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National results of the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2009 (0256)

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The Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) is a national initiative to gather the views of research staff in UK higher education institutions about their experiences of and attitudes to employment and career development, and their career aspirations. CROS was relaunched in 2009 with a record number of HEIs and researchers taking part. We present an overview of the aggregated UK responses and analysis, which gives a snapshot of the views and experiences of research staff respondents nationally. The information provides a valuable national picture for policyholders, as relatively little is known formally about this cohort despite their key role in the UK's research. Significant key findings and emerging themes are highlighted, some in contrast with certain views from anecdotal evidence. This also provides the national context against which individual institutions can evaluate data collected within their own surveys, which will assist them in developing support for their research staff.

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An introduction to CROS

The supply and development of highly skilled researchers is critical to UK higher educationⁱ. Information from the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) provides evidence to learn what can be done to foster the development of researchers so that they can benefit themselves, their discipline and their institutions.

The CROS survey, conducted by higher education institutions (HEIs) in spring 2009, gathered the anonymous views of research staff about their experiences, employment, career development and aspirations. The 51 HEIs participating in CROS 2009 included 16 Russell Group institutions and 12 of the 94 Group, and represent 74% of the estimated 38,000 total UK HE research staff population. The 5908 responses received equate to a 21% response rate from the target sample (and actually comprise about 16% of the total population).

Demographic information received compares well with known information about the UK research staff population in HEⁱⁱ. The high response rate and strong statistical confidence afforded by the large sample size further suggest that responses are representative.

This paper reports analysis, carried out by Vitae, of the aggregated responses to a core question-set common to the 51 parallel surveysⁱⁱⁱ. The analysis was largely restricted to the overall sample, with

only very preliminary analysis of responses from selected sub-populations.

Key findings

Overall the messages from CROS are positive. Most researchers felt valued, were satisfied with their work-life balance and believed their institutions were committed to equality and diversity. Institutions appeared to recognise the importance of supporting career development and there has been improvement over time in the uptake of induction, appraisal, and training and development opportunities. Most research staff felt integrated within their departmental research community and stimulated by their institution's research culture.

However, there is still scope for institutions to recognise the wider contributions made by research staff, and to encourage them to be more realistic in their career aspirations and more active in career development planning.

Preliminary examination of responses from sub-populations revealed few significant differences between females and males, or from the 35% of respondents who originated outside the UK. For most questions, there was little difference in the responses from those with fixed-term contracts and open-ended employment. However, some groups of researchers, such as those who have had long service through multiple, short-term contracts, did not feel integrated within their institution, and reported less positive feelings about their employer, job and career.

Many of the findings can be related to the aspirations of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers^{iv}, and are presented accordingly.

Recruitment and selection

Generally, recruitment and selection procedures appear to be open and transparent. However, there is continued dependence on word of mouth in recruitment (21% of appointees heard about their role solely this way). Although 80% of respondents were interviewed during application for their current post, only half of interviews involved the principal investigator (PI) and there were few opportunities for informal discussion.

Recognition and value

Most respondents appeared to enjoy their jobs, reported satisfactory work-life balance and felt valued by their institution, particularly for research-related activities. However, about 30% did not feel that their other contributions, such as teaching or management of staff/resources, were recognised; half were undertaking teaching and 43% supervised research students. Over half of respondents did not feel they were valued equally with lecturing staff, at an equivalent level, in relation to career progression and promotion.

Support and career development

Most respondents believed they were encouraged to consider their career development; 40% had talked to their manager about it in the last year although few had talked to careers or development

staff. Half had participated in staff appraisal in the last 2 years, an increase compared with previous surveys^v.

The availability and take-up of training and development activities appears to be rising, with 72% having undertaken training/CPD activity in their institution in the last year, compared with 36% in CROS 2006^{vi}. Although only 5% had undertaken a placement outside HE, and 7% a secondment to another HEI, up to half would like to. Notably, considering their research career subsequent to doctoral study, 63% of respondents had only worked in their current HEI.

More than half of respondents reported long-term career aspirations in HE, either in teaching and research or a pure research role. About one third had aspirations to a career outside HE. However, few currently sought advice from careers staff in relation to applications or progression.

Researchers' responsibilities

Most respondents appeared to be well-informed about issues closely related to their own role and research, but less so about wider issues such as progression opportunities or the operations of their department or institution.

Half of respondents claimed to have a distinct career plan. Taking ownership of career appeared to be a significant motivating factor; those with a career plan responded more positively to many questions. Many reported enthusiasm for training in research and personal development skills, but had not yet taken advantage of such opportunities.

Diversity and equality

Almost all respondents believed that their institution was committed to diversity and equality and a large majority believed staff were treated fairly. However, 10% of respondents believed they had experienced unfair discrimination in their current post.

Conclusions and recommendations

The overall picture from CROS 2009 is a positive one. Recruitment processes are generally transparent; most researchers feel valued; institutions appear to recognise the importance of supporting career development; about half of all researchers have a career plan; and the vast majority believe their institutions are committed to equality and diversity. Nevertheless there are variations and concerns which emerge from the responses.

These aggregate results offer a snapshot of the experiences and attitudes of the UK's current research staff within HE. The findings should prove valuable to those looking at the national picture, particularly in relation to the implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. Staff working in HEIs have the opportunity to compare their institutional results with the UK aggregate and are encouraged to do so. Although such comparison, or benchmarking, is valuable, the real benefit to institutions will come from longitudinal comparison of their own institutional data, in part through participation in future CROS surveys. Institutions should also identify areas of good practice and share these with the sector through the CROS and Vitae networks. Such exchange will

help researchers and enhance their contribution to the UK's research agenda. CROS 2009 also provides a rich dataset worthy of further analysis, particularly to explore sub-populations.

ⁱ HMSO/DfES (2003). The Future of Higher Education.

ⁱⁱ HESA (2009). Resources of Higher Education Institutions 2007/08.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vitae (2009). Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2009. Analysis of aggregated UK results

^{iv} Universities UK & Research Councils UK (2008). Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

^v Contract Research staff Online Survey (2002). Summary analysis of 2002 results

^{vi} CROS (2006). Unpublished data – selected statistics with permission of CROS Steering Group