

'Supporting Aspiring Researchers in the Arts and Humanities'

Vitae Researcher Development International Conference

8 September 2015

James Lees (AHRC) ran a workshop at the Vitae Conference on 8 September 2015 on the issues facing individuals working in non-research positions in universities post-PhD, who are still seeking to develop research careers in the arts and humanities. The workshop was particularly concerned with those 'hidden ECRs' employed on teaching-only contracts, which are frequently short-term and part-time, who pursue research outside their contracted hours.

The presentation focused on the vulnerability of this group in terms of their skills development and capacity for finding substantial future employment in the academy or beyond. It suggested that while hidden ECRs were also employed in administrative positions in Higher Education, experience of working in an administrative/policy environment provided a more widely applicable skill-set than teaching alone. Given the highly competitive nature of the market for research posts, teaching-only ECRs needed to be encouraged to consider training and placement opportunities which would broaden their understanding of the value of their research training to non-academic employers.

A discussion followed the presentation, which raised the following points:

- There was some variation between institutions on the training opportunities available to hidden ECRs, but researcher developer attendees reported that there were still many courses and resources open to them.
- It was acknowledged, however, that there was a communication gap between universities and their ECRs over development provision. Hidden ECRs in particular were often unsure of their eligibility for development opportunities, and it was suggested that this problem might be alleviated to an extent by a more inclusive definition of a 'researcher' in the *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers*.
- It was thought that delivering development opportunities to hidden ECRs was also often hampered by the difficulty of their obtaining paid time in which to undertake training and placements.
- In addition, some attendees felt that the lack of uptake was part of the wider difficulty of engaging arts and humanities researchers in their personal development, especially in preparation for careers beyond the academy.
- While access to institutional research funding and subject-specific training was seen as helpful for hidden ECRs, it was thought that non-academic skills training and placements would be of greater long-term value to them, given the relative scarcity of research positions in universities.

- Many attendees thought that a key step in encouraging ECRs to consider wider employment options would be to address the feeling of failure some experienced at the prospect of leaving academia, by showcasing more widely examples of the successful careers pursued by ECRs beyond the academy.
- It was felt that doctoral supervisors and research project Principal Investigators, as the most frequent first point of contact for ECRs, needed to be equipped to give advice on careers beyond the academy; or at least to be able to direct ECRs to the careers resources which were available to them.
- Some attendees considered that the position of teaching-only ECRs might be improved by further formalising the separation of teaching and research through the development of a teaching-only career path, similar to the adjunct professor model in the USA. Others considered that it was the challenge of research which attracted ECRs, and that they would be better served by pursuing careers outside the academy which utilised their research skills, rather than by continuing in teaching-only positions, largely to retain their connection to academia, without using those skills to the fullest potential.