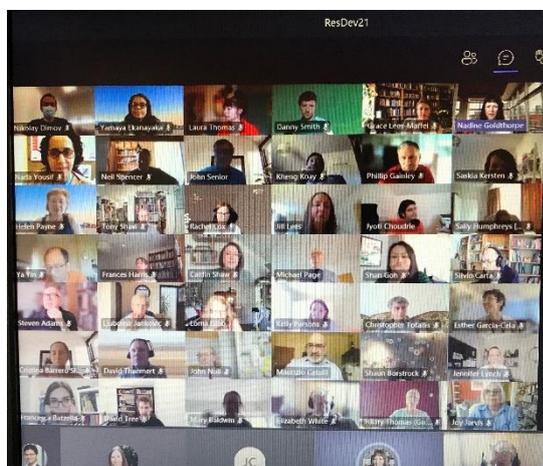


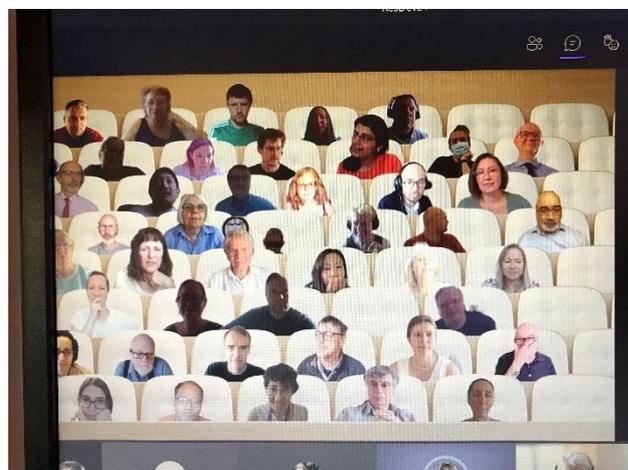
#UHResDev21 conference

Wellbeing, Funding and Futures

Wednesday 4 June 2021



#UHResDev21 captured in the Large gallery on Teams



#UHResDev21 captured in Together mode on Teams

Over 100 members of staff attended the #UHResDev21 conference, our 4th Researcher Development Conference and the 1st one online. Professor John Senior, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) opened the with an outline of the universities Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 Submission, sharing that 346 staff submitted, which is a significant increase since REF 2014. The composition of the submission was reflective of our research community with 42.2% FTE women; 22.4% identified as BAME and 4.6% declared a disability. 140 had been recruited since 2014. This is 40% of the total. Of these 140, 38% are early career researchers and 32% identified as BAME, showing that we have recruited a greater proportion of BAME staff. We submitted to 12 of the Units of Assessment.

Professor Senior went on to share from our Institutional Level Environment Statement which summarised notable achievements over the RE F2021 period. These included being ranked 4th for institutional research culture and 21st overall in the 2019 UK Postgraduate Research Student Experience Survey (PRES) and a 46% increase in average number of doctoral awards per annum compared to REF 2014. We were able to support a research-rich environment by operationalising the Research Themes, resourcing these and recruiting early career researchers to support the Research Theme activities; establishing 4 new cross-disciplinary Research Centres.

We have been fostering and strengthening research with global partners with institutional research partnerships; international doctoral dual awards and international research programmes. UH creates and develops innovative ideas, products and processes through the stand-alone innovation team and the expanded research impact team. We have also addressed regional and national research priorities through Hertfordshire Science Partnership and the UH Heritage Hub.

We first obtained the Vitae HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiR Award) in 2010, in the second cohort, and had a successful 10-year review in 2020. Professor Senior complimented the Researcher Development Group for this work and for organising UHResDev 21 conference. This introduction was rated as useful to very useful by 78% of respondents.

Jill Lees (Learning and Organisational Development Facilitation and Support Team Manager, HR) introduced the conference on behalf of the Researcher Development Group which is made of early career researchers from each school, an Associate Dean Research and representatives from Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Human Resources, Careers and Employment and the Research Office. The Researcher Development Group decided the content and put together a lot of the sessions with the theme of Researcher Wellbeing, Funding and Futures. Attention was drawn to the new [Researcher Development Concordat](#) that the University signed up to in December 2020 with a commitment to 10 days CPD per year pro rata in the [action plan](#) for the new HR Excellence in Research Award. Researchers were encouraged to plan their use of this time and to make this part of their appraisal. Finally, the new Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) was launched for researchers and their managers to feedback on the provision of support, providing direction for our action planning going forward.

Our keynote, Rachel Cox from [Vitae](#), gave a brief introduction to what Vitae does, including running the researcher survey, CEDARs, having a resourceful website and regular Vitae news which any of our researchers can sign up to (<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/news>) and also follow on twitter @Vitae_News.

The keynote was on researcher wellbeing and mental health. There is a growing momentum to support the wellbeing of research staff and doctoral researchers because they can be more vulnerable due to a number of reasons: being more likely to work alone; possibly falling between provision in institutions as they may be neither student or permanent staff; a possible poor work/life balance with blurred lines between start and finish; a hidden workload, especially for early career researchers and leaders of research; financial pressures especially for doctoral researchers. For this reason, the research culture of institutions is getting a lot of focus.

Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a professional context Rachel helped us to see different aspects of how we settle in our workplace by having our physiological and safety needs met through basic training, access to equipment and systems, onboarding processes, job security, health and safety and HR policies. We gain a sense of belonging that supports our growth and development through being part of a team, being comfortable in our role, in an equitable culture. The hierarchy reflects our wellbeing as a whole person - personally and professionally. When our needs are met at the more basic levels we can feel motivated to focus on our professional development and embrace the support that is available to grow our sense of belonging and self-esteem. It is important to consider what actions we take to look after ourselves and those around us.

Researcher development is about more than career prospects. Research has shown that PhD students felt better about themselves when they had been sufficiently prepared for careers outside academia and considered a PhD in their field as an added value for future employers outside academia.

Rachel shared the findings of a [research report on postgraduate researchers mental health and wellbeing](#) funded by Vitae Research funded by Vitae. A doctoral degree was consistently described as stressful; supervisory relationship was a common cause of wellbeing issues, with a tricky power dynamic; international mobile researchers were potentially more vulnerable; researchers with a career development plan and had received training were less likely to have considered leaving; overall researchers were positive about their contact with their supervisors; researchers having a cohort and wider support networks were more likely to discuss issues relating to their mental health.

The situation was not good prior to pandemic, but during Covid-19 mental health issues have become even more challenging. [Vitae partnered with the Student Mental Health Research Network](#)

[\(SMaRteN\)](#) to survey doctoral researchers and early career research staff to understand the early impact of lockdown conditions. An exceptional number of people responded. [A further survey of researchers and research group leaders carried out by Vitae](#) is being used by UKRI and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to consider policy changes to support the research pipeline because of the impact of Covid-19 on research activity.

The SMaRteN/Vitae survey showed that in the initial period of Covid: half of the participants were very stressed about their work; two thirds were worried about their future plans; four out of five had some level of mental distress and three quarters had a low level of mental wellbeing. This was not felt equally across researchers but was influenced by factors such as space for research; whether they were active; or where research activity increased due to Covid; change in focus from regular discipline; financial challenges; change in caring responsibilities. Postdoctoral researchers had greater mental wellbeing than doctoral researchers; male greater than female; those working in medical sciences greater than those in arts or humanities; those without a disability than those with; and feeling well supported by their university including provision of online skills training compared to those who did not feel well supported and had a lack of clear guidelines from their university.

The findings were shared with universities in order to increase the clarity of guidelines and support for wellbeing. The question is - how do we support the researchers who feel they are behind, for example, those who have missed out on progress and development because of increased caring responsibility during Covid? There is a strong focus on wellbeing and mental health in the Researcher Concordat and in the action plans linked to HREiR Award, indicating a lot of action on researcher mental health and tackling inequalities. Vitae have been welcoming researchers to reimagining research culture, thinking about the culture they work in at culture cafes and seeking to be solution-focussed and to understand how large funders in UK can have an impact. UKRI have an action plan for funders to make an impact, based on the principles of the concordat.

What can you do as a researcher? Make sure that you are prioritising yourself and taking time to think about your career and reflect on what you are doing, see what options are available by looking up from your research; relax; exercise & diet; stay hydrated; take control – write down how you feel; make a plan; talk to others – network; you may need to do a self-referral; use the resources and tools available (for example mindfulness apps; exploring nature; practicing good sleep hygiene habits). There can be a conflict of interests between teaching and research, with the pressures of moving to online teaching and delivering on research expectations being really hard. Sometimes the needs of individuals and their research can be overridden. By raising the awareness of this conflict and your workload, it can help you feel in control.

As an institution we can think about our population of researchers as inclusion in research development is important rather than one size fits all. Different actions will be important for different groups. Holding local focus groups or researcher network committees to feed in views and getting views from committees with a diverse make-up is important.

This was rated a useful to very useful by 71.5% of evaluation form respondents and feedback included 'Both sessions depict a candid picture of the situation we are in and the common struggle we all face, the sessions also provide helpful wellbeing tips and optimism'. 'The welcome and keynote in the morning', 'Managing research from wellbeing aspects to funding and promoting opportunities, all very educative', 'Given the past year the keynote was the perfect choice for all of us, not just researchers',

Parallel sessions followed a coffee break away from the screen, and were available again in the afternoon:

- Impact of Covid on Researchers equality, diversity and inclusion – Shivani Sharma (School of Life and Medical Sciences)
- Research Communication – using social media platforms – Dr Samantha George (School of Humanities)
- Creative approaches for researchers' careers development – Mary Baldwin (Careers and Employment) and Dr Suzanne Culshaw (School of Education)

Feedback in this session has led to Suzanne applying for funding for a scoping award to look at this approach for academic development in greater depth.

- Research funding for Early Career & Mid-career Researchers – Annalisa Jones (Research Office)

Comments on most useful session include 'the funding session with Annalisa Jones', 'funding and promoting opportunities, all very educative', 'as a new member of staff the presentations on commercialization and funding are vital'.

- Knowledge Transfer Opportunities – Mike Drummond (Enterprise and Business Development)

This was rated as very useful and one respondent commented 'To the point, pragmatic, and covered what would seem to be all the important things. Also, one of the most realistic views on the potential benefits of commercialization', 'In addition to the KTP session I also found it useful getting to put some faces on names and finding out who I should help from on specific issues'.

Over Lunch we had an opportunity to hear about some approaches and projects from the EdRes Network or to find out more about staff networks and mentoring with representatives from some of the networks available on-line, an ideal opportunity to build some of those links that support our mental health and wellbeing!

EdRes Network Showcase

- Using corpus linguistics to inform educational research – Dr Saskia Kersten (School of Humanities) and Dr Suzanne Culshaw (School of Education)
- Implementing and evaluating an online collaborative education tool in chemistry teaching – Dr Suzanne Fergus (School of Life and Medical Sciences)
- Exploring influences on visiting lecturers' academic identity development – Lesley Glass (Hertfordshire Business School)
- Learning Together in Community: The student experience of using WhatsApp and its impact on collaborative learning – Dr Martina Doolan (School of Physics, Engineering and Computer Science)

The evaluation ratings show 88.8% found the lunch time session useful to very useful and comments include 'The session contains a variety of topics and cases across different areas. It is informative, but somewhat difficult to digest for people who are not experts in those areas'.

Staff Networks and Mentoring

- Disability and wellbeing network
- Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic network
- Network Women + professors

- Academic Women's Action Group
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer network

We asked staff how they had found attending the conference online and using links to self-navigate the parallel sessions attended they were overwhelmingly positive and told us 'Worked really well', 'Very convenient', 'Very good. I could not have attended otherwise', 'brilliant - much easier to attend, especially around other commitments. There were some less positive comments 'lacking opportunities for informal chats and networking', 'As a presenter it was a bit more difficult to interact with participants' and 'sterile'.

Finally, we asked what else they would have liked included in the conference and respondents said:

- 'Presentations by some theme champions on the participation in the new European Framework initiatives'
- 'More awareness raising of groups and resources available to support researchers at UH'
- 'Some expert advice from a marketing expert or equivalent on social media etc.'
- 'How can professional staff get involved or be encouraged to do research within their roles?'

All these ideas provide food for thought on future events the RDG can provide for our research community.