

Notes for HESDA London Region's meeting on Supporting Research Staff University of London Senate House 4th December 2003

Present were:

Judy Barnett (Imperial), Ursula Blumenthal (LSHTM), Jacqui McDonald (IoE), Susan Oke (RHUL), Petra Dodd (IC), Tonia Hillidge (City), Stephanie Thorne (UEL), Janet Barker (UEL), Jo Price (SOAS), Stephen Tarling (BBK), Sheelagh Hill (Brunel) and Eszter Molnar Mills (Senate House)

The meeting was co-chaired by Judy Barnett and Ursula Blumenthal.

In introductions those present outlined their responsibilities for supporting research staff, the approximate numbers within their institutions and current support and training provision. It was apparent that different institutions are at different stages from offering limited one-off training opportunities to comprehensive development programmes.

The Sheffield pilot

Judy Barnett introduced the pilot project run by the University of Sheffield at 14 universities. This project identified the main aspects of good management practice, recommended a framework for the support of research staff which included a skills matrix.

For further details please see the relevant handout.

A question was brought up about how the 14 institutions engaged research staff and research group managers(PI's) to carry out this project as PI's variable commitment to their management role as well as time constraints were seen as potential barriers to the project's success.

The issue of further action was also raised – once the development needs are identified, how will these be met and where does the funding come from: is it the responsibility of the department or would it be included in the grant?

University of Oxford

Judy Barnett outlined University of Oxford's approach, a relatively new project that relies on a dedicated member of staff. The programme is built on substantial preparatory work to ensure buy-in, it focuses on local initiatives for individual departments. A mixed menu of training sessions and seminars is supplemented by mentoring and coaching schemes. Details of this programme can be obtained in a hard copy from Eszter Molnar Mills.

City University

Tonia Hillidge described City's researcher development programme. It is based on the results of a training needs analysis and involves training sessions aimed at researchers in general or PI's in particular. Take-up is steady, though these sessions are run for lower numbers than they would expect on other courses.

Imperial College

Judy Barnett introduced Imperial's support for researcher development by outlining the key documents influencing it – the Research Concordat of 1996, the Roberts Report of 2002 and Imperial's own HR Strategy for 2001-4. She described the appraisal scheme and Review and Development Planning for research teams and the relevant documentation. The College also offers a range of training workshops and a mentoring scheme .

The following points were raised in relation to researchers:

- A range of support mechanisms is needed to meet varying needs
.eg mentoring may be taken up by staff who feel that their line management is inadequate in supporting their career development.
- Certain development needs may only be an issue in the short-term as current graduate school students already receive training in certain areas. These students are the researchers of the future.
- At UEL mentoring is a mandatory part of the induction process for all new staff
- At Imperial it is planned for 9 months but can be open-ended and taken up at any point in the staff members' career

The issues and barriers affecting support of research staff were identified as:

- Difficulties of engagement, funding and resource issues
- PI's becoming aware of the existence and range of development options and encouraging their researchers to take advantage of these.
- Ensuring good practice in areas such as conducting appraisals
- Career development is a prominent issue for contract research staff due to their mobility

Skills development

Ursula Blumenthal described the School of Hygiene's provision, which is offered under the headings of teaching skills, general working skills (i.e. personal effectiveness) and research specific courses, as a training needs analysis 18 months ago identified the need for improved subject specific knowledge and skills. Some courses are offered in-house by LSHTM staff, others are run by external providers, while for some workshops staff can attend Imperial, QM or UCL. Additional development takes place as on-the-job learning with an opportunity for staff to attend MSc teaching programme or get funding for external specialist courses of up to £250. In terms of providers in addition to its own staff and external training consultants, the School aims to invite editors of prestigious medical journals (BMJ and Lancet) to speak to staff about writing for publication.

Details of the programme can also be found in the attachment.

Imperial College offers specific research skills-based courses as well as career development workshops, the latter offered by the College's Careers Service and focused on specific staff groups. Workshops for PI's offer supervision and team development skills alongside legal information relating to fixed-term contracts. Courses are offered for development of mentoring skills, in addition to the briefings mentors within the faculty schemes receive.

The following points were raised in the final discussion:

- A balance has to exist between centralised provision and local (departmental) initiatives and support.
- Where several priority areas are competing, identifying and meeting minimum institutional requirements should be the first step, to be extended later on
- Using experts from outside of academia and alumni to deliver some training sessions can be a way of attracting researchers
- Our biggest challenge is how to get researchers and academics to buy into staff and career development activities.

Providers used by those present or recommended:

- Suggestions from HESDA database
- Oxford Brooks University has a good list of providers and facilitators
- City University's own Educational Development Centre
- Local Careers Service
- Simfonec for Exploiting business opportunities in research and innovation
- Philip Hills for Grant applications and Writing up research for publication
- Judith Gill for writing reports (not research specific)
- Valerie Thackeray of Trainers at Work for writing skills (not research specific)
- Investors in Industry for generic entrepreneurial skills
- Possibility of research councils running briefing sessions on grants
- Better chance of attracting big name speakers if invited by a London-wide network, rather than individual institutions

Future plans

It was agreed that the group would like to continue meeting, possibly on a termly basis. The next meeting is planned for March / April to discuss what has been done at the institutions, how it went, plans for the next academic year and what collaboration may follow. In addition the topic of training needs analysis for research staff will be discussed.

It was also suggested that some time could be given to one or two institutions to introduce their programmes in more detail at each meeting .eg for the next meeting City University and Institute of Education. It was also suggested that the group compile a report in June to take back to their institutions.

Date and exact agenda for the next meeting to be agreed at the February London region meeting.