



**Report on the**  
**AIREN Project Event on**  
**Supporting PhD and Postdoctoral Researchers**  
**Held on Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

This AIREN Event discussed developing a research culture for supporting PhD students and postdoctoral researchers. The latest developments in establishing communities of practice and networks to support researchers were presented, and an example of a current North South PhD networking initiative was shared. The role of research managers and administrators as research developers was also discussed.

We thank each of our presenters for their time and contribution at the AIREN event on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2022:

**Clare Viney, CEO of Vitae, Careers Research Advisory Center (CRAC)**, presented an overview of the landscape for developing a supportive research culture for PhD and postdoctoral researchers. Clare introduced Vitae, the UK's leading organisation focused on supporting the professional development of researcher which plays an important role in informing policy and strategy. She outlined how Vitae's work is largely evidence based, gathered through surveys tracking researcher career development and progression. Clare outlined some of the background context, including the Research Concordat that supports researchers, and to which many institutions have signed up to. The Concordat sets out employer responsibilities to support researcher careers and professional development, including a requirement that researchers should have a minimum of 10 days a year to partake in development activities and training. Clare also presented data highlighting the importance of helping researchers to understand career options beyond academia – as surveys show that 80-85% of postgraduate researchers believe they will become academics, yet only 10% actually do so. She flagged however that researcher development is about more than career prospects, it is also about supporting the researcher's mental well-being and health. Throughout her presentation Clare commented on the complex nature of the research ecosystem and how researchers can sometimes feel disempowered by the system. There are tensions relating to job security that also has an impact on attracting and retaining talent. Clare shared CEDARS survey statistics that 76% of researchers in the UK are on fixed term contracts, compared with only 30% in other sectors, and that there is a particularly high reliance on fixed term contracts in the STEM disciplines. She also spoke about research environment and culture and highlighted current developments in areas such as open science and zero tolerance for bullying and harassment. Clare also highlighted other topics about the monitoring and measurement of career pathways, and also how will the period of disruption caused by COVID-19 will be reflected in CV's and publication records. Clare closed with a strong message that we all have a collective responsibility to support researchers – she suggested all stakeholders should consider / focus on what we do to support 'the researcher', rather than focusing solely on supporting the research per se.

**Dr Saneeya Qureshi, Head of Researcher Development and Culture, University of Liverpool**, presented on the latest developments in establishing communities of practice and networks to support researchers. Saneeya presented a definition and overview of communities of practice. Drawing on her extensive experience of participating across a range of different communities of practice, Saneeya shared her thoughts and advice on what makes them successful and why it is important to incentivise and recognise them. Participation in a

community of practice tends to be voluntary with people giving their own time to support it. Saneeya highlighted that communities of practice need energy and commitment to sustain momentum and flagged how the sector's use of fixed term employment contracts for researchers has an impact on this. To be successful, the other elements required include a link with senior management; funding supports; representation; and to articulate the benefits of being involved in the group. Throughout her presentation Saneeya highlighted the importance of embedding the researchers voice across researcher initiatives and in involving them in the co-creation of researcher events so they are at the heart of it.

**Michelle Daly, PhD Researcher, University of Limerick**, presented her experience of the PhD Writing Festival Initiative, 'FortWrite', as an example of a current community of practice. Michelle outlined how the initiative evolved between the University of Limerick and Ulster University to support PhD researchers in developing their academic writing skills. It started as an intensive 2-week academic writing workshop and retreat which, at the PhD researchers request continues and they meet bi-weekly together for 'Shut Up and Write' sessions using the pomodoro technique whereby they write for 25 minutes, and then they break for 5 minutes before resuming writing for another 25 mins and so forth. Michelle's story stimulated much discussion during the Q&A session, as she explained how even during the periods of Covid restrictions they continued to meet and work together virtually and that a strong friendship and bond has developed within their community of practice.

**Rosie Wadman, Senior Fellow in Academic Practice (Research and Enterprise), University of Southampton**, presented on the role of Research Developers. She outlined a tool that was devised by Rosie and colleagues from Southampton (Dr Heather MacKenzie, Catherine Howe), Ulster University (Lisa Thompson) with input from Dr Emma Compton-Daw (University of Strathclyde) following a workshop they delivered at the Vitae national conference in 2021. The purpose of the event was to gather data on the range of responsibilities undertaken by researcher developers in Universities - Rosie presented the data and analysis in an 'iceberg' infographic. It shows in one sense that Research Developers do exactly as the job title implies, which is to support the development of researchers, and this is represented in the infographic above the iceberg waterline. However, the analysis reveals they also do a broader range of other valuable 'hidden' work which is represented below the iceberg waterline. The analysis enabled the full range of work that is carried out by Research Developers to be grouped into themes and sub-themes. The themes are used by Research Developers to support their professional development, and by other stakeholders to help understand the breadth, the impact and changing nature of the Research Developer role.

**Dr Alice Dubois, Postdoctoral Development Centre Manager, QUB**, chaired a very stimulating Q&A and Panel Discussion session. It opened with a question to Clare for her views on the exciting changes currently taking place in research culture. Michelle was invited to comment on how the support provided by the university institutions involved in the PhD writing community of practice she is part of could be improved. Saneeya was asked about finding the right balance between launching new ideas and initiatives to support researchers and yet to avoid over-burdening the same individuals / cohorts all the time. The session closed with a final question to Rosie about the main challenges Research Developers face today, to which she highlighted the challenge of using and delivering e-learning for researchers and the importance of communications and engagement.



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