, meaningful support and development opportunities for a specific group.

This is the real power of targeted provision: providing opportunities tailored to specific communities, helping them to manage the challenges and potentials of their position, and giving them access to peer support from others in a similar position. It is little surprise, then, that York saw fit to continue the initial pilot scheme, having committed to funding this initiative until 2027 at the earliest.

Yet our experience of running YFP has not been without issue. Even within this fairly niche group of researchers, it has become apparent that they have differing needs. Fellows in the Sciences, who have often already held a number of postdoctoral positions, are almost at a different career stage than their peers in the social sciences and humanities, many of whom are not long out of their PhDs. Based on disciplinary differences alone, this group is sometimes less similar than they may first appear, and even Fellows at similar career stages may be different in every other way, requiring different kinds of professional development support.

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

86

At York, providing such tailored, in-depth support has been possible because the University has been willing and able to put time, money and resources into supporting this community, even providing a full-time member of staff to manage the daily workload associated with YFP, supported by the University's Fellowship Coordination Committee who can offer advice and support from across the University.

However, even with a full-time member of staff, the workload associated with this level of support has quickly increased, and the costs of the YFP have increased with it. For smaller institutions or those with smaller budgets for professional development, this level of provision is unrealistic given the relatively small size of the fellowship community in most universities.

One way of getting around such an issue is by bringing together researchers in similar circumstances from different universities. Some funders have facilitated such networks already; the British Academy recently successfully piloted an Early Career Researcher Network for ECRs in the humanities and social sciences, with researchers joining one of three regional hubs (**Meagher & Kettle, 2022**). The National Association of Disabled Staff Network (**NADSN, n.d.**), allows what are often small networks within institutions to come together, share and pool resources. Such cross-institutional networks can allow for the kinds of community-building and sharing of best practice which may not be feasible within an individual institution alone. The UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship Development Network (FLFDN) has aspired to tackle this problem head-on, with the aim of supporting under-resourced universities to increase their success with the FLF funding scheme.

Targeted provision can provide researchers with a sense of community, access to others in a similar position, and the opportunity for professional and career development tailored to their needs. However, as we have seen at York, such provision requires a huge investment of time, effort and money. Certain researcher communities may also be seen as too niche, or representing too few researchers, for universities to be able to commit the required resources.

We believe that bringing together smaller communities from different institutions, whether instigated by funders, universities or the researchers themselves, is one way of ensuring equality of opportunity, regardless of home institution, and allows universities and researchers to benefit from working together, not merely sharing best practice but actively co-creating communities of practice. In doing so, researchers who are part of more niche communities (such as independent research fellows) can be part of broader, cross-institutional communities, supported as they navigate the transitions of an academic (or non-academic) career.

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

87

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, we posed a key question: is it better to develop provision which is as inclusive as possible, or should we focus on tailoring provision to more specific needs and communities?

The key takeaway from our experiences is that both general provision, offered to all, and targeted provision, offered to a few, have their own advantages. General provision, when done well, is inclusive and offers researchers the broadest range of opportunities possible, while targeted provision allows us to provide specific audiences with interventions and opportunities tailored to their needs. If all of our provision is general, we lose the chance to target support we know is needed by communities with specific needs. If all of our provision is targeted, we run the risk of pigeonholing our researchers and assuming their needs based on their career stage or status. Covering both specific and general provision allows us to cast the net as broadly as possible.

The flexibility of our roles means that it is possible to provide both kinds of provision, but this is not possible without a big investment of time, effort and resources. Whether general or targeted provision, there is a need to pool resources and work together across institutions. As many of the examples mentioned in this paper show, there are some excellent resources freely available online already. There are a number of public fora at which to share best practice; conferences such as the International Research Culture Conference, the Researcher Education and Development Scholarship (REDS) Conference, as well as Vitae's annual conference, provide effective platforms for researcher developers to showcase and facilitate engagement with open-access resources and to raise awareness of larger collaborative projects. However, we would urge researcher developers to go one step further, actively working to co-create resources, as opposed to just passively sharing examples. There is still work to be done to collaborate more closely between institutions, learning from and with one another, avoiding duplication of effort, making best practice more visible, and sharing what hasn't worked, as well as what has.

In short, our recommended approach can be encapsulated in the phrase 'the more the merrier': the more we have these conversations and collaborations between universities, the better we're able to serve our researcher communities. Given broader moves in research culture to encourage researchers to privilege collaboration over competition, why shouldn't researcher developers do the same?

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

88

Acknowledgements

Taryn is a Researcher Development Adviser in the Researcher Development and Culture Team, University of Leeds. Her work focuses on supporting researchers across the University with their career development, with a particular interest in how to make fellowship and funding support more equitable. She was previously Fellowship Coordinator at the University of York.

Francina is the Researcher Development and Culture Manager in the Building Research and Innovation Capacity (BRIC) Team, University of York. Her work supports a range of activities at York, and beyond, with the aim of fostering a vibrant, supportive and inclusive environment for researchers at all career stages.
All the best,

Megan is Head of the Building Research and Innovation Capacity (BRIC) Team, University of York. The BRIC Team supports researchers at York by facilitating the development of a positive research culture, and providing a range of professional development opportunities. Megan is also a co-investigator on the Valuing Voices for Equitable and Responsible Research project, funded by the Wellcome Trust.

References

Gould, J. (2022). Muddle of the middle: why mid-career scientists feel neglected. Nature Careers Podcast. DOI: 10.1038/d41586-022-02780-y [Accessed: 5 January 2024].

Gratton, L., & Scott, A. J. (2016). The 100-year life: Living and working in an age of longevity. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Guccione, K., & Hutchinson, S. (2021). Coaching and mentoring for academic development. Emerald Publishing Limited.

McKenzie, L. (2021). Unequal expressions: emotions and narratives of leaving and remaining in precarious academia. Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale 29(2), 527–542.

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

89

Meagher, L. R. & Kettle, A. J. (2022). External Evaluation of the Early Career Researcher Network Pilot. British Academy. [Online]. Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/early-career-researcher-network/external-evaluation-of-the-early-career-researcher-network-pilot/ [Accessed: 5 January 2024].

NADSN (n.d.). National Association of Disabled Staff Networks. [Online]. Available at: https://www.nadsn-uk.org/ [Accessed 5 January 2024].

Vitae (2019). The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. [Online]. Available at: https://researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Researcher-Development-Concordat_Sept2019-1.pdf [Accessed: 22 December 2023].

Van der Weijden, I., Teelken, C., de Boer, M. and Drost, M. (2016). Career satisfaction of postdoctoral researchers in relation to their expectations for the future. Higher Education 72, 25-40.

Vitae (2010), Researcher Development Framework, [Online]. Available at: https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/rdf-related/researcher-development-framework-rdf-vitae.pdf/view [Accessed: 5 January 2024].

Vulliamy, B. (2023). Students or staff? A research postgraduate Bread and Roses. Wonkhe. [Online]. 13 October 2023. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/students-or-staff-a-research-postgraduate-bread-and-roses/ [Accessed: 18 December 2023].

Wellcome (2020) What researchers think about the culture they work in. [Online]. Available at: https://wellcome.org/sites/default/files/what-researchers-think-about-the-culture-they-work-in.pdf [Accessed: 16 December 2023].

Zacher, H., Rudolph, C. W., Todorovic, T., & Ammann, D. (2019). Academic career development: A review and research agenda. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 110, 357-373.

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

90

Endnotes

i See: https://prosper.liverpool.ac.uk/.

Bell et al. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 80-91

91