AHRC Research Training Framework for Doctoral Students

Introduction

The AHRC's overarching aim for research training is to support excellent students in world-class research training environments. It seeks to foster both the health of the research base, and the wider sectors which draw on high-level capabilities in the arts and humanities, by ensuring the next generation of researchers receives the highest quality of training and skills development. The AHRC therefore wishes to promote, not only subject-specific development, enabling students to become experts in their field, but also wider skills that provide students with the capability to pursue successful careers both within and outside academia.

> AHRC Strategy 2013-2018, 'The Human World: The Arts and Humanities in our Times'(opens in a new window)
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> 'The AHRC will help to sustain generations of researchers by funding postgraduate research and supporting excellent provision of postgraduate and early-career training and skills. The AHRC will maintain oversight of national capability and monitor the overall health of the arts and humanities.'

While many students enter doctoral study intending to pursue an academic career, a significant proportion have several alternatives in mind, or have no clear career plan at that stage.[1]

Doctoral study is a unique opportunity to spend a focused period of time devoted to research. The AHRC wants the students it funds to make the most of this opportunity, and to develop as world-class researchers and the intellectual leaders of the future. However, it also wants AHRC-funded students to be aware of, and to explore, the wider opportunities that doctoral study opens for them. Universities are increasingly seeking to engage with the wider cultural and civic milieu in which they operate, and this means that there is a key role for highly-trained doctoral graduates in a range of public, private, and third sector organisations that want to work in partnership with academic researchers. It is vital, therefore, that universities and individual supervisors work to counter the view that academia is the only meaningful career for doctoral researchers.

The Research Organisations (ROs)[2] that host AHRC-funded students offer high quality development in skills, knowledge and expertise outside of individual subject disciplines.

They also encourage students to consider new ways of thinking and to develop new skills. These not only enable doctoral students to undertake excellent research and produce a high-quality thesis, but will also ensure that they are well-placed to pursue careers in a wide range of related sectors. An understanding of how to work collaboratively and flexibly with partners in other sectors is also increasingly beneficial within academic careers. To make the most of this training, ROs should also be advising students on how to fully document and present their skills and qualities to any prospective employer in a way that demonstrates to the employer that those skills are transferable and relevant.

The Research Councils have set out the [RCUK Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training (opens in a new window)](#), which outlines the broad framework for all RCUK-funded students and those that support them. Likewise, the researcher developer organisation [Vitae® (opens in a new window)](#) has produced a Researcher Development Statement and Framework (RDS and RDF) to help define, develop and document the researcher's development needs.

AHRC's Expectations for Doctoral Training

The AHRC has used the Vitae RDS/RDF and the RCUK statement, to identify a number of key areas where it expects students to develop skills. This is not a comprehensive list but gives an indication of the areas that students might wish to investigate. It is expected that ROs will provide the training that students need to complete a high-quality research project as well as for their wider development, and that students engage in development activities beyond the immediate needs of their doctoral research.

Wider experience and impact

Doctoral study can provide significant opportunities for exploring the wider impact of the research being pursued. This might involve performance or exhibitions, or work with cultural partners or community groups. There are a wide variety of ways in which arts and humanities research can have a wider impact beyond academia.

Pursuing opportunities to explore the wider impact of their research is a key responsibility for academics in all fields. Academics applying for Research Council funding are asked to outline the pathways to impact they will be looking to explore, i.e. the potential ways in which their research could have an impact and benefit beyond the academic sphere. This may include, for example, making connections with potential users at an early stage in the research, so that they can be part of the research development, progress, and exploitation. Impact was also included in the Funding

Councils' Research Excellence Framework (REF) (opens in a new window), which determines the allocation of funding to universities.

Any student considering an academic career is encouraged to think at an early stage about the potential impact of their research, and to look for opportunities to gain experience during their doctoral study. Equally, the experience of working with non-academic organisations will help more broadly in any career setting. The AHRC strongly encourages doctoral students to work with their supervisors to consider this, and to pursue any relevant activities and opportunities which might arise. If such a course is followed, then the student must be aware of the ethical implications of working with groups outside academia. They will need to consider carefully whether this applies to the research or engagement activities that they intend to pursue, and ensure that they seek advice and approval from the necessary bodies. The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) has a useful guide (opens in a new window) on the ethical and social issues of public engagement:

To find out more about impact, there is information on the RCUK (opens in a new window) and AHRC (opens in a new window) websites.

Needs-based approach

The AHRC recognises that students enter doctoral study with a diverse range of skills and experience and their ongoing needs will vary considerably, according to the nature and demands of their research project. It is important, therefore, that there is a needs-based approach to the assessment of the development the student should undertake. This development should assist both with the completion of their research project and with the realisation of their career goals beyond the PhD. Moreover, this should be a continual process of review and reflection, to ensure that any new needs arising from the student's research or career aspirations are met.

The AHRC does not want to be prescriptive about the types of development opportunities that are offered, and encourages all parties to be innovative, flexible, and responsive when considering their provision and engagement. The AHRC's vision of training is as a collaborative venture between the RO, the student, the supervisor, partner organisations, potential employers, and the AHRC.

All parties are encouraged to look beyond the immediate needs of the thesis to consider what other development opportunities are available. These might include: courses, workshops or other development activities provided by the student's institution and

partner bodies; opportunities for public or cultural engagement; placements, internships or secondments with non-academic partners; or study visits to other ROs in the UK or overseas. Information on the funding which the AHRC provides for some of these activities may be found in the 'Resources and Further Information' section. In some cases, these are focused on research development, but in all cases they present opportunities to gain experience of working with experts outside the academic environment and a chance to network and make new contacts.

Whilst areas such as advanced language training might be necessary for some research projects, students should not ignore the value of language-learning as part of a researcher's wider portfolio of skills. Not only does it allow access to a greater range of sources in different languages, thereby enhancing research quality; it also potentially increases the impact of research, by providing the researcher with the ability to reach a wider, international audience.

There are other examples where skills developed specifically for a project have broader applications, and students should think about how these skills can be employed in a range of contexts. Conversely, skills which might be termed generic or transferable – such as project management or making presentations – are invaluable in the successful completion of the research project.

Examples of research skills

These are equally relevant to careers within and outside academia.

- Understanding theoretical issues, the nature of evidence and argument; and the relationships between practice, theory, and criticism. This includes the ability to think critically and evaluate evidence.

- Understanding different approaches and methodologies and how they can be applied. Being open to exploring new avenues. Developing research methods and skills and practical techniques appropriate to the project.

- Developing knowledge and understanding of the research context of the project, and of trends in the discipline on an ongoing basis. This includes an appreciation of how the project might have an impact on the discipline, and adapting to any new knowledge or approaches which emerge during the course of the project.

- Developing knowledge and understanding of related disciplines where appropriate, and being aware of, and open to, opportunities to work with other disciplines. Pursuing these interactions and collaborations where there is benefit to the project.

- Developing knowledge, understanding and skills in analysis, referencing, and synthesis of research material and information, and understanding how best to use these in the research context.

- Developing or strengthening language skills in at least one modern language other than English. This might, for example, be in order to read secondary literature or facilitate better networking with overseas researchers, recognising the increasingly international context for research in all disciplines.

- Knowledge and understanding of existing and new methodologies, such as numerical, data management, and statistical techniques or software, web and social media communication tools. Also, developing the necessary expertise to use these methodologies and tools appropriately and optimally.

- Understanding the requirements of a professional researcher, with regard to ethical and legal requirements, codes of practice, and social responsibility.

Examples of key wider skills
These are relevant to doctoral study and equally to careers within and outside academia.

- A full range of communication skills and awareness of communication media, so that both specialist and non-specialist audiences can be appropriately addressed. Public engagement activities provide a useful context for developing the necessary skills for communicating academic knowledge to a non-specialist audience. This includes understanding the wider political, social, and economic context.

- Project management skills, including: designing and managing a project; team-working; delegation skills; time management; risk management; resource management; working proactively to ensure the effective delivery of objectives; and the ability to recognise key issues and to prioritise.

- More general aspects of working with others effectively, including: communicating and collaborating effectively; sharing knowledge and experience; recognising the

- skills and expertise of others and building on individual strengths; mentoring; and, managing work within a team in the most efficient way.

- The ability to motivate oneself and others.

- Enterprising and entrepreneurial attributes, skills and behaviours such as: taking initiative; the ability to solve problems, adapt to new situations and make effective decisions; innovation and creativity; open mindedness and working to remove barriers; the ability to recognise opportunities, take them forward effectively and bring a project to fruition; social, commercial, and relevant employment sector awareness; and, personal enthusiasm, self-improvement, and motivation.

- Leadership skills, including: the ability to engage with and influence others; the potential to develop as a leader in the field and to represent their area of research positively within and outside academia.

- Networking and collaborative working opportunities such as: participating in workshops and conferences; building partnerships with organisations and businesses; negotiating and listening skills.

- Organisational skills including managing and organising own workload effectively by prioritising tasks, anticipating future workloads, and keeping and maintaining good records.

- Taking responsibility for one's own career direction and development. Motivation and perseverance to pursue and succeed in the chosen career, in whatever sector that might be. This includes the ability to highlight skills and qualities to any prospective employer.

In addition to all of the above, for students wishing to pursue a career in academia there are more specific development needs that the ROs and students will wish to address, these might include:

- Opportunities to lecture or give seminars to undergraduates and to assist with postgraduate teaching, with accompanying training to ensure that they can do this to a high standard.

- Advice and resources to help students publish their research.

- Advice on the administrative commitments that academics face.

- Advice on applying for funding from internal and external sources, which might include an overview of the funding context.

Students should also consider how the application of wider skills may need tailoring to the academic context. In areas such as networking or team-working, for example, the approach required for working with other academics is different to that for working within a partnership between academic and non-academic institutions, or in a wholly non-academic environment.

Resources and Further Information

AHRC funding for training and development is embedded in fees, as for all the Research Councils. ROs will provide a wide range of courses, activities, training and development opportunities and students need to work with their supervisors and relevant colleagues within the RO to find out what is available to them and how they can access it.

For the Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) there is additional support for individual students through the Student Development Fund (SDF) and for cohort activities through the Cohort Development Fund (CDF). The range of activities will vary by institution and consortia, and students should contact their supervisor, RO, or consortium lead to find out what is available to them.

For students funded on Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDAs), the partner organisation will typically have outlined a broad range of training and development opportunities as part of the application for AHRC funding, and a student should ask their supervisors for details.

The AHRC also runs separate schemes which are targeted on particular activities, such as:

- the International Placement Scheme (IPS) (opens in a new window) which allows students to spend a period abroad working with specific institutions.

- the AHRC and POST Postgraduate Fellowships Scheme (opens in a new window), which provides support for students to undertake a short secondment at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST).

- The New Generation Thinkers (opens in a new window) which is a collaboration between the AHRC and BBC Radio 3 and provides an opportunity for successful applicants to develop their programme-making ideas with experienced BBC producers.

These are all annual calls and students can find out about these and other opportunities on the AHRC website or by signing up to the student JISCmail list (opens in a new window).

Vitae is an organisation which works in partnership with other organisations '…to meet society's need for high-level skills and innovation and produce world-class researchers'. It has a range of resources available for all stakeholders involved in researcher development. There are dedicated resources for postgraduate students (opens in a new window).

For students who are considering career options outside academia, the AHRC has published a report, commissioned through DTZ (opens in a new window), which analyses the careers AHRC-funded students go into. The Report describes the skills gained during their doctoral study, the most important skills and competencies for their current career, and those skills that they feel should have been given greater emphasis during their PhD. A series of case studies (opens in a new window) were published to accompany the DTZ report. There is also further information about research careers (opens in a new window) on RCUK's website.

Vitae also publishes analyses of researcher careers post-PhD in the 'What do Researchers do?' series. These cover all subjects but there is data on the arts and humanities. They also have information and case studies on career destinations for researchers (opens in a new window).

AHRC
October 2014

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[1] According to Vitae's 'What do Researchers want to do?' Report, 44% of arts and humanities doctoral researchers had a definite career in mind, and of those, 75% specified 'HE research' or 'Teaching and lecturing in HE' as the career they were aiming for. 45% said they were considering several alternatives, and the remainder said they had no clear career direction in mind.

Vitae's 'What do Researchers do?' report, shows that 50% of arts and humanities doctoral graduates were in 'Teaching and lecturing in HE' and 7.5% were in 'HE research occupations' in 2008. Whilst in the 2010 survey, only 36.9% were in 'Teaching and lecturing' and 9.3% were in 'HE research occupations'.

[A series of Vitae reports on research careers can be found on their website. The 'What do researchers want to do?' report was based on survey responses from 4,500 doctoral students. The section on strength of career ideas was based on responses from final year students.]

[2] 'Research Organisation' is the term used throughout this document to describe the universities and similar bodies that host studentships.