

# Critical times: An exploration of recent evaluations of researcher development needs

**Shelda Debowski**

University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia  
Shelda.Debowski@uwa.edu.au

**Abstract:** The introduction of the Research Quality Framework will place increasing pressure on researchers to build a strong and credible research profile. This will necessitate the ongoing development of researcher capabilities to increase research productivity and quality. Universities are responding to the financial implications of the RQF by raising their expectations of academics with respect to their research. Unfortunately, most Australian universities are not providing suitable development opportunities to guide researchers into new and improved ways of meeting those requirements. This paper reports the results of several evaluations of researcher development needs. It identifies and describes four stages of researcher careers: the postgraduate internship, early career researching, mid-career research and research leadership. The data indicates that there are different development needs which should be met at each of these phases. The paper suggests that there is already considerable knowledge about how best to build the requisite capabilities if other successful university staff development programmes are considered.

**Keywords:** researcher development; research capabilities; academic development

---

Higher education is based on two critical activities: teaching and research. In the last few decades, there has been a consistent effort to clarify and develop university staff in basic teaching strategies. Foundations courses have played an important role in guiding many university teachers toward an enhanced understanding of their role in supporting students through their learning. It could be argued that this support has played a major role in improving university teaching across the nation. Unfortunately, the same care and concern has not been demonstrated with respect to research activities in higher education. While postgraduates are provided with some support in developing their research skills, university researchers generally do not receive guidance and ongoing opportunities to enhance and upgrade their research capabilities to match their evolving requirements.

The imminent introduction of the Research Quality Framework has increased our focus on how higher education undertakes and justifies its research activities. In the United Kingdom, the nature of higher education activity has been greatly changed as universities increased their scrutiny of research quality and quantity. The calibre of journals in which one publishes and the credibility of those publications has become a pressing concern for many individuals and institutions in higher education. The enhancement of researcher capabilities has shifted from a desirable to a critical requirement for higher education. Unfortunately, most universities are ill-prepared to support the needs of their researchers in this regard.

This paper explores the implications of several recent evaluations of Australian researcher development needs. It briefly outlines the key findings of those studies with respect to the capabilities that researchers should be cultivating to maintain their competitive edge. It then explores the ways in which researcher support is currently provided in many higher education institutions. The paper will suggest that researcher development is poorly understood and addressed, and some reasons for these difficulties will be explored. Finally, some practical

suggestions to improve the support for researchers are provided. In particular, the paper recommends an approach which mirrors the development activities provided to other university cohorts. It also advocates a methodical and structured approach to researcher development, and greater recognition of the evolving requirements of researchers as they move through their career stages.

## **Background to the paper**

In addition to extant literature, the comments in this paper are drawn from three evidential sources: an evaluation report of a researcher development programme, a collaborative research project across six universities, and a workshop attended by academics and research managers in Canberra.

The first source draws on a review which investigated the success of two researcher development programmes presented at the University of Western Australia (Adams et al, 2004). These programmes comprised a semester long series of workshops, mentorship opportunities and other forms of peer interaction. Two programmes were conducted over two years, with fifty-five researchers taking part. Six months after the programmes were concluded, participants and their supervisors were interviewed to obtain feedback on the programme content, impact and recommendations for new programmes.

The second source draws on a collaborative investigation undertaken by six research-intensive universities. Each university committed to interview six researchers: two early career, two mid-career and two senior researchers. The interviews were transcribed and analysed, with the general trends then reported to the senior executive of each university (2005, Building a competitive edge). The project also included an extensive literature review of existing research (2005, One size does not fit all).

The third source of evidence was a workshop conducted at the Australian Research Manager's Society conference, held in Canberra in 2005. Approximately thirty research managers and academic research leaders explored the issues they perceived in supporting researcher development.

## **Researcher capabilities**

Past literature has tended to focus on early career researcher development needs. Despite a large body of literature (particularly from the United Kingdom) there is minimal recognition of the career phases of researchers. Early career researchers have been the primary focus of research in this area, with many studies highlighting the needs of this group to build a publishing and research profile. (See, for example, Bazeley et al, 1996). Little has explored the needs of those who are working as more advanced researchers or as research leaders. Further, there is little understanding of how researchers might best acquire these additional capabilities.

The three investigations on which this paper is based clarified that there are, in fact, four phases of researcher development: the postgraduate internship, early career and mid-career researchers and research leaders. Each of these phases poses new challenges for researchers as they evolve toward new roles and new responsibilities. These four phases will be briefly outlined prior to consideration of university practices in supporting these changing roles and research expectations.

*Postgraduate students* are primarily taught through individualised internships. They work intensively with their supervisors through a carefully monitored and orchestrated programme of study, with high levels of accountability and guidance. In many cases, coursework relating to basic research methodologies and processes are included in the programmes. Students are increasingly encouraged to present their findings at conferences and to publish papers during their candidature. Thus, by graduation, they have gained a sound understanding of the research process, research techniques and the mechanisms by which one can build a research profile in the wider community. The PhD graduate is poised to assume a more substantial academic role as either pure researcher, or one who integrates both teaching and research. However, they commonly have little experience of working independently, or of seeking grant monies to continue their research.

When an individual is employed as an *early career researcher* (ECR) it is likely that many new experiences will be encountered. While many ECRs may have developed an area of research excellence during their PhD studies, they may be encouraged to shift their focus to a new strategic research area when they gain employment, therefore requiring a further period of establishment and consolidation. At this point in the career, the ECR needs to build research networks and gain credibility in the research field. Grant seeking is a critical skill for new researchers. Despite a dwindling and highly competitive funding pool, academics are expected to gain external support for their research. Successful grant seeking is predicated on successful publishing – in the right sources and in a timely manner. For many new researchers, this can be an immensely frustrating period as new areas of research are developed, and avenues for funding are pursued. Without strong support, it can be a fruitless activity. While seeking to build a research profile, young researchers also face other areas of growth and development. They must navigate workplace politics and build a career strategy. They may be simultaneously learning to teach at university level, including postgraduate supervision. Time management, life balance and career management may be pressing concerns.

For many early career researchers, the support of a mentor is one of the most powerful forms of guidance available (Records & Emerson, 2003). Researchers across all three studies noted the critical need for guidance, direction and career savvy. Those who lacked a mentor noted that stalled careers often occurred, while those with a mentor highlighted their strategic placement of effort and outputs. The identification of suitable mentors can be challenging, however, particularly in more isolated research areas. In many documented cases, junior researchers noted a reluctance to pursue highly successful researchers and to seek subsequent meetings.

While many early career researchers may be well-equipped and supported in their initial research years, the relevance and currency of those capabilities may become less pertinent over time. The difficulties faced by *mid-career researchers* were noticeable across all three samples. Mid-career researchers can be defined as researchers who have maintained a research career for more than five years. In many cases, they had remained at the same level as their initial appointment and were experiencing a career rut, with little opportunity for growth and development. In other cases, they were transitioning into management roles within the research team or research area, particularly with respect to managing teams, projects and programmes of research. At this stage of the career, the capabilities must shift in a commensurate manner to reflect the emergent responsibilities that could be assumed. People management, interpersonal skills and team building are but a few of the requisite knowledge sets required. The building and maintenance of networks and junior researchers are highly

demanding skills. Many of the mid-career researchers who participated in the studies also noted the challenge of rebuilding research foci as initial areas of investigation reached fruition or lost impetus. This was regarded as being very challenging, as the busy role of being a research manager reduced the capacity to reflect and build new sources of inspiration and engagement. In a number of instances, the researchers noted that the senior research leader also tended to be highly profiled, often at the expense of the mid-career programme leaders.

*Research leaders*, on the other hand, outlined how important their profile was to the research community over which they presided. Their name and research record pulled in grants, new PhD students, researchers and industry partners. Many senior researchers are employed through the highly competitive research fellowship schemes, thereby requiring continued evidence of outstanding research performance. As research leaders, however, they found they were increasingly required to operate as strategic directors: identifying new research avenues; seeking sponsorship and supporting their university priorities. They also played a very significant role as mentors to new and continuing researchers. Of interest is that the need for better leadership skills and expertise was often noted. In most cases, research leaders recognised their deficiencies and regretted their failure to avail themselves of leadership development programmes.

Across the continuum, time management cropped up as a critical issue. Researchers must achieve tangible outcomes. And yet, there are many reasons why research performance is sub-optimal. In particular, university and federal government reporting requirements and ethics reports were noted as being major demands on researcher time.

### **Developing our researchers.**

This is a critical time for universities as the RQF takes hold. Australian universities have already begun to target research-inactive staff for redundancies and the nature of research rewards are being redefined. The final definition of the RQF will become a more powerful source of influence when finally confirmed. Certainly, it is clear that the quality of the research (as measured by journal credibility and impact) will be a major concern. However, the final criteria are also likely to include a measure of impact through the adoption of research by the wider community. This measure will place even more pressure on researchers to work collaboratively with community partners, industry and professional associates. For many this will further increase expectations as to the required research capabilities to be demonstrated. Australian universities can no longer simply hope that researcher development will occur by osmosis. It is now time to redefine how the research enterprise in universities can be nurtured, stimulated and escalated in effectiveness.

However, a scan of university websites reveals a paucity of researcher development strategies. In some cases, workshops on the research process can be found. In general, however, there is much less support than that provided to other members of the university community. This can be attributed to a number of factors. First, while Australian universities commit considerable investment and energy in developing postgraduates, the same cannot be said for our research active staff. They are left to learn on the job – a strategy that can greatly reduce overall returns to the organisation. Second, the responsibility for researcher development can span a number of university agencies: research services, academic development, staff development, occupational health and safety and other university development groups. Third, the minimal understanding of researcher development in universities means that support and sponsorship of a programme may be absent. Fourth, researchers may feel they cannot participate in

development activities as they are anxious to achieve their research outputs. Finally, the industrial context in which research-only staff operate limits their access to study and renewal opportunities. Research grants do not provide for development and study leave: they are task and output driven.

Researcher development, like other forms of academic development, can benefit from a structured, targeted and focused learning and development strategy. Much can be gleaned from the successful strategies employed by those who provide Foundations of Teaching and Learning programmes (2005, Foundations Programmes for University Teaching) and targeted programmes for academic heads and women in universities (de Vries, 2005). These are the most common intensive development strategies which may be found in institutions of various research intensities. As programmes, they support a learning cohort as it journeys through a progressive range of activities which encourage reflection, consideration of the working context, and intensive development of context-relevant capabilities.

Intensive programmes of this nature are customised to reflect the needs of a specific cohort. In the case of researchers, for example, these programmes might be directed toward the needs of early, mid-career or leading researchers. Each cohort would require a different form of programme. Some typical elements might include an update of current strategies (such as time, career, project or people management), interaction with successful models from within and beyond the university, a mentorship, shadowing or coaching option, and an opportunity to work within other research contexts. In the case of research leaders, the opportunity to share good practice and successful research strategies can also enable greater outcomes for the research group or centre as well as the individual participant. This parallels successful programmes for academic heads such as those provided through the University of Melbourne.

The motivational effects of intensive development programmes can be very significant. The programme signals a strong organisational commitment to supporting the group of learners. This, in itself, is a powerful driver for those who are participating. The selection of participants can also affirm the value placed on the individual – particularly where candidates must compete for a place. The sponsorship by supervisors also encourages strong engagement by those participating.

While these broad principles are readily transferred to researcher development programmes, there are many logistic issues to resolve. A suitable and willing sponsor from the university executive needs to be identified. The programme may cut across various domains – particularly those led by the research or academic executive members. A strong prominent sponsor creates a powerful message to the university community, encouraging greater consideration of the programme benefits. This benefactor can also harness support from other significant personages in the university, such as research leaders and deans. Similarly, these programmes will rely on a number of critical stakeholders, including academic developers, the research directors and their staff, faculty developers and others with a research interest. These people could become part of the steering group which assists with the programme development.

Researcher programmes must reflect the strategic directions of the university. As research funding diminishes while research expectations grow, there will be an increasing concern for building strong and collaborative research communities which support identified areas of institutional research. These programmes can encourage discussion of how research may be more effectively managed. Evidence from academic heads and past researcher programmes

also show that peer cohorts become more confident and active as they develop their sense of community during development programmes. As the programmes build a number of cohorts, these members can become champions, and encourage others to participate. This would be particularly important for researcher development, given likely reluctance to commit time to learning and development until the benefits are more publicly promoted.

## Conclusion

University researchers are facing increasing expectations in terms of quality, quantity and impact of their research. We no longer have the freedom to just hope that our researchers will be effective through their good efforts alone. Academic development has to move into a more comprehensive and integrated support of researchers – through all stages of their career cycles. The expertise that develops effective academic heads and university teachers can provide guidance on how support might be offered. However, these programmes must also be customised to reflect the real issues facing researchers. Researcher development has the potential to act as a powerful force of change, growth and enhancement. We can now link past experience and knowledge from other programmes with our greater understanding of the researcher career phases. There is no time to lose in stimulating organisational responses to this critical need as our researchers face perhaps the greatest challenge in Australian higher education history.

## References

- Adams, J., Debowski, S., Lawrence, V., Dunlop, S., Morgan, V., Thomson, C., Juniper, S. (2004). *Career Researchers: Supporting their developmental needs*, Perth, University of Western Australia.
- Bazeley, P., Kemp, L., Stevens, K., Asmar, C., Grbich, C., Marsh, H., and Bhathal, R. (1996). *Waiting in the wings: a study of early career academic researchers in Australia.*, National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Australian Research Council.
- Building a competitive edge... A review of the development needs of researchers in Australian research-intensive universities. Working Paper #2*, (2005). Group of Eight Researcher Development Project.
- de Vries, J. (2005). *More than the sum of its parts: 10 years of the Leadership Development for Women programme at UWA*, Perth, University of Western Australia.
- Foundations Programmes for University Teaching, Flinders University*. (2005). Retrieved from <http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/foundations/home.htm>
- One size does not fit all... a review of the literature relating to researcher development needs*. (2005). *Working Paper #1*, Group of Eight Researcher Development Project.
- Records, K & Emerson, R. J., (2003). Mentoring for research skill development, *Journal of Nursing Education*, 42(3), p.553.

Copyright ©2006 Shelda Debowski: The author assigns to HERDSA and non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in course of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime site and mirrors) on CD and in printed form within the HERDSA 2006 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.