

UK Research Staff Association



supported by Vitae

How will getting involved with a research staff association benefit you?

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Introduction and context

This booklet aims to inform members of research staff of the benefits of getting involved with a research staff association (RSA). Getting involved can be in the shape of joining the RSA committee, acting as a representative of university policy or organising events.

The data quoted were collected through survey and case study based research. Our survey included specific skill development questions (as mapped to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework) to identify possible links between RSA involvement and a researcher's skill development and productivity. One version of the survey was aimed at researchers involved at any level of an RSA (34 responses), and the other version was aimed at research staff developers (seven responses from seven different universities). Case studies were solicited via contacting members of RSAs through connections with the UKRSA.

Research staff associations

A research staff association is an organisation where research staff (those employed primarily to do research in higher education) represent the interests of their colleagues. This can be through interactions with institutional management and administration, informing institutional policy, facilitating the organisation of training activities or career development sessions for other researchers, and providing support for researchers as necessary.

Research staff are well placed to inform and develop the skills and knowledge base of colleagues in the areas that matter most to them. RSAs are in a unique position to coordinate the responses of research staff to policy changes that affect their working conditions, professional development and career opportunities. RSAs can also ensure that the provisions introduced and delivered by higher education institution (HEI) employers are tailored to their needs and that research staff participate in their development.

Typical research staff association activities include:

- organising events for their peers
- representation of research staff on university committees
- dissemination of news and policies that affect research staff to their constituents
- fund raising.

RSAs and researcher development

The 2010 UKRSA report 'Understanding Research Staff Associations and Their Impact' highlighted the important role that RSAs can, and do, play in researcher development, either via directly organising events or through input into and promoting an existing researcher development programme. The report also showed that committee members derive additional benefits from RSAs, with many reporting that they had developed new skills, expanded their personal network, were more informed about career opportunities and frequently acted with more confidence as a researcher.

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, launched in 2008, sets out the expectations and responsibilities of researchers, their managers, employers and funders. The Concordat consists of seven principles for the support and management of researchers' careers. These include the recruitment, recognition, flexibility, career development, responsibility, equality and diversity of researchers.

RSAs have worked with universities to deliver aspects of the Concordat, improving the profile of researchers, reviewing policies that impact researchers and commenting on plans and documents. Committees liaise with research staff about any concerns and feed these back.

UK Research Staff Association

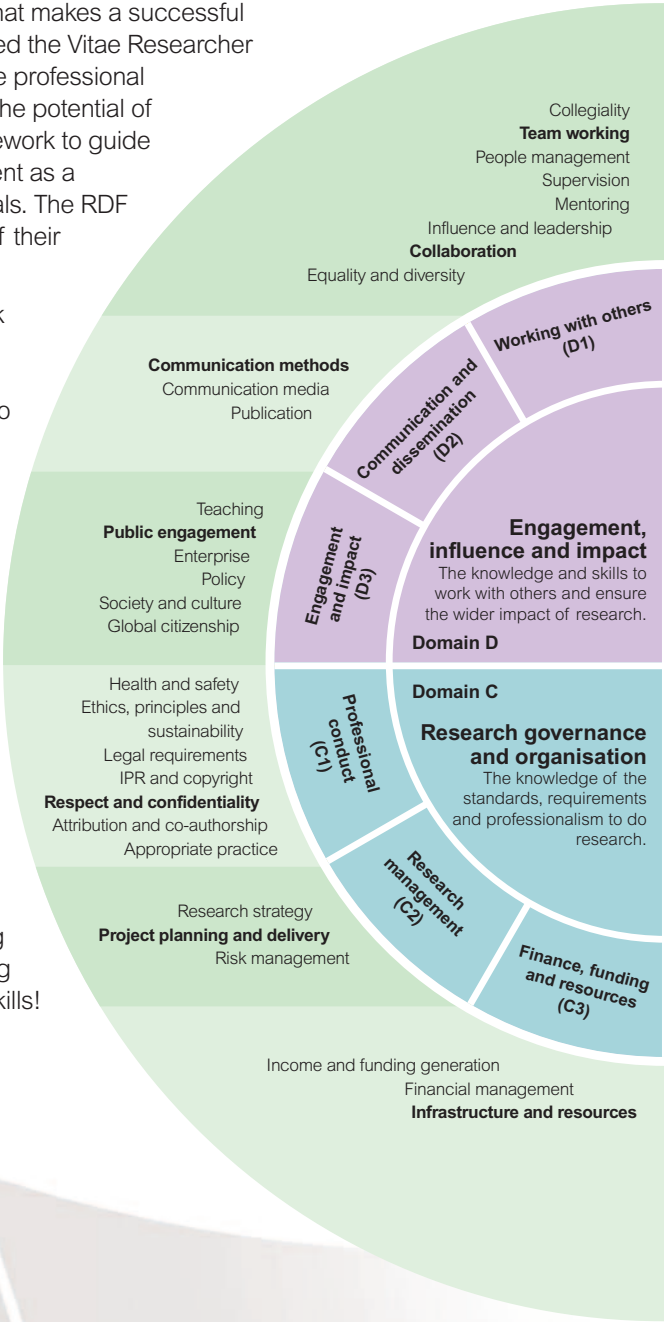
The UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA) was established in 2010 to provide a collective voice for members of research staff in higher education. It strives towards "a fulfilling career for every researcher" through its mission to empower members of research staff to take control of their careers and contribute to policy. It acts as an umbrella organisation for local and regional RSAs. The UKRSA also acts as an advisory group for Vitae, the programme that champions researcher development in the UK, and is represented on national policy committees and panels. Finally, the UKRSA conducts research relevant to research staff.

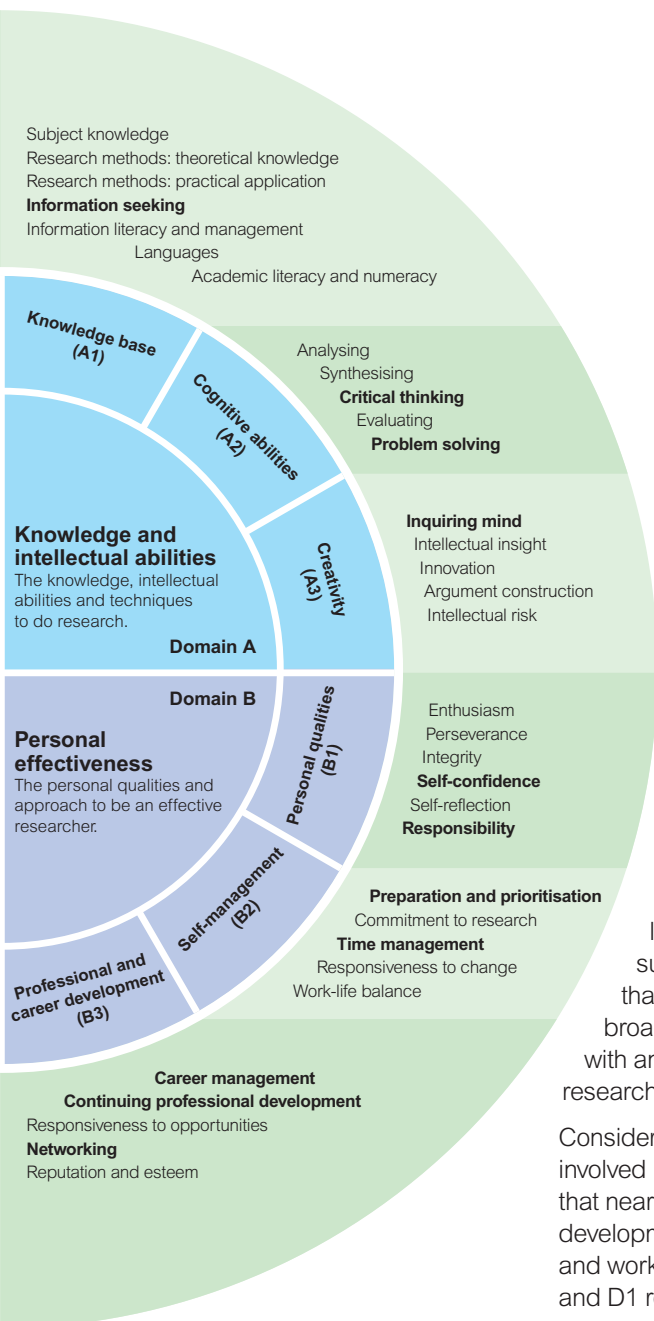
Vitae Researcher Development Framework

Vitae asked leading academics ‘what makes a successful researcher?’. Their answers informed the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF), the professional development framework to realise the potential of researchers. You can use the framework to guide you in your professional development as a researcher and set aspirational goals. The RDF is for all researchers at any stage of their career.

Depicted as a circle, the framework consists of four domains, 12 subdomains and 63 descriptors, each of which is described by up to five phases. You can view the full Researcher Development Framework document online at www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf. It articulates the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of researchers.

The Vitae Researcher Development Framework was taken as the starting point for a survey to evaluate the capabilities developed by researchers involved at any level of an RSA. The results highlight the wide ranging skills that researchers can develop by playing an active role in the running of an association. Attending training events is not the only way to gain skills!





RSA and RDF skills development

The RDF descriptors highlighted in bold are those where a high proportion (at least half) of respondents felt that they had developed skills as a result of being involved with a research staff association.

Strikingly, for every subdomain at least half of respondents to our survey reported skills development in that subdomain. This highlights the broad ranging skills that being involved with an RSA can contribute to a researcher's development.

Considering the types of activities RSAs are involved in, it's gratifying but not surprising that nearly all individuals reported skills development in professional development and working with others (sub-domains B3 and D1 respectively).

Developing skills through research staff associations

Will getting involved improve the quality of my research?

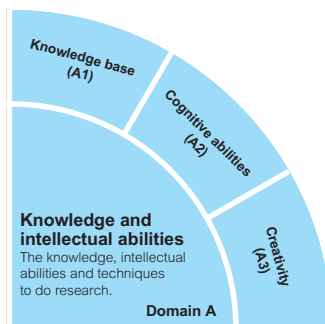
Kassandra Papadopoulou, University of Manchester

The university was lacking a research staff community and being a research staff ambassador in my school fits in great with this scope. Being the only staff researcher in a very big group makes it more difficult interacting with other researchers. Joining has significantly increased my networking within other faculties of the university, and transfer of knowledge from individuals on particular topics. I have met people that otherwise I would not be able to.

Committee membership has significantly improved my skills (as mapped on to the RDF):

- A. I have increased my knowledge base on information seeking on activities in the university and UK via Vitae and UKRSA. Membership has helped me to identify my problem solving skills on communicating with other researchers from different disciplines. On creativity, it helped me with my argument construction when I had to support my ideas to the researchers attending the RSA
- B. I was able to involve more attendees with my perseverance and enthusiasm as these were the first months that the RSA was active in the university and it needed a boost from my faculty. Being the only active RSA member of my faculty I had to bring the balance and representation to the RSA as well as invite other research staff to get involved. It assisted with my preparation and time management with my involvement with the RSA and my day-to-day responsibilities. It helped me a lot with my networking with the other three faculties of the university
- C. It helped me with my professional conduct. By chairing a session it helped me gaining respect from other researchers and confidentiality
- D. This was one of the strongest skill developments domain as I was able to work within the RSA team effectively helping with vital matters of ongoing meetings, increase collegiality from other faculties and together we organised meetings, inviting speakers etc.

These skills are directly relevant to my role working with the Managements of Projects Expert Group in the University of Manchester. It is all about people management, organisational skills, time management, effective communication and leadership. Although it does not help with my hard skills and research, it strongly helped me develop my soft skills further.



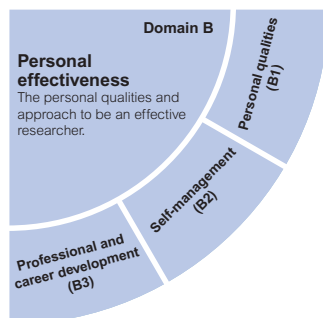
Domain A of the Vitae Researcher Development Framework highlights the knowledge, intellectual abilities and techniques to do research. Does being involved with an RSA improve this? A majority of respondents to the survey felt it did, especially for creativity (subdomain A3) in general. Individual descriptors that were mentioned often were: information seeking (A1), problem solving and critical thinking (A2), and enquiring mind (A3).

Will getting involved help me develop my career?

Samaneh Maysami, University of Manchester

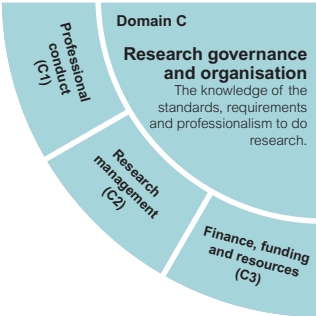
I joined the RSA hoping that it will help me with career development. I believe that teamwork in this way is a great thing to do, because it gives us an opportunity to share our ideas with other researchers and come up with better solutions to improve our career status. Through my membership I ensure I am learning, sharing, understanding, and challenging myself. Joining the RSA helped me in building successful relationships in fields other than lab-based environment/work. In general I consider this as a forward step. Whatever I do as a member, chair a meeting, helping out with running a session, or participating in discussions, helps me add skills and improve in both research and fields in parallel or complementary to my research (i.e. teaching and management).

Researchers juggle many priorities and balance the demands of their research with other aspects of their career development. Is involvement with a research staff association worth the time investment? Our survey found that, if anything, being involved in an RSA improves personal effectiveness. The main benefits of RSA involvement in personal qualities and self-management were responsibility, preparation and prioritisation, self-confidence, and time management. All respondents to the survey noted improvement in professional development and career development skills (B3), with emphasis on networking and career management, skills that are crucial to all researchers as they plan the next steps in their careers.



Will getting involved give me insight into how to improve my research practices?

Approximately two-thirds of researchers reported improving one or more skills in research governance and organisation as a result of being involved with an RSA. Half of all respondents found that they had improved their understanding of infrastructure and resources (C3). Other areas that were developed were respect and confidentiality (C1), and project planning and delivery (C2).



Michaela Goodwin, University of Manchester

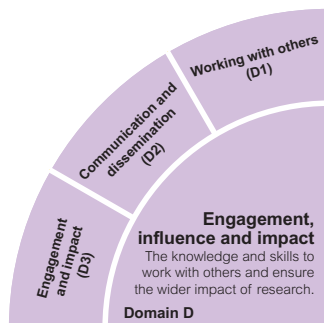
I was quite new to the university and had a lot of questions about where I could get different information from. I also recognised the need for somewhere where researchers could share information as I felt I had learnt quite a lot, but still was unsure of different aspects – so when this idea was discussed I really wanted to get involved. I also wanted to meet researchers from other departments and become more involved with the university as a whole. I think being a researcher is quite specific within the university and it seemed nice that we could all support and share information in this area.

I have met so many interesting people and feel that this has really helped me to not only feel happier and more secure working at the university but that the information we get can be shared with a greater number of people. The university has so many opportunities but not everyone knows about them. It's also a great way to feed back to the university what researchers are after/lacking in terms of training.

I think discussion with other researchers (even those from very different disciplines) has positively impacted on my own research skills, learning different approaches and also reassuring me sometimes that I am on the right track! Everyone generally has the same worries and problems and it is great to discuss these – even if they can't be solved to know you are not the only one! I think it has probably helped with my organisational skills, and being involved with something outside of my own project which is keeping me saner (hopefully). These skills and those in communicating ideas and finding responses to problems that other researchers are facing will help me in my future career.

The committee is a great network for me. I have solved research problems for myself, and others, through connections made in the committee.

Will getting involved help me engage and influence others?



Skills related to engagement and impact were behind only skills related to personal effectiveness as the most frequently reported as improved by RSA committee members. RSAs provide a leadership opportunity for research staff and one that can be evidenced in job applications. All committee members reported increased skills related to working with others (D1), particularly noting team working and collaboration. Other frequently reported skills included communication methods (D2) and public engagement (D3).

Karen Hegney – BioDocSoc, University of Edinburgh

I originally joined a dwindling postdoc society at the end of 2009, when a friend sent out a plea for help. I was the only person to respond to her email in a school of around 300 postdocs! After this, she pretty much handed the reins over to me and a couple of other hardy individuals that we managed to recruit. We took the opportunity to change things, making the important decision to invite postgraduate students to join in. And so BioDocSoc (the School of Biological Sciences Postdoc and Postgrad Society) was born. I have been working to build up the society ever since. My motivation to join the old postdoc society was to force myself to get out of the lab and meet other researchers. My motivation to start up the new society was for the same reason, but with the added bonus of really being able to mould it into something that would meet the needs of researchers, postdoc and postgrad alike.

Through this I get to meet with people who are motivated to improve the lot for researchers in our school and to actually put our ideas into practise. We have great support from the university to help us realise our potential as a group. It is really empowering to be able to run with your ideas and make a success of them. It has been a privilege to see the society grow. The committee has grown, the numbers attending our events have grown and our impact within our school has grown. The sense of achievement I get from this is great!

Being a BioDocSoc committee member has impacted my research life immensely. It has enabled me to exercise (or newly acquire) skills that are often underused in daily lab life, particularly those indicated in domains B and D of the Researcher Development Framework. A few examples: I have to work successfully with others, be they other researchers, committee members, university administration, senior academics or the professional workshop trainers that I hire. I have learnt to manage my time more effectively – you have to if you want to do well in the lab as well as make a success of the society! It has improved my self-confidence. Organising highly rated events, writing a successful application to fund the society, creating new tools and networks for researchers and now being recognised by Heads of Institutes and the school as the 'voice of researchers'. How could that fail to boost your esteem?

Pretty much everything I have done in BioDocSoc can be transferred to my current role; time management, public speaking, communicating with different audiences. The list could go on. Most importantly, I have no fear of networking now. This is a vital skill for researchers, I believe. All of these things are, of course, transferable to different careers. I hope to remain in academia, and I think that the skills I have obtained through being a part of a society will contribute to that. However, if life has other things in store for me, then this experience should be of use there too.

Benefits of RSA-led events



Running events is a major activity for RSAs and organising events develops a broad range of skills. Our web-based researcher survey captured information about the events RSAs run and how these activities benefit the researchers who attend them. Across all events, the most cited benefit was networking (or socialising) with other researchers and the linked benefit of increased information exchange and collaborative thinking.

Researchers felt that information gained through RSA-led events increased their understanding and skills, increasing engagement, motivation and proactivity, and enabling them to access management routes and engage in discussion with senior colleagues.

Careers specific events and activities, such as careers seminars and mentoring programmes, had associated career-related impact achieved through raising awareness of career types and routes and generating support for researchers at a transitional stage.



Julie Preston – MDHRSA, University of Sheffield

It took me a few meetings to understand what the committee was all about, and a few more to get involved. What I gained might be seen as fringe benefits from a career development perspective, but bench research can sometimes be really isolating. Being able to spend time with like-minded people talking about life, not work, is invaluable. The committee is a great network for me. I have solved research problems for myself, and others, through connections made in the committee. As a member of the communications team I have engaged with researchers through digital media, print, and – most importantly – face-to-face advertising. Each of these requires different skills and approaches. As departmental champion I had to approach academic staff, including the Head of Department, but with support from the MDHRSA and our career development advisors I have the confidence to stand up for what I think is important. It seems obvious, but being part of the committee means I've learnt how a committee runs, how the officials are elected, how to resolve disputes that threaten the committee. I have taken on quite a few committee responsibilities over the years. Being accountable to the committee, as well as my research project, has reinforced my time management skills.

The skills I have developed can be mapped on the Researcher Development Framework. Probably the most obvious skills transfer is in Domain B of the RDF. The research enthusiasm of committee members is infectious, and can be a great boost on a bad day. Having friends in research, but outside my department is an important source of support and encouragement, boosting my confidence (B1). Taking on committee responsibilities has improved my time management skills (B2). Being a committee member has made me more aware of the career development opportunities available, and the importance of each element. Encouraging others to engage in career development makes me more likely to do the same (B3). Confidence and time management skills are very important in my current role. I am more likely to discuss a situation, where in the past I would have run away and ignored it every time.

I've had a couple of opportunities to represent the committee. Each situation required a different approach (C1). I am also more aware of the internal structure of the university – who are the responsible people or committees, and who to approach (or avoid) to discuss a problem (C3). My future is not in bench research and learning to speak to and create meaningful connections with 'strangers' should make it easier for me to build a new network in my future career path.

Social and researcher networking events and away days

Committee members reported that they had used 'away days' to train members, discuss new ideas and action plan for the coming year. Additional benefits reported were socialising, networking and collaborative thinking.

“ Organising the annual away day has improved my team working, people management, time management, networking, etc. ”

“ The main value is networking, being given time and resources to meet. ”

“ Our RSA covers costs via the coffee morning sponsorship and offers a very wide range of benefits to all members including initiatives to fund researchers. The close links with our Think Ahead training programme are a massive benefit being a postdoc here in Sheffield. ”



Social events, or networking events framed in a social context, predictably increase networking and promote the association, links to other RSAs and generate discussion.

“ These sessions are designed to inform [members of research staff] of our association; who we are, what we do, how they can get involved, and why active participation is so important and beneficial. ”



Increased engagement and collaborative thinking were also nominated as benefits, even if the focus of the event was not based on the presentation of research.

“ They are a chance for researchers to meet others outside their immediate research group. We hope this could lead to professional connections as well. ”

Research and career seminars

Networking and career support are benefits of organising seminar events. Raising awareness of research across the institution and creating a forum to share information, opportunities and to discuss issues is also gained by setting up seminars. Organising seminars increases research staff motivation and engagement with the RSA and promotes collaborative thinking. Careers events also increase opportunities to learn about non-academic career paths and network with future employers.

“ [Seminars] provide a forum for postdocs to network and to hear about relevant issues to them such as careers information and skills development opportunities. ”

Conferences and poster sessions

The reported key benefit to being involved in the organisation of a conference was to gain awareness of the different areas of research topics and fields. Researchers also thought that organising a conference was an opportunity to enhance their CV.

“ Being part of the RSA committee has taught me a lot of skills that I can use outside academia. I have been 'forced' to think about my career beyond my current post, and the rate of participation in the events and workshops we run or collaborate on show that many other [early career researchers] now also think about their future. ”

Notably, it was reported that involving research staff in the organisation of a conference can increase uptake by other research staff.

Information sessions

Committee members felt they benefitted from organising information sessions, as these sessions created opportunities for consultation with departmental management committees or faculty executive boards. Respondents felt that they became more informed of university policies, procedures and opportunities through this type of event.

“ The committee has worked with the university on delivering aspects of the Concordat, improving the profile of researchers, reviewing policies that impact on researchers and commenting on plans and documents through the college board and other channels. The committee has also liaised with, and listened to, research staff concerns and fed these back into appropriate college and university business discussions and meetings where decisions are made. ”

Recommendations for making the most of research staff

Members of research staff

- Get involved in your RSA, and if one doesn't exist, set one up. Doing so will, among many other things, help you gain skills that will be important in your future career, whether in or out of academia
- Promote the benefit of RSA involvement to your peers and the university
- Organise events as well as representing your peers in committees as this will develop capabilities that will stand you in good stead
- Capture and record the skills development opportunities your RSA provides, working with staff developers
- Encourage PIs to appreciate the time you devote to an RSA, potentially by likening RSA involvement to sitting on committees

Research staff associations

- Get others involved with your RSA by promoting how it can help them gain skills that will be important in their future career, whether in or out of academia
- Use the RDF as a valuable tool to record, capture and inform the activities and events your RSA provides
- Capture and record the skills development opportunities your RSA provides
- Promote your RSA and its achievements at all levels

Staff Developers

- RSAs are an important mechanism for researcher skills development. Encourage the formation of new RSAs and continue to support and promote existing RSAs to demonstrate this
- A permanent member of staff supporting RSAs provides much-needed continuity

Principal investigators and research leaders

- Encouraging members of research staff to be active in RSAs will increase their profile and can be likened to work of more senior academics on committees and panels. It will also gain them valuable research skills



About UKRSA

The UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA), supported by Vitae, provides a collective voice for research staff in the UK, working with local research staff associations and informing policy. It continues and extends the work of the National Research Staff Association. Vitae provides resources, courses and events for research staff, including a research staff blog and annual research staff conference. Vitae works closely with the UKRSA to deliver projects, and provides administrative support and continuity.

UKRSA activities are divided into two categories, communities and policy, which include the following components:

Communities

The UKRSA

- supports the development of local and regional research staff associations
- develops and maintains online social networking resources for research staff
- represents the interests and views of research staff in interactions with relevant national bodies
- maintains a collaborative committee comprised of members of research staff and representatives of stakeholder organisations

Policy

The UKRSA

- provides input on policy affecting research staff at UK institutions
- informs research staff of relevant policy issues

For further information about the UKRSA go to www.ukrsa.org.uk or contact ukrsavitae@gmail.com



About Vitae

Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK, (RCUK), managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation and delivered in partnership with regional Hub host universities.

Vitae works with UK higher education institutions (HEIs) to embed professional and career development in the research environment. Vitae plays a major role in innovating, sharing practice and enhancing the capability of the higher education sector to provide professional development and training for researchers.

Our vision is for the UK to be world-class in supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers.

Our aims:

- build human capital by influencing the development and implementation of effective policy relating to researcher development
- enhance higher education provision to train and develop researchers
- empower researchers to make an impact in their careers
- evidence the impact of professional and career development support for researchers.

For further information about the range of Vitae activities go to www.vitae.ac.uk or contact enquiries@vitae.ac.uk

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