

# **Strategic scaffolding: Supporting mid-career and senior research leaders in the social sciences**

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“Across the RDI landscape, there is a requirement for talented and engaged leaders whose objectives should be to empower researchers to release their individual creativity and passion for discovery, and to ensure that bureaucracy is kept to a minimum. Outstanding leadership and operational management are transformative, and attention should be paid to how leaders are developed, nurtured and supported. Often the range of skills required will need a diverse leadership team bridging scientific and technological expertise and practical operational capability. Attracting the best candidates internationally is critical, because highly accomplished researchers who are also excellent leaders are rare.”

Sir Paul Nurse, Independent Review of the Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape, March 2023.

## Glossary

Absorption	The capacity of an organisation to internally process and disseminate new information or opportunities.
Accidental Leaders	Individuals who have found themselves in leadership roles without self-defining as 'a leader', applying for a leadership position or receiving the necessary training or support.
Alignment	The need to ensure that structural capacities, organisational ambitions, professional skills, and individual competencies are aligned to remove friction and failure points.
Bandwidth	The range of responsibilities, areas, or intellectual fields that an individual or organisation is expected to manage and range across.
Braided Careers	The ability to move in-and-out of professions or sectors throughout a career. Reflecting the increasing non-linearity of career-routes.
Boundary-Hopping	The ability to move between disciplines, professions, and organisations to build-bridges between seams of scholarship or inject disruptive challenges.
Co-Production	A methodological approach and ideological commitment to working with potential research-users (broadly defined) through all stages of the research process.
Crucible Effect	The structured serendipity created by bringing people together with different skills and talents who would not normally get an opportunity to meet.
Docking Points	Clear and signposted entry points into organisations or networks that facilitate access and positive working relationships.
Knowledge-Synthesis	A recognition that knowledge comes in different forms and the ability to fuse and blend insights to get a rounded view of a societal challenge or potential opportunity.
Hybrid Space	A research environment that exists at the intersection of nexus between professions, disciplines, or organisations.
I-Career	Descriptive term for the early stages of a career that tend to be defined by self-leadership and the securing of professional position and status. [Antonym – T-Career]
Matthew Effect	The theory of accumulated advantage which recognises the existence of path dependencies and implicit bias towards those who already benefit from a system.
Leadership Lag	The time between the investment of new training, development and skills-focused initiatives and their systemic impact being clearly felt within a sector (generally 10 years)
Lost Leaders	Those individuals who are not identified as 'future leaders' during early career selection processes and are therefore disadvantaged in relation to recruitment, retention and role.
Porosity	The ability of people, information, and talents to flow through and across the organisations within a network. Linked to catalysing and connective capacity.

Research Leadership	A combination of roles that are generally associated with informal processes and the provision of an intellectual vision, nurturing talent and a positive research environment.
Research Management	A combination of roles that are generally associated with formal reporting, audit processes, regulatory compliance and administrative processes.
Returnships	Funding that is designed to allow people who have taken a break from academe to return to the sector, and generally involves resources to re-establish research profiles.
Range	The ability to take subject specific knowledge into new fields, areas, or domains to make connections and achieve insights that would otherwise not have been made.
Skill-Shifting	A capacity to utilise a broad skill set to engage with a range of audiences or complete a range of tasks with minimal friction or cost.
Strategic Scaffolding	The structuring and resourcing of informal structures that facilitate collaborative learning, encourage inter-sectoral mobility, and cultivate productive interactions.
Structured Serendipity	A form of structured or engineered luck whereby individuals or institutions proactively position themselves to benefit from likely opportunities.
T-Career	Descriptive term for the later stages of a career that tend to be defined by an emphasis on supporting and nurturing future generations. [Antonym – I-Career]

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## Executive Summary

- 1. This is a report about ‘research leadership’ which is defined as the activity of supporting and facilitating the production of research in an inclusive manner that maximises the scientific quality and social impact(s) of that endeavour) in the social sciences.** The significance of research leadership in the sense of guiding, nurturing and supporting both knowledge-production and knowledge-mobilisation has only in recent years been recognised as a core element of a successful research, development and innovation ecosystem. As such, this report draws upon five years of research that can be broken down into three phases. The first phase was undertaken between 2018-2020 and included eight institutional visits, 32 focus groups and a national ‘call for evidence’ to develop the first detailed review of research leadership in the social sciences. The main output was the [‘Fit for the Future’](#) report of June 2020. The second phase of research was undertaken in the final six months of 2022 and was predominantly an audit-based review of research leadership developments since 2020. This desk-based exercise led to the publication of [‘Research Leadership Matters’](#) by the Higher Education Policy Institute in November 2022. **The third and final phase of research was undertaken in April and May 2023 for the specific purposes of this report and to inform future ESRC investments in relation to talent management, leadership and skills.**
- 2. This report was commissioned by the ESRC in February 2023 with a very specific remit:** to engage with the social science community in order to:
  - a) understand the link between skills and talent in the context of research leadership,
  - b) to develop a clear and evidence-based statement of the ideal skills and talents that are required of research leaders at different career points
  - c) to consider the need for new professional support structures.

The main research and engagement methods involved a series of curated workshops that brought together mid-career and senior social scientists from across the ESRC’s investment portfolio, and seventeen semi-structured interviews with researchers who had either (i) not been able to attend either of the workshops (ii) had undertaken non-conventional career paths with periods based in and beyond academe, and (iii) research leaders with experience in particularly complex research investments. The aim of the workshops and interviews was to explore the barriers and blockages researchers faced in their leadership roles (see Appendix A). The specific rationale for the workshops was that they would facilitate the collection of experiential insights and tacit knowledge from researchers in leadership roles, while also facilitating shared learning and the identification of systemic issues. **These ambitions were achieved as the workshops facilitated discussion on issues relating to (inter alia) equality, diversity and inclusion, on the changing nature of academic careers (notably the impact of precarious employment models and how to facilitate ‘braided’ or ‘blended’ careers that facilitate the mobility of researchers between sectors), and on the**

**specific, practical and immediate needs of research leaders in terms of professional development and support.**

3. **Five elements make this report distinctive and significant.** First and foremost, it adopts a ‘whole of career’ approach and a focus on key transition points. Following on from this (and secondly) it attempts to identify and map how and why the skills and talents of those in research leadership roles need to evolve and change as individuals progress in their careers. Thirdly, the report adopts an explicit emphasis on the mobility of talent, people and knowledge across traditional disciplinary, organisational or professional boundaries. This leads to a fresh focus on the needs not just of early career researchers but also on those of mid-career and established researchers (the focus of the two main workshops underpinning this report). This report is (fourthly) therefore based on extensive engagement with the social science community and provides a powerful and positive agenda for embracing a new approach to research leadership (see Table 1, main report). Finally, **the research leadership challenge is a core component of broader national ambitions, as the Nurse Report of March 2023 underlined, to remain a ‘science superpower’ with implications and opportunities that range across the scientific spectrum and across the research-policy interface.**
  
4. The central finding of this report is that **mid-career and senior research leaders understand why research leadership matters (Table 2, main report) but very often feel under-prepared for new roles, and under-supported when trying to do their jobs.** This, in turn reflects a lack of strategic research infrastructure to support and develop leadership-related skills and to facilitate shared-learning and peer-to-peer support. Increasingly complex and boundary-spanning forms of research leadership are recognised as demanding a broad set of skills and a team-based approach to leadership that very few social scientists are professionally prepared for (see Table 3, main report). The increasing non-linearity of careers, the lack of a clear and supported progression framework for researchers, and an awareness of key transition points within careers (see Table 4, main report) are also key issues or ‘design dimensions’ that warrant urgent attention. There is also an appetite within the social science community for more clarity about *what* skills are needed at different career stages, *where* researchers can go to gain those skills, and *how* they can be developed to give researchers an understanding of the ‘bigger picture’ beyond their own institution (see Table 5, main report). Critically, the evidence suggests that mid-career and senior research leaders face significant barriers and blockages when trying to be effective research leaders (see Table 6, main report). **These combine to impede efficiency, frustrate collaboration, sap energy, complicate processes and on some occasions to dampen ambition and encourage talented mid-career researchers to leave academe.**

### **Main findings**

- Training – many mid-career researchers feel they are ‘thrown into’ leadership roles without sufficient training or preparation.



- Time – a very large number of senior research leaders suggest they lack the time to maximise the scientific value and societal impact of the investments they oversee.
- Tick-boxes – increasing management friction and a post-Covid ‘bureaucratic bulge’ is frustrating those leading major investments.
- Mentorship – good mentors are ‘few and far between’ with luck and structural inequalities affecting access and support.
- Mobility – Moving across traditional professional or disciplinary boundaries or building ‘braided’ careers is not only difficult but widely seen as risky.
- Mapping – there is no clear professional framework that identifies or facilitates career stages, transition points, training opportunities or purposeful networking.
- Angst – insecure employment models and short-term research funding streams create fundamental challenges for research leaders.
- Architecture – A growing emphasis on network-based research structures and digital management systems raises major challenges for research leaders.
- Access – Although major investments have been made to support early career researchers there are few targeted opportunities for mid-career researchers.

5. **Engaging with mid-career and senior research leaders about the existence of ‘barriers and blockages’ to effective research leadership generated several practical and evidence-based ideas for reform** (see Table 7, main report). What these recommendations and suggestions share is a positive emphasis on greater connectivity within the research, development and innovation ‘ecosystem’. Horizontal connectivity that brings researchers together to harness peer-to-peer support, promote shared learning processes, highlight best practice insights, facilitate inter-organisational and cross-sectoral mentoring, create cohort positive effects, etc.; and vertical connectivity that facilitates greater dialogue and mutual understanding between mid-career and senior research leaders, on the one hand, and research funders and other key organisations in the sector, on the other. **There is currently no national strategic scaffolding or framework that can deliver this connective, catalysing and collaborative capacity.**

6. **It is for this reason that the creation of a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network is recommended.** The network would form an ambitious, aligned, and agile piece of research infrastructure that focused on skills-development, training and support through an emphasis on facilitating reciprocal learning, peer-to-peer support and productive interactions. It would be a low-cost high-gain innovation that *connected* (across initiatives and investments), *catalysed* (by building positive cadre effects), and *collaborated* (with cognate initiatives in other sectors) (see Table 9, main report). The network could also undertake activities in relation to *research* (strengthening the evidence base and identifying innovations), *reflexivity* (injecting constant challenge while horizon-scanning to identify longer-term challenges and opportunities), and *reach* (making sure that network benefits the whole social

science community and maximises the flow of opportunities). The main aim of creating a new ESRC Research Leader Development Network is to facilitate the provision of new forms of training and support, and specifically to support skills that span sectors and institutions in ways that align with the shifting nature of research leadership at the mid and senior levels. **The USP of the network should be that it facilitates a level of range, mobility and collaborative capacity that is generally very difficult for any single institution to provide.**

7. **With a clear set of workstreams and themes in place, a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network could work with the social science community to co-design and co-deliver a programme of events, initiatives, and opportunities** (see Table 10, main report). These could range from networking events (skills-focused seminars, group mentoring, shadowing schemes, shared learning sessions, etc.), through to initiatives like conferences, prizes, lectures, etc. that were designed to highlight the significance of research leadership, reward excellence and encourage participation in the network. A network could also experiment with the facilitation of skills-focused and leadership related secondments, placements, and other forms of short-term experiential placements (broadly defined with an emphasis on inclusive practice); and play a key role in identifying and enabling engagement in related international initiatives to nurture and support research leadership. **Web-based platforms and ICT should be used to maximise the value of a new network and to make sure that where possible all activities are designed and delivered with an emphasis on inclusion, flow, and accessibility.**
8. **Outstanding research leadership is transformative. It unlocks potential, drives innovation, demonstrates value, produces world-class science, and helps address major societal challenges, but far more needs to be done in terms of developing, nurturing, and supporting research leaders.** This report has focused on mid-career and senior research leaders in the social sciences and although many of the barriers and blockages may well be relevant across the scientific spectrum the main value of its core recommendation to establish an ESRC Research Leaders Development Network is that facilitates a staged or phased developmental agenda. Framed in this manner the original 'Fit for the Future' review of 2020 can be viewed as Phase 1 due to the way it stimulated a positive debate about research leadership and produced a broadly accepted definition. This report can be viewed as Phase 2. It focuses on a near-term agenda and recommends the piloting of initiatives that all focus on increasing connectivity (horizontal and vertical) through the creation of a new network to support mid-career and senior research leaders. **The boundaries of this specific report are therefore limited.**
9. **The logic of 'full journey' thinking throughout careers which is increasingly prevalent when it comes to thinking about the health and vitality of research, development, and innovation 'ecosystems' does,**

**however, highlight the potential for medium and longer-term thinking towards broader integrated frameworks and greater network connectivity.** ‘Phase 3’ thinking, for example, may at some point consider how to integrate early-career researchers into the ESRC Research Leaders Development Network to maximise connective, catalysing and collaborative capacities. A later ‘Phase 4’ might explore how and if the network might usefully be ‘scaled-up’ or ‘scaled-out’ to support the development of future-focused research leadership skills beyond the social sciences. The changing nature of major scientific investments, and particularly their increasingly interdisciplinary emphasis, may at some stage stimulate interest and discussion about the need for a UKRI-wide Research Leaders Development Network. **The aim being to nurture the same forms of peer-to-peer support and reciprocal learning that this report has recommended for the social sciences.**

- 10. The vision that underpins this report is of an infrastructure that drives talent and realises potential** through an explicit skills-based developmental framework that is *ambitious* in terms of setting new international standards and underpinning governmental global ambitions, is *aligned* in the sense of contributing to funder priorities, intellectual objectives and research-user needs, and is *agile* enough to flex and adapt to new pressures and facilitate ‘braided’ or ‘blended’ careers. **A new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network is recommended as the tool through which this vision can be realised in the social sciences.**

## Introduction: Research Leadership

What I take from this discussion is that so much is down to luck.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

I didn't have a lot of research leadership experience or training, but that is the same  
for most research centre directors.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

I find it striking that people at a very high level within academe can lack basic skills,  
even down to chairing meetings, how to run meetings, etc. You can get a long way  
up the career ladder without some basic skills and experience.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

Universities are often very bad places for research leaders to thrive because you are  
swamped in bureaucracy, and you do not have the time to be a real research leader.  
If we want to enable people to flourish in these roles, then I think universities are  
better at training for management than they are for training for leadership. I spend  
very little time leading in my research centre and a hell of a lot of time  
managing....and I just don't know how to deal with that. Universities just seem to  
stand back and you just sink or swim.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

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This is a report about 'research leadership' which is defined as the activity of supporting and facilitating the production of research in an inclusive manner that maximises the scientific quality and social impact(s) of that endeavour) in the social sciences. The significance of research leadership in the sense of guiding, nurturing and supporting both knowledge-production and knowledge-mobilisation has only in recent years been recognised as a core element of a successful research, development and innovation ecosystem. As such, this report draws upon five years of research that dates back to the commissioning of the [Fit for the Future](#) report that was commissioned in 2018 and published in 2020. This initial review included eight institutional visits, 32 focus groups and a national 'call for evidence' to develop the first detailed review of research leadership in the social sciences. A second phase of research on the topic was undertaken in 2022 and involved an audit-based review of research leadership developments since 2020. This desk-based exercise led to the publication of '[Research Leadership Matters](#)' by the Higher Education Policy Institute in November 2022. This third phase of research was commissioned by the ESRC in February 2023 to develop and deliver a series of stakeholder engagement events that would aid understanding in relation to:

- a) the link between skills and talent in the context of research leadership;
- b) how the skills and talents that research leaders need evolve throughout careers; and

- c) whether a research leadership development initiative might need to be piloted to offer enhanced professional support and what such an initiative might usefully offer.

The research and community engagement for this report was undertaken in April and May 2023 and was facilitated by the ESRC. This involved two half-day scoping workshops – the first with senior and experienced research leaders, the second with mid-career researchers – plus seventeen semi-structured interviews with researchers who (i) had not been able to attend either of the workshops, (ii) who had attended the workshops and had brought up interesting insights that warranted further investigation and analysis, (iii) who had undertaken non-conventional career paths with periods based beyond academe, and (iv) or with researchers with experience of leading particularly complex research investments. Although conversations clearly need to continue, especially if the core recommendation of this report is piloted, this report is itself based upon extensive engagement across the social science community and seeks to make a major contribution to the knowledge base about research leadership.

This report is divided into three main parts. Part I focuses on the context to this report and the opportunities to nurture an agile, aligned, and ambitious approach to research leadership. As such, the first section explains what research leadership is and why it matters. The second section outlines the existence of a research leadership challenge in the sense of a generalised lack of structural or systemic attention to why leadership matters in relation to research, and the more specific challenges presented by existing incentive and audit frameworks. The third section in the opening part of this report explores what a genuinely ‘whole of career’ approach might look like, and how it might facilitate greater mobility not only across and within academe but across the research, development and innovation ecosystem. The second part of this report is challenge focused. It explores the main barriers and blockages that the research and engagement on which this report is based has exposed. As such, the fourth section focuses on training, time and tick boxes, the fifth section on mentorship, mobility and mapping, and the sixth section on angst, architecture and access. Part III adopts a solution-orientated perspective and presents suggestions and recommendations born out of community consultation for addressing each of the nine barriers and blockages that were identified in Part II. The overall recommendation, as the tenth and final section of this report outlines, is that a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network is established with an emphasis on connectivity, collaboration and catalysing research leadership talent.

### **The Proposition for the ESRC: the Vision**

Research leadership is such an under-developed concept – both in relation to theory and practice – that the higher education sector is to some extent still being socialised into an understanding of its centrality to successful research processes.

**Nevertheless, the core vision underpinning the recommendations made in this report is for the creation of a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network in the United Kingdom that provides support and nurtures capacity**

through a ‘whole of career’ approach that is itself flexible enough to embrace non-traditional and non-linear occupational profiles (i.e. ‘braided’ or ‘portfolio’ careers). The creation of such a framework would deliver the clarity, support and structure that is currently missing and would represent a high gain but low cost to the existing research infrastructure. The vision would reflect the current definition of research leadership (outlined above) in the sense that it would emphasise the existence of different leadership roles within projects and investments (thereby avoiding a focus on the ‘heroic’ individualised research leader) and acknowledge the need to recognise, blend and reward a range of skills, experiences, and talents.

**The vision is founded on the notion of strategic scaffolding which is designed to facilitate reciprocal learning, peer-to-peer support, and productive interactions with a focus on key transition points (see Figure 3, below).** In recent years the need for integrative developmental networks has been recognised by the ESRC and UKRI in relation to early-career researchers, most clearly in relation to the commissioning of the [Future Leader Fellows Development Network](#), the [Post-Doctoral Fellows Development Programme](#) and cohort-building component of the Public Policy Fellowships, and this logic must now be scaled-up to foster positive cohort effects across the research community. The aim not only being to provide an integrated and flexible pathway programme of leadership-related and development opportunities tailored to the need of social scientists, but also to connect that pathway horizontally into cognate leadership and development investments or initiatives within and beyond academe, while at the same time forging vertical mutual learning relationships between research leads and the research councils. The recommendation of establishing an ESRC Research Leaders Development Network has emerged out of conversations within and across the social science community. Mid-level research leaders too often feel ‘thrown in’ to leadership roles, while senior research leaders often feel isolated and similarly unsupported. The creation of ever more complex forms of research infrastructure, like the new Local Policy and Innovation Partnerships (LPiPS), will require increasingly sophisticated leadership support structures to ensure and maintain success. The creation of a central co-ordinating ‘hub’ for the LPiPS initiative resonates with the connective and catalysing logic that exists within this report’s advocacy of a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network. **The intellectual and professional ‘glue’ that could bind all the activities of the network together are set out in Table 1 (below).**

*Table 1. A New Approach to Research Leadership: Underpinning Principles and Values*

<b>Emphasis</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
1. Scaffolding not structures	Facilitating purposeful interaction and mutual support across investments with an emphasis on action orientated and experiential learning insights.
2. Access and inclusion	Supporting those in leadership roles while rippling-out insights and upskilling across the social science community through the creative use of ICT.

3. Peer-to-peer support and shared-learning	Nurturing and investing in social capital within a professional context so that informal and formal support structures co-exist as part of a positive research culture.
4. Transition points and sectoral mobility	Identifying key steps within career processes and ensuring that support and training is available, plus opportunities to learn from research-related non-academic environments.
5. Shared responsibility	A commitment to collaborative working between funders, institutions and individuals to identify effective solutions to shared challenges in an open manner.

**The creation of an ESRC Research Leaders Development Network provides an opportunity to drive-up ambition through an aligned and agile approach to supporting research talent.** An initial focus on mid-career and senior research leaders (i.e. the specific focus of this report) may, in time, broaden to include early-career researchers or even expand to support research leadership across UKRI (see Section 10, below). In many ways the idea of a new ‘network’ or ‘hub’ to create a stronger focus on peer-to-peer support, shared learning and forms of purposeful networking provides a way of locating several pre-existing but currently largely fragmented investments within an integrated framework. Not only is this likely to facilitate the identification of efficiencies of scale and mutual learning opportunities but new investments can also be designed and delivered to fit within an explicit, cohesive and agile national development framework. **The evidence suggests that although researchers do not want to be ‘taught how to lead’ in the sense of formal mechanical training initiatives and they recognise the role of informal learning processes, they would like to be able to draw upon the advice, insights and experience of people who either hold or have held similar roles.** This explains the emphasis on strategic scaffolding rather than on extensive new programmes or major organisational innovations.

The great danger of any leadership-focused initiative or investment is that they become exclusionary structures that define a small majority as ‘leaders’ which may without careful and explicit consideration further embed and entrench longstanding structural inequalities. One of the most interesting points of discussion to emerge out of the scoping workshops that were held to inform this report was the notion of being either ‘in’ or ‘out’ of ‘the loop’. The ‘loop’ for the purposes of this report relates to whether a researcher is embedded within a supportive research environment that provides not only subject specific scientific support but also broader career awareness, skills and understanding. At the moment, **whether a researcher has access to and support to engage with this broader approach to skills and development is very much down to luck**, especially in relation to whether they have a good mentor or are based in a well-resourced research centre. The obvious question this notion of ‘the loop’ poses is how to ensure that a greater proportion of researchers are somehow kept ‘in the loop’ in terms of training, development, understanding and opportunities. This creates a double dimension for those charged with designing and delivering the core recommendation of this report. At one level

there is a need to consider the existence of ‘lost leaders’ and a well-known ‘leadership lag’ by ensuring that learning, support and development opportunities are extended for the benefit of as wider pool of researchers as possible. But at a second and more specific level there is a need to ensure that those researchers who appear to be ‘in the loop’ **already do actually have the training and support they need to flourish and thrive.**

To recap, the core finding of this report is that mid-career research leaders very often feel that they have been ‘thrown in’ to research leadership roles and then left to ‘sink-or-swim’, while senior and established researchers also very often feel isolated and unsupported. **An ESRC Research Leaders Development Network would provide a novel, relatively low cost and potentially world-leading piece of research infrastructure to address these issues (see Section 10, below).**

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Having worked in non-academic research environments in government and in the charitable sector I’m really taken – having come into academia - with the almost complete lack of structure around research. It’s clear that this has changed in relation to teaching but in relation to research and leadership development it remains a major issue. There needs to be more porosity and more moving across sectors – that is something that we could do much better. For me getting into a university was so hard because none of my previous experience was recognised.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

I’ve recently been thrown into a leadership role on a large European research grant and I’m quite torn about how I feel about that. Some of it is quite exciting – it’s interdisciplinary and there’s lots of energy and it’s all great; but also it’s been frustrating because although I applied for the money some time ago no thought was given to preparing me. So now it’s been me sitting on my own thinking ‘what am I supposed to be doing now?’ and it is not very clear where to go to get any support. I’ve had some informal support within my institution but at the more formal or structured level something seems to be missing. It’s as if you are suddenly expected to have all these skills to suddenly project manage and hire people, and to support those people...while having no experience of ever doing that or what to do. Looking back, I wish I’d have been sat down well before there was any chance of the funding coming through to be taught some of the basics about what I would be doing. Once the money was granted it was too late to learn as I was suddenly expected to have the skills and knowledge in place.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

I was part of an ESRC Centre as a PhD student and I was lucky being part of that bigger award as there was much more discussion about career-development planning and succession management that I could learn from and be part of. I was ‘in a loop’ that was hugely beneficial, but I do not know what I’d have done if I was not in it and able to draw on the support. We were almost apprentices working on work packages and not just on our own PhD and that taught us a lot about how things worked on a larger level. But I could see that there were colleagues in the same department who were not part of the centre and therefore did not have the



learning opportunities. They have not progressed in their careers, because they did not have a team around them supporting each other.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

I've always been lucky that I've worked with people who have been willing to mentor me in both a formal and informal sense. I've also been lucky to work across a range of funding streams and what I have noticed is that some of them pay far more attention to talent management and skills training than others. The European funding specifically included a regular requirement to reflect upon the career development of the whole team and that was incredibly valuable – it forced you to think about the careers of others in a way that might not have happened otherwise. Having talked to colleagues who have not worked on lots of grants, this emphasis on team talent management seems to have been completely missing. It strikes me that I have managed to be 'in the loop' but if I had not been involved in those research centres and larger grants – even for a short time – I would have found it harder and more challenging to engage and fulfil the leadership roles I am now doing.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

# Part I – Context & Challenge

## 1. What is Research Leadership and Why Does it Matter?

One of the things that this workshop has really made me think about and realise is that from the start of our research careers we are all doing things that are in fact related to research leadership but we don't all realise that because there is a real lack of clarity and guidance about what research leadership looks like and the types of activities that count. So maybe there is something around producing more guidance and information about different skills and how they change at different career stages. I feel more confident today about my own role simply because I now know I am not on my own.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

I think we should be talking about the whole of leadership as well as the whole of career. Leadership in universities necessarily involves dealing with management and dealing with bureaucracy and dealing with difficulties and the slowness of universities...the administration. That is management but that is part of research leadership.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

There needs to be a clearer model that tells everyone about the steps that they can take to build research leadership skills and experience step-by-step.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

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In response to the 2022 report [\*Research Leadership Matters\*](#) Dame Athene Donald, Master of Churchill College, Cambridge, reflected on how the arguments and insights it offered resonated with her own career as she asked 'Research leadership - are we getting it right?' 'Leadership in academia is a bit of a hit and miss affair' she wrote, 'Many people rise through the ranks due to their research excellence, regardless of their ability to work with large teams, to look beyond their personal silo or to value different perspectives. They may be ineffective in their interactions with others. Project management may not be a phrase they are particularly comfortable with. Perhaps they are still burying their head in the sand when it comes to EDI initiatives, letting bullying go by on the nod (or even being the perpetrators) or failing to make sure all who need it receive mentoring.' The notion of a 'hit and miss affair' certainly resonates with the core findings of this report (see Part II). The incentives system generally rewards highly individualised forms of behaviour, and many forms of research leadership are simply not recognised or rewarded within existing work allocation models. A rather amateurish approach persists, when a more professional perspective is needed. The concept of research leadership remains under-developed, researchers feel isolated and unsupported and there is no strategic scaffolding offering support and developmental opportunities beyond the early career researcher stage. **When it comes to research leadership we are not 'getting it right'.**

In recent years many universities have established their own research leadership development programmes in an attempt to fill this gap, but the evidence suggests

the success of these schemes is limited by three factors. Firstly, they are often focused on early career researchers with no consideration of the needs of mid and senior research leaders. Secondly, the content and delivery of these courses is often of a 'chalk and talk' teaching approach whereas researchers want action-orientated and skills-based training opportunities delivered by successful research leaders. Thirdly, the emphasis on collaboration and working across institutional and professional boundaries which is a key element of mid and senior research leadership is by definition a very difficult skillset for any single institution to deliver. **The strategic scaffolding supporting research leaders must itself be able to range and flex to facilitate a commitment to mobility and cut across research development initiatives to foster shared learning.** Following on from this the main contribution of this section is to *define* research leadership and underline why it matters.

### Defining Research Leadership

Research leadership is a complex concept. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. It is not a topic of common discussion within academe or more specifically within the social sciences, in particular. Even the most basic attempts to define the concept are absent from the scholarly and professional literature. Different disciplines will have their own particular understandings of what 'effective' or 'good' leadership looks like *vis-à-vis* research, the tenets of which will generally be passed down through tacit knowledge, institutional relationships and cultural mores. This may explain why the existing research base on the impact of leadership (and different forms of leadership) on the extent and quality of research is so limited. This is an important point. **Vast amounts of research and writing have been undertaken on the theme of leadership, in general, and in relation to university leadership, in particular, but the relationship between leadership and effective or world-class research remains almost non-existent.**

Conversations, focus groups and meetings with university-based researchers and professional research support staff reveal the existence of significant enthusiasm for addressing this gap. Academics, and especially early-career researchers, want to operate in a professional context where their achievements in relation to both scientific excellence and social impact are recognised. They also recognise the benefits of mobility and fear being 'trapped' in an overly narrow and constraining 'academic' career. **What the research conducted for this report with mid-career and senior social scientists found is that they would welcome the establishment of a clear development framework that provided learning, development and engagement opportunities.** More specifically these conversations within the research community (broadly defined) have helped to clarify the core essence and meaning of research leadership to the extent that it is now possible to offer a clear and concise definition of what research leadership *is* –

Research leadership:

*Noun.*

1. The activity of supporting and facilitating the production of research in an inclusive manner that maximises the scientific quality and social impact(s) of that endeavour.
2. Relates to both individual development (self-leadership) but more commonly to the contribution of an individual to *supporting and nurturing the research careers of others*.
3. May refer to activities in relation to a specific project or programme of research, or to broader ambassadorial roles within research funding organisations, learned societies or academies.
4. Research leadership occurs in a number organisational and professional contexts and is in no way restricted to academe.

As this definition seeks to underline, research leadership is multi-dimensional. It includes activities relating to both knowledge-creation (i.e. scientific excellence) and knowledge mobilisation (i.e. societal impact); and it acknowledges the existence of multiple leadership roles within the research process. It also seeks to reflect how the interpretation of research leadership, and the expectations that might come with it, are likely to evolve as a researcher progresses in their career. Finally, the definition acknowledges that a huge amount of social scientific research is conducted in institutions and organisations that exist beyond the higher education sector (in charities, government departments, etc.). **This definition has emerged out of an extensive consultation process and is now broadly accepted as providing an accurate, timely and practical explanation of what research leadership is.**

### Why Research Leadership Matters

In recent years a much sharper distinction has emerged between ‘research’ (i.e. the ‘doing’ of research) and ‘research infrastructure’ (i.e. the foundations on which the ‘doing’ takes place). Funding ‘more’ research without ensuring that the appropriate foundations are in place is unlikely to deliver positive outputs or outcomes. The UKRI Strategic Plan for 2022-2027 underlines this fact when it notes: ‘The UK’s world-class research and innovation is the foundation of our health and wellbeing, our economic prosperity and our nation’s global influence... However, the world is changing fast and the UK needs a research and innovation system that is fit for the future and able to respond with agility to social, environmental, technological and economic change on a global scale. The UK has a long and proud tradition of excellence in research and innovation. The government wants to capture the power of this extraordinary talent and creativity to secure the UK’s status as a science superpower and innovation nation. **We need a more connected and agile system. We must capitalise fully on the breadth and depth of talent across the UK and create a nexus for global talent and investment.**’

Rethinking and focusing upon the notion of research leadership provides a way of harnessing, nurturing and supporting extraordinary talent and creativity. A focus on skills and support through the creation of novel forms of strategic scaffolding

provides a way of connecting-up across the research, innovation and development ecosystem in ways that are likely to unlock innovation, catalyse thinking and create communities of practice that span traditional boundaries. It was for exactly this reason that the *UKRI Delivery Plan 2019* contained an explicit commitment to investing in talent, people and research infrastructure and called for ‘a paradigm shift in supporting careers that seamlessly span sectors and increase mobility.’

**Understanding why research leadership matters provides a way of achieving this shift and driving positive change and in this regard six core and interlinked reasons can be identified (see Table 2, below).**

*Table 2. Why Research Leadership Matters*

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Scientific	Major transformational breakthroughs are in the future likely to emerge at the intersection of disciplines and demand complex collaborative structures in which research leadership skills are vital to success.
Societal	As the global Covid-19 pandemic illustrated, major societal challenges are likely to demand rapid and agile inter-organisational responses in which scientists are confident operating within a range of contexts and assuming leadership roles in hybrid teams.
Financial	The government’s pledge to increased investment in R&D demands that the science base can utilise that funding in an efficient and effective manner with a focus on the delivery of societal benefits. Poor research leadership increases the chances of failure and sub-optimal outcomes.
International	The research leadership challenge is one that many countries around the world are grappling with to increase their global scientific standing and economic position. The UK can lead this agenda if its talent management strategy is genuinely ‘Triple A’ (i.e. ambitious, aligned and agile).
Equality	Thinking about research leadership provides a way of recognising the value of different talents, building positive research cultures, and forging a more diverse and inclusive science base. Increased transparency and targeted support could address longstanding embedded inequalities.
Professional	Individuals in research leadership roles very often feel under-prepared, under-supported and overwhelmed. Their scientific training has not prepared them for leading major projects. Mid-career researchers rarely see senior research leadership roles as an attractive career option.

A clear ‘leadership lens’ has never been developed when it comes to thinking about research careers in the social sciences. Recent reforms represent small but significant steps to nurture an understanding of what research leadership *is* and *why it matters*. This includes changes to the ESRC’s Postgraduate Training and Development Guidelines, and the establishment of new post-doctoral development networks. The aim of both measures being to promote an approach to developing

research talent that acknowledges the need to nurture individuals who possess both academic and non-academic skills and qualities, and who are also able to operate within a range of research-related contexts. **But how did discussions with mid-career and senior research leaders contribute and ‘add value’ to our understanding of *what research leadership is and why it matters?***

First and foremost, the scoping workshops provided a much-needed arena for those holding a variety of research leadership roles to have a voice and feed into the current review process. Not surprisingly (and second) they provided insights that reinforced existing concerns while also identifying clear opportunities to drive positive change in an inclusive manner. Finally, their insights and everyday lived experience demonstrated the continuing legacy of historical and cultural dimensions of the debate. More specifically, engaging with mid-career and senior research leaders emphasised (i) contextual dimensions, (ii) the issue of agency and (iii) the distinction between research leadership and research management. **These insights matter as they all form part of the collective intelligence this report was commissioned to collect, and they provide the background rationale for many of the recommendations made in the third part of this report** (particularly in relation to the creation of an ESRC Research Leaders Development Network).

## Context

The basic argument here was that although there was a general and positive welcoming of the ESRC’s interest in supporting and investing in research leadership training, development and support beyond a rather narrow focus on early-career researchers there was also a strong and very honest emphasis on the current realities of professional life within universities. This is a reality that was sharply outlined through a focus on the current strikes and marking boycotts which was itself a reflection of the pressures caused by rising student numbers, precarious employment practices, higher teaching loads, REF-related pressures, increasing administration, and what were perceived to be generalised but unrealistic expectations of excellence. **Innovations and investments in relation to research leadership must therefore be sensitive to the contemporary context and co-produced with the research community to ensure they deliver increased support rather than additional burdens.**

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There is a need to be very sensitive to the contemporary context when thinking about research leadership. Is there a good understanding within the ESRC about what it’s like to work within universities when more and more pressures and expectations are being placed upon staff. Research and research leadership is only one part of our role, but we are also facing big challenges in terms of increasing student numbers, stagnant pay, strikes, marking boycotts...so whatever happens in this space really needs to be sensitive to the broader context.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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A related element of the contextual dimension is also the increasing variety of research investments that exist. This ranges from individuals or small groups of researchers based in departments and holding teaching and research responsibilities, through to major investments in the form of research centres and institutes and then onto an increasingly diverse array of boundary-spanning structures that would include the 'What Works' centres, the UK In a Changing Europe initiative and a growing sphere of observatories, such as the International Public Policy Observatory, the Economics Observatory, and the emerging framework of LPiPs. Other funders and research councils have been equally active at establishing hybrid research spaces with Research England's funding of Insights North East and the West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute and the AHRC's new policy and evidence centres providing examples. **The simple point being made is that research leadership within an explicitly inter-sectoral context is likely to demand a very different skill set to that required if fulfilling a leadership role within a more traditional large research investment.**

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I think there are almost two parallel worlds going on. There is the world of research institutes and then there are mainstream departments full of academics in teaching and research roles. My sense is that research leadership takes very different forms in these very different environments. In departments the pressure of teaching and administration may well squeeze out any real time to do research let alone reflect on how to develop research leadership skills; in the research institutes there may well be more focus on developing researchers, but it will be through learning on the job.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

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## Agency

One of the key insights emerging out of the scoping workshops with individuals in mid-career and senior research leadership roles was how rare it was for a researcher to have consciously chosen to move into a leadership role. There was a strong view that very few people went into academic careers on the basis of a desire to be 'a leader.' If anything, there was a broad understanding of the cultural animosity towards directive leadership approaches in a research setting. This explains why research leadership is often viewed as a team-based endeavour and the notions of 'leading from the middle' or 'leading from the back' are often used within conversations (i.e. research leadership defined in terms of stewardship and support rather than top-down directives). **But this notion of the 'accidental leader' who finds themselves in a leadership role without necessarily having the training or support structures around them may well help explain the existence of a clear leadership challenge** (discussed below).



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There is an issue as to whether you have actively sought a research leadership role or whether you are asked. I never consciously sought a leadership role but was asked [to take on different roles] - I was invited to be an editor but I never asked....That means that it has always been a leap of faith and I was never really prepared for the roles.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

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## Leadership & Management

One of the most interesting insights emerging out of the scoping workshops that were held to help inform this report was a very clear recognition that an important distinction needed to be made between what was termed *research leadership*, as opposed to *research management*. The former was defined largely in terms of non-formal structures and involved elements such as the ability to maintain a clear intellectual vision, to encourage and nurture staff, to foster a positive research culture, excellence in relation to communicative skills, the projection of scientific passion and energy, and high levels of emotional intelligence and empathy. Research management, by contrast, was defined in terms of top-down bureaucracy, regulatory oversight and administration. Although there was an acceptance that any *research leadership* role was inevitably going to involve some element of *research management* there was also a clear sense that management tasks were increasingly limiting basic leadership capacity. Moreover, **senior research leaders very often framed their role in terms of ‘protecting’ their staff from unnecessary bureaucratic burdens so that they could get on with their research.** With this in mind, the next section explores the research leadership challenge.

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There is a difference between research leadership in the sense of vision, direction, support, etc. and management which tends to be about control, bureaucracy, etc. and often these things are in tension.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

I have received really good training when I have taken over new leadership roles in my institution but that was nothing really to do with research leadership. It was organisational management which is very different. I don't know what research leadership is... I've never received any support on that specifically.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

A lot of it has been down to luck – the learning through negative and positive experience. There were just one or two people in my career who took the time to encourage me and without them I would not be here. It was all very informal. Really just luck and a willingness to encourage junior researchers. There was no formal programme.

Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

It's quite scary how many of us are here today in this workshop on the basis of a strong element of luck. We were fortunate enough to meet people who took us under their wing. There was one person in my career who 'opened the doors' and supported me to walk through them.

Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

## 2. What is the Research Leadership Challenge?

The research leadership challenge is simple. There is no structure to support research leaders, most academics don't want to be led and the incentives framework pushes people towards a very individualistic approach.  
Senior established Researcher, April 2023.

Collaborative leadership across different organisations is increasingly difficult...things seem to be getting worse...I'd suggest that the ESRC really needs to row back on its ambitions.  
Senior established Researcher, April 2023.

Only in academia would you give a five-million-pound project to someone with absolutely no project management capabilities, no financial training and often no experience of ever running anything. I came into higher education from local government to help develop a new research institute and couldn't believe what I found.  
Senior established Researcher, April 2023.

Much more research is now produced by teams of researchers. and this is reflected in the growth in the number of authors on published papers. This means that the skills required to produce genuinely path-breaking research are very different to those that were required twenty or even just ten years ago.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023

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The *Fit for the Future* report of 2020 and the update report of 2022, *Research Leadership Matters*, were both structured around a single research leadership challenge. This framing was wrong. **There is no research leadership challenge. There are several inter-woven and multi-layered research leadership challenges which all in their own different ways focus attention on the issue of alignment.** The research funding landscape is changing in ways that are designed to align with the demands of an increasingly complex social context. At the core of this process of change is an increasingly explicit focus on three inter-related questions:

1. Scientific breadth: 'How do the parts contribute to the whole and serve to produce more than the sum of their parts?'
2. Viewpoint diversity: 'How do we stress test research in terms of methods and findings in order to increase its scientific quality and social relevance?'
3. Knowledge utilisation: 'How do we maximise the public value and social relevance of publicly funded scientific research?'

This emphasis on *scientific breadth*, *viewpoint diversity* and *knowledge utilisation* form the cornerstone of the emerging research funding landscape, and they also

help explain this report’s core focus on research leadership and its relationship with facilitating mobility (discussed above) and developing new support structures (i.e. strategic scaffolding, discussed below). These three elements (breadth/diversity/utilization) and the questions they pose are fuelling an increasingly obvious shift within the research funding landscape toward investments that exhibit the characteristics outlined in Table 3 (below).

**Table 3. Architectural Ecosystem Dynamics: Common Project Design Characteristics**

1. Research investments are increasingly large, ambitious and complex (i.e. they seek to exploit scale and to build-upon previous investments).
2. [...] are inter-disciplinary in design, inter-sectoral in nature and international in scope (i.e. they seek to focus on the intersection between disciplines and to engage in border-crossing);
3. [...] are ‘challenge-orientated’ or ‘mission-driven’ and involve close engagement with potential research-users (i.e. they combine a dual focus on knowledge-creation and knowledge-utilisation);
4. [...] embrace an increasingly broad definition of ‘useful knowledge’ that stretches beyond scientific research (i.e. it seeks to utilise experiential knowledge, tacit knowledge and lived experience); and
5. [...] are likely to involve a range of funders and participating institutions and promote an emphasis on the co-design and co-delivery of research (i.e. through a ‘hub-and-spoke’ approach to governance).

What this section has so far presented are three elements and five dimensions of change that underpin why research leadership matters. In the future, research processes - and (critically) the institutional architecture that facilitates these processes – is likely to look very different to how research has traditionally been undertaken. It was for this reason that the ‘Research Leadership Matters’ report of 2022 promoted a ‘Triple A’ approach based around ambition, alignment and agility. **Higher education systems that fail to recognise and adapt to these shifting ecosystem dynamics by facilitating mobility and investing in research leadership capacities are likely to fall back and away from those early innovators who are likely to emerge as global science superpowers.**

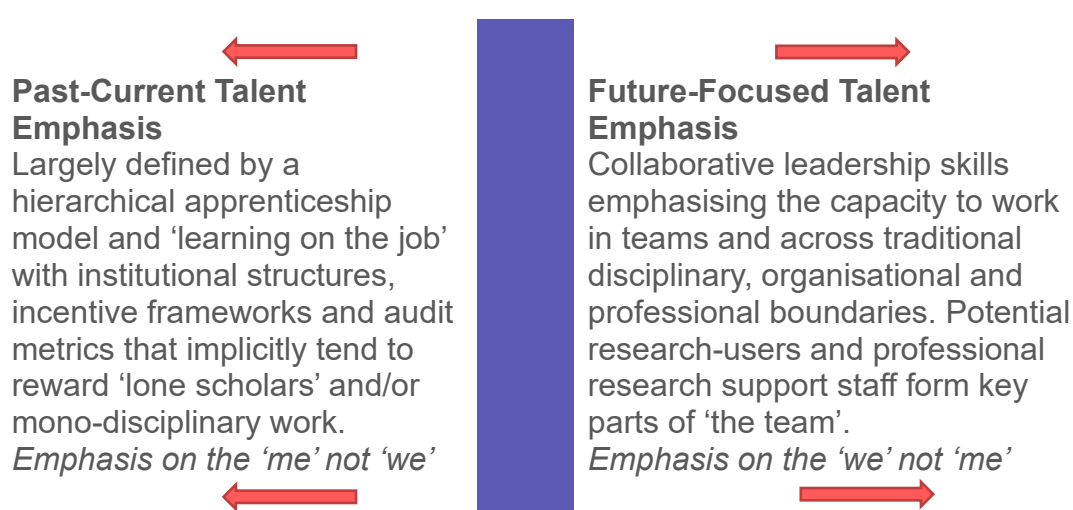
Reviewing the existing evidence, it is possible to identify three very different but related research leadership challenges.

### **The Incentives Challenge**

The research, development and innovation system is evolving towards an emphasis on collaboration, co-production and boundary-spanning research spaces (see Table 3, above). One implication of which is that social scientists will be required to work as members of large teams which embrace inter-disciplinary and research-user roles and contributions. A critical research leadership challenge stems from the manner in

which the existing infrastructure and incentives within higher education generally tend to reinforce and perpetuate a highly individualised approach to ‘what counts’ which very rarely incorporates an explicit understanding of research leadership roles while at the same time disincentivising exactly those forms of team-based and collaborative activities that the broader ecosystem is increasingly demanding (see Figure 1, below). The existing emphasis on “the ‘me’ not the ‘we’” within recruitment and reward system makes leading across boundaries or even within the same organisation very difficult.

*Figure 1: Closing the Gap: The Core of the Research Leadership Challenge*



### The Structural Challenge

As the *Fit for the Future* report of 2020 underlined, as a sector higher education is far from alone in thinking about leadership. In recent years a vast range of leadership development initiatives have been initiated within and beyond the public sector (including in several research-related contexts). Irrespective of the sector, the core challenge that each of these initiatives is generally designed to address is often very similar: a recognition of a changing context arising from innovations in organisational design and delivery which lead to the review and reform of leadership development frameworks in order to forge future-focused capacity and a clear talent management strategy. Within higher education this is reflected in the introduction of new support and development frameworks in relation to university management (formerly through the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, now within Advance HE), and university teaching (through the Higher Education Academy). **When it comes to supporting research, in general, and the social sciences, in particular, it is possible to identify a leadership vacuum in terms of professional development and support frameworks.**

The proposal for an ESRC Research Leaders Development Network – the core recommendation of this report – is therefore designed to put in place a more visible, inclusive and strategic framework: an ambitious, aligned and agile framework of strategic scaffolding that would be co-designed and co-delivered with the research community and would become a best practice template for other funders.

## The Cultural Challenge

The lack of positive incentives and support structures for research leadership are themselves a reflection of a historical legacy that forms a cultural challenge. Academic life has traditionally been defined by robust arguments concerning intellectual freedom and academic autonomy. A large number of academics view research as their primary role and are understandably keen to defend this against what might be seen as external interference. The ‘decline of donnish dominion’ to paraphrase the title of A.H. Halsey’s classic 1992 study of academic life charts the origins of these strong scholarly norms, and how they have been affected or threatened by more recent managerial reforms. This cultural history matters because it helps explain why the research councils have in the past tended to adopt a rather *laissez faire* approach to building research leadership capacity and talent management on the basis that this role should fall to research organisations (i.e. universities) and scientific communities and not to arm’s-length government agencies. And yet the evidence also suggests that universities have adopted a fairly relaxed approach to research leadership, often on the basis that this was best left to scientific communities. **The result might be seen as a classically British version of ‘muddling through’ and one of the main arguments of this report is that this approach is no longer acceptable.**

Cultures are, however, notoriously ‘sticky’ and difficult to change which is why this report sets out a clear vision based on an explicit set of principles and values (Table 1, above), and a pragmatic step-by-step agenda for change (discussed below). The existing incentive system seems, according to the available evidence, to almost militate against people taking on research leadership roles, instead of supporting them as far as they want to go along an explicit, challenging and inclusive career framework. **The introduction of a new and integrated framework that supported researchers across different key transition points could go a long way to addressing these incentive-based, structural, and cultural challenges.** This forms the focus of the next section.

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The emphasis I see is all about supporting my research career, there is nothing about supporting the careers of others. There is lots of lip service but as a basic thing that needs to change.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

It’s not necessarily about having a particular label that says you are a leader. It’s about enacting and demonstrating leadership in much more informal ways, and I think that’s really difficult to capture [in terms of evidence], and it’s actually not well

recognized [in review and reward systems]. A lot of the incentives in academia are towards individual extractive non-collaborative approaches. So, you're almost going against the incentives [by promoting collaborative research or team science].  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

There is a trade-off with career success. If you are being a truly inclusive and dedicated research leader and really bringing on early and mid-career researchers, then that may well have implications for your own career in the sense that you may miss some of the markers of research excellence that are held over you. Research leadership will often involve making sacrifices to support the careers of others. That sacrifice needs to be recognised by institutions and funders.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

There is a complete lack of recognition for those who really invest time and energy into supporting other people's careers. There is definitively a trade-off that needs to be recognised. The most giving and collaborative researchers are often the last to be promoted.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

### 3. A ‘Whole of Career’ Approach

I think the whole of career approach is great, we need to focus on multiple research leadership roles. A key part of senior research leadership seems to be about mobilising institutional support around a project, but it is often far from clear about how this can be achieved. Do research institutions generally have any policy on research leadership and how people are trained? My experience is that there isn't much.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

I think it's a great idea to think about what Level 6 might look like and how to support people to get there but that is very different to assuming that Level 6 is some sort of desirable endpoint that should be in everyone's ambitions. Some people will get to Level 5 and want to get back into their own research and that's fine. But having said that I would certainly welcome more clarity about Level 6 and how you might transition between Level 4 and Level 5 and how you might support people into those roles.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

There is no coherent Level 6 at the moment. Lots of people at Level 5 actually take on Level 6 roles but they do so in addition to their main roles. If you want to create a Level 6 you need to persuade universities to support those roles properly. And this is a problem because most of those senior Level 6 roles do not come with any money or support.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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‘There are gaps in the UK’s talent offer at different career stages’ UKRI’s strategic plan for 2022-2027 acknowledges ‘and low awareness and high friction in navigating the wide variety of career opportunities available.’ ‘Building together tomorrow’ therefore requires a systemic review of not only the main career stages within academe but also the opportunities to ‘step out’ of this sector to gain skills, experience and knowledge in other research-related professional contexts. Research leadership and talent management is therefore bound into broader debates concerning porosity, absorption and mobility in ways that are rarely acknowledged. The notion of boundary-spanning research leadership roles and capabilities remains particularly under-developed despite shifts in the broader architecture and objectives of universities (Table 3, above). **Making visible the range of diverse and dynamic career opportunities within and across the research, development and innovation ecosystem represents a potentially transformative opportunity.**

Redefining, reimagining and reconceptualising outdated views about ‘traditional’ careers and progression paths is a key element in making this transformation happen, as is improving the flow and connectivity within and across different sectors (i.e. facilitating ‘sector permeable’ ‘braided careers’). The current system compromises creativity and frustrates the retention of talented people (discussed



below). In their *R&D People and Culture Strategy* of July 2021 the government acknowledged these issues and pledged to support funders to design a ‘joined-up talent offer’ that would include ‘people at all career stages whether they are just starting out or are already at the top of their game.’ **Discussing and designing (i) what a ‘full career’ framework might look like, (ii) where the main hurdles or transition points might be or (iii) how to facilitate mobility across and within this framework has, however, so far been restricted by the lack of any initial model, blueprint, or detailed starting point.**

Figure 2. Research Careers Tool, University of Edinburgh, 2022.

EXPERIENCE: Starting → Advanced

	Fellowship	PhD	Post-doctoral	Early Career	Mid Career	Senior/Advanced	
Research	Grants	Project RA/PDRF on collaborative grant	Small grant	Co-I on collaborative grant/ work package lead	PI on small collaborative grant	Scaling up PI on large collaborative grant	
	Research Skills	Develops new skills	Methods training	Interdisciplinary		Develops new areas of expertise	
Engagement	Outputs & Publications	PhD outputs	Post-doctoral outputs	Continues to build portfolio	Targets wider academic audiences	Guides and co-authors with ECs	
	Academic Dissemination	Conference poster	Conference paper	Organises panel	Invited speaker	Organises workshop/ conference	Organising committee of major conference
Leadership & Collegiality	Wider Dissemination	Social media engagement	Writes Blogs	Hosts own Blogsite	Contributes to hosts public events	Contributes to articles in media	
	Knowledge Exchange	Engages with users	Specialised workshops	Advisory roles/ evidence	Consultancy	Specialised/ targeted briefings	
Research & Publications	External Partnerships	Practice background	Consulting users	Involving users	Collaborative project	Co-design	
	Mobility	Collaborative PhD	Internships	Placements	Secondments	Dual roles	
Research & Publications	Journals	Book reviews	Peer reviewer	Editorial Board member	Journal Editor	Launching new journal	
	Peer Review	Article reviews	Grant peer review	PhD examiner	External appointment panel/assessor	Grant review panels	Chairs grant review panels
Research & Publications	Collegiality	Peer support group	Informal peer review	Mentoring	Research coaching	Review panels	Initiates/leads research support systems
	Research Clusters	PhD or EC network/ reading group	Co-leading research group		Centre Co-Director	Launch new research group	Centre Director
Research & Publications	Sectional Leadership	Join/network in Professional Association (PA)	Lead a section/working group in PA		Establish new network	Leadership role in PA	Fellow of Learned Society

CROSS-CUTTING VALUES: Equality, Diversity & Inclusion      Research Integrity      Collegiality & Support

Source. [https://www.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/research\\_careers\\_tool.pdf](https://www.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/research_careers_tool.pdf)

This is not to suggest that individual institutions have not been innovating in relation to developing new full career research development tools. The University of Edinburgh’s ‘Research Careers Tool’ (Figure 2, above) provides a particularly innovative approach which, in an example of the way in which the topic is beginning to develop professional traction, does include an explicit emphasis on leadership. Not only does this tool underline the existence of a broad range of research leadership roles – editing journals, informal peer review, mentorship, co-leading or co-directing projects or centres, or contributing to the work of a professional association or learned society - the way in which ‘leadership’ is paired with ‘collegiality’ and separated from the top-level focus on ‘research’ also serves to underline the inevitable complexities of the topic (discussed above). The notion of the ‘I career’ and ‘T career’ is also gently embraced within the tool. The former relating to self-leadership and the development of a self-standing research reputation and profile at the beginning of a career; the latter indicating a shifting emphasis towards the middle and final phases of a career towards supporting and nurturing early career-researchers. **The main value of Figure 2 is that it offers a broad review of several research leadership roles and maps them across a journey-based approach.**

But with the *Fit for the Future* report’s emphasis on ‘Managing the Middle’ (i.e. offering more support to mid-career researchers) and ‘Pushing the Top’ (i.e. identifying new opportunities for senior and experienced researchers) in mind – and having engaged across the social science community - there is value in adopting a

slightly more disaggregated approach that is sensitive to at least three design dimensions (see Table 4, below).

**Table 4. Design Dimensions of a Future-Focused Full Career Framework**

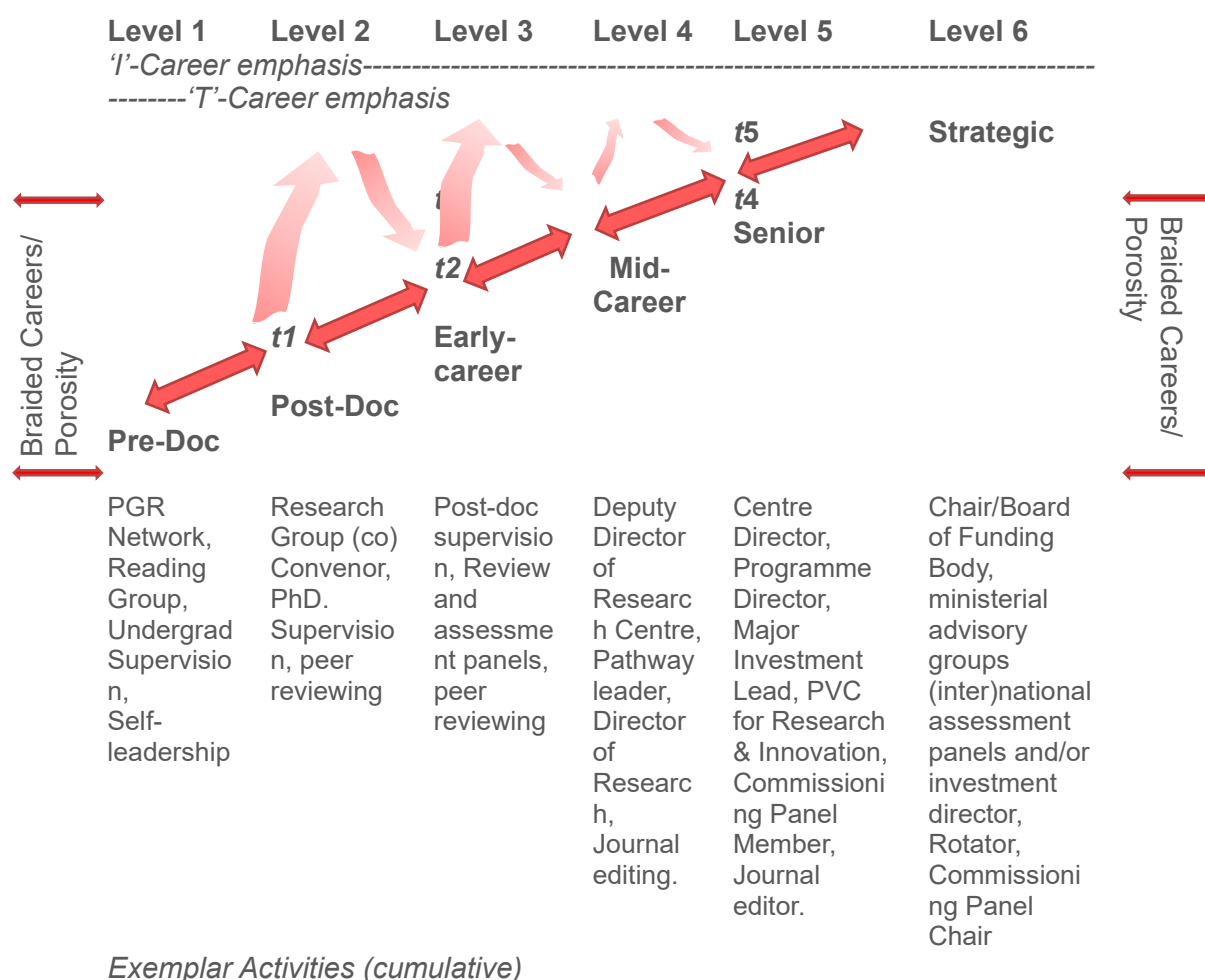
Dimension	Meaning
1. The increasing non-linearity of careers.	The need to facilitate mobility and movement in-and-out of higher education. Removing barriers to exit and re-entry and creating positive incentives.
2. The existence of six potential levels.	Academic careers have traditionally been framed in terms of four phases or levels. A six-stage framework embraces and stretches the full talent pipeline.
3. The significance of key transition points.	A focus on key transition points between stages reveals the main barriers and blockages to thinking about nurturing research leadership in an inclusive way.

The ‘vision’ for the purposes of this report is the development of a framework that offers the capacity to think afresh about how to tackle the incentive-based, structural and cultural research leadership challenges that were identified in the previous section. At the moment, thinking about *what* research leadership is, *why* it matters and *where, when* and *how* different people may at different stages (or when facing key transition points) require additional support, is held back by the lack of any basic foundational framework. Figure 3 (below) provides a first attempt to provide this framework and is offered as a starting point for discussion and subsequent development. However, what it does provide is a first attempt to map a ‘whole of career’ or ‘journey based’ approach to thinking about nurturing research leadership in the social sciences. **Incorporating the design dimensions outlined in Table 4 and developed in consultation with the research community, it is also aligned with funder priorities and ecosystem needs), agile enough to flex and adapt in an inclusive manner, and ambitious in terms of setting new international standards.**

The most important element of Figure 3 is that it provides a basis for thinking about new forms of strategic scaffolding. In terms of design elements, the following features or assumptions are significant. First, there is no expectation that all researchers should or would want to progress to all levels. The emphasis is on expanding choice and opportunity. Secondly, there is an understanding that non-linear career paths are likely to become more common which demands an emphasis on exit, re-entry and the facilitation of mobility. There is also (and thirdly) a strong, explicit and novel emphasis on key transition points within an integrated talent management structure. Fourthly, the framework embraces a degree of fluidity in the sense that the boundaries between levels or phases will at times be inevitably porous and overlapping. Fifth and finally, Figure 3 seeks to identify in a very clear

and pragmatic manner what the key skills and talents that researchers need at different career stages (see Table 5, below).

**Figure 3. Research Leadership: Full Journey Mapping**



The historical background behind Figure 3 is that in recent years increasing investment and thought has revolved around Levels 1, 2 and 3. The focus of this report is on the training and development needs vis-à-vis research leadership at levels 4, 5 and 6, and on the transition points between these levels (i.e. *t4* and *t5*). As the review of key barriers and blockages in the second part of this report and the recommendations set out in Part III all serve to underline is that having at least some form of benchmark 'full career' framework is of huge value in terms of structuring conversations about what research leaders need to thrive and flourish in a context that is almost defined by increasing pressures and a rapidly evolving research, development and innovation ecosystem. The language of levels, transition points, exit, re-entry, etc. was not only accessible to participants in the workshops that were held to inform this report but the provision of a visual map and an attempt to link

skills progression with career advancement also resonated with an appetite for greater clarity. Figure 3 allowed researchers to position themselves within the broader landscape and generate a sense of why research leadership did matter to them, and the skills they needed to develop or progress. More broadly, **the clear strategic value of a full journey approach is that it offers the potential to integrate a range of generally fragmented initiatives and investments within an interconnected model to maximise value, forge positive connections and foster positive cadre effects and peer-to-peer support systems.**

*Table 5. Research Leadership Skills Statement: A Starting Point for Discussion, Design and Delivery*

<b>Level 1</b> Pre-Doc  <b>RECRUITING TALENT</b>	<b>Key Question</b>
	How do I explore career options in research or know what qualifications I need?
	<b>Leadership Emphasis</b>
	Largely self-leadership but with the support of careers advisers and/or engagement opportunities (summer placements, shadowing schemes, etc.).
	<b>Talents &amp; Skills (Indicative Examples)</b>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strong first degree combined with a passion for further study.</li> <li>2. Ability to work under supervision but with high levels of self-direction.</li> <li>3. Understanding of different theories, methods, and approaches in post-graduate work.</li> <li>4. Confidence and understanding that research careers and opportunities exist within and beyond academe.</li> <li>5. Appreciation that research careers are based on learning from failures and success, and demand an ability to balance risks</li> </ol>
<b>Level 2</b> Doctoral  <b>FIRM FOUNDATIONS</b>	<b>Key Question</b>
	How do I understand research leadership and why it matters?
	<b>Leadership Emphasis</b>
	Largely <i>self</i> -leadership but also leadership within research groups, conferences, networks, and publications.
	<b>Talents &amp; Skills (Indicative Examples)</b>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Awareness of broader professional environment and shifting research landscape.</li> <li>2. Regular engagement and interaction with other disciplines and research-users.</li> <li>3. Opportunity to gain experience in research-related but non-academic environment.</li> <li>4. Understanding of professional opportunities beyond academe.</li> <li>5. Ability to assess and manage risks and learn from failure</li> </ol>
<b>Level 3</b>	<b>Key Question</b>

Post-Doc  HARVESTING TALENT	How do I gain experience in relation to research leadership and assess success?
	<b>Leadership Emphasis</b>
	Leadership within small research groups (including supervision of pre/doc students) while developing an independent research profile.
	<b>Talents &amp; Skills (Indicative Examples)</b> 1. Willingness to contribute to small team-based projects or to the creation of new research platforms or innovative 'docking points' with research-users. 2. Capacity to operate in an inter-disciplinary context and/or utilise insights from other disciplines. 3. Appreciation of different research cultures within and beyond academe. 4. Ability to offer training or professional support to peers, PhD students or research-users. 5. Awareness of the challenges and opportunities of co-design and co-production.
Level 4 University Scientist [Lecturer/Senior Lecturer]  MID-CAREER MOMENTUM	<b>Key Question</b>
	How do I develop my experience to be able to lead larger and/or more complex projects/build innovative collaborations?
	<b>Leadership Emphasis</b>
	Leadership role within research projects, networks, collaborations, etc. or centres, mentorship. Abilities in relation to knowledge mobilisation and impact. Project and network management skills (finance, staff, etc.). <b>Talents &amp; Skills (Indicative Examples)</b> 1. Capacity to create and promote a confident, collaborative, and inclusive research vision. 2. Ability to undertake project management responsibilities in key areas, including the management of staff. 3. Cultural and emotional intelligence derived through training, experience and inter-sectoral mobility. 4. Understanding of different leadership styles and the need for adaptation in different contexts. 5. Commitment to nurturing 'future leaders' through formal and informal mentorship, and the facilitation of/encouragement towards new skills-based opportunities.
Level 5 Professor	<b>Key Question</b>
	How do I excel in terms of demonstrating research leadership, especially in relation to nurturing future generations, building research infrastructure, and shaping the agenda?
	<b>Leadership Emphasis</b> Leadership role within large and complex projects, mentorship to junior colleagues. Proven project and network management skills. Possibly leadership in relation to building (inter)national

ESTABLISHED RESEARCH PROFILE	capacity, influencing policy, shaping debates, horizon-scanning and/or playing an ambassadorial role.
	<p><b>Talents &amp; Skills (Indicative Examples)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Proven capacity in relation to complex project management.</li> <li>2. Experience of coping with crises and/or potential repurposing.</li> <li>3. Proficiency in relation to strategic coalition building and advocacy.</li> <li>4. Extensive media management and public engagement experience.</li> <li>5. Familiarity of research leadership challenges at the (inter)national level and experience of working within complex networks/politically salient contexts.</li> </ol>
Level 6 Professor  STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP	<p><b>Key Question</b></p> <p>How do I utilise my research leadership experience to help inform policy-making and/or contribute to the broader governance of the research, development and innovation ‘ecosystem’?</p>
	<p><b>Leadership Emphasis</b></p> <p>Policy-focused leadership role working at the sector-wide level to support funding systems, regulatory regimes, or other system-wide governance elements, possibly at the international level.</p>
	<p><b>Talents &amp; Skills (Indicative Examples)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Previous senior leadership experience, notably in relation to boundary-spanning investments.</li> <li>2. Clear and sophisticated understanding of the socio-political context within decisions about funding and research are taken?</li> <li>3. Ability to frame arguments and conversations around the interests and ambitions of different audiences, plus a willingness to contribute to public debates.</li> <li>4. Emotional intelligence and an understanding of the dynamics of policy-making.</li> <li>5. Experience of building coalitions and overseeing the implementation of new innovations.</li> </ol>

A detailed breakdown of each element of Figure 3 – by key question, leadership emphasis, talents and skills – is provided in Table 5 (above). None of these elements should be seen as fixed or necessarily exclusive to any one level. A hallmark of a genuinely world class skills support structure is that it is not only the focus of ongoing discussion and dialogue, but that it also evolves and changes to meet new demands. But why this framework matters for the purposes of this report is that the evidence suggests that **mid-career research leaders (Level 4) very often feel unprepared, isolated and unsupported in their roles, senior research leaders (Level 5) suggest a need for additional support structures, and there is no explicit structure to ‘push the top’** in the sense of identifying further strategic policy-focused research leadership opportunities (Level 6) and supporting individuals into

those roles where they would like to pursue them. This leads to a more detailed focus on the main barriers and blockages facing mid-career and senior research leaders in the social sciences.

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I have a sense that people stay in Level 5 roles for too long, maybe it's because they don't know where to go.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

The map works for me. It's not perfect but I've never seen anything like this before and nobody's ever talked to me about talent and skills in this way.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023.

Many of us would not want to get to Level 6 at all. I would not want to get away from doing research and not just leading others to do their research.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

I worry that this framework is too linear ... The pyramid gets very steep with the number of people reaching level 5 and 6 with most people plateauing somewhere. [It would] need to incorporate ideas about peaks and troughs and plateaus and non-linearity.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

I was a PVC but I wanted to go back to being a 'mere professor' so you can go back if you look at the diagram. The elements of Level 6 can also be done by people across the spectrum. Being a research leader is a very contingent thing. What we need to do as a community is to have people who have leadership skills who might not be leaders but might be leaders or might have been leaders.  
Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

## **Part II Barriers & Blockages**



In 2020 the ESRC published a major report on research leadership – *Fit for the Future* - that identified a severe gap when it came to supporting mid-career and senior research leaders. The aim of this report is to drill down into the skills, support and training needs of mid-career and senior researchers to provide an evidence-base that could be used to inform conversations around the design and delivery of an integrated new support framework. This section focuses on the barriers and blockages researchers say they face when trying to undertake their research leadership roles. The following section (Part III) offers recommendations for removing these barriers and blockages in ways that, when taken together, would create an integrated support framework for research leadership that is ambitious, aligned and agile. The main insights discussed in this section are set out in Table 5 and provide a structure for the three brief sections that make up Part II of this report.

**Table 6. Barriers and Blockages to Effective Research Leadership: A Mid and Senior Career Perspective**

Training/Time/Tick Boxes		
1	Training	[...] many mid-career researchers feel that they are ‘thrown’ into leadership roles without training or preparation. ‘Learning on the job’ and ‘sinking or swimming’ reflects a lack of systemic and strategic support. Many are ‘accidental leaders’.
2	Time	[...] many senior research leaders suggest that they simply lack the time to maximise the scientific value and societal impact of the investments they oversee. Too often ‘in kind’ staff-time contributions are simply not honoured.
3	Tick-Boxes	[...] increasing management friction and the emergence of a post-Covid ‘bureaucratic bulge’ are frustrating those leading major investments. Collaborating across institutions is viewed as increasingly problematic.
Mentorship/Mobility/Mapping		
4	Mentorship	[...] mentors matter but good mentors are ‘few-and-far-between’ with luck and structural inequalities affecting access. Research leaders often feel isolated in their roles and would benefit from more peer-to-peer support.
5	Mobility	[...] world-class research environments generally lack a capacity to facilitate mobility. This is a key element of research leadership but moving across professional boundaries or building ‘braided’ careers remains very difficult.
6	Mapping	[...] there is no clear professional framework that identifies career stages, transition points, training opportunities, support structures or that facilitates forms of purposeful networking across the broader knowledge ‘ecosystem’.
Angst/Architecture/Access		
7	Angst	[...] insecure employment models and short-term funding streams create fundamental challenges for those in leadership positions. Recruiting and retaining staff is difficult, financial stability a constant distraction from research.
8	Architecture	[...] the architecture of academe is changing towards an emphasis on digital processes and on-line and platforms. Leading research projects with no or very limited ‘in-real-life’ interaction creates challenges that require review.
9	Access	[...] although major investments have been made to support early career researchers, there are very few targeted opportunities for mid-career scholars. Innovative thinking about ‘supporting the middle’ could provide leadership-related skills, opportunities, and training.

There are several immediate issues that need to be raised about Table 5. First and foremost, it does not claim to present every possible issue, nor frame them in a manner that would be acceptable to everyone within the research community. But it does provide the first evidence-based review of the main challenges that research

leaders currently feel they face, and therefore a basis for future conversations and dialogue. Secondly, although Table 5 identifies nine nominally separate issues or topics many of them are clearly inter-related and inter-dependent. Finally, although some of the issues identified in Table 5 exist within the remit of the ESRC, others raise broader questions for UKRI or for the broader research community.

## 4. Training, Time & Tick-Boxes

### Training

**[...] many mid-career researchers feel that they are ‘thrown’ into leadership roles without training or preparation. ‘Learning on the job’ and ‘sinking or swimming’ reflects a lack of systemic and strategic support. Many are ‘accidental leaders’.**

One of the most striking findings of the research on which this report is based is just how little training or support individuals had received either before they took up new research leadership roles or when they were in that role. Mid-career researchers consistently felt they had been ‘thrown in’ to leadership roles. Thinking about non-academic skills development, role shadowing, succession planning, transition processes, etc., simply does not appear to occur in any sensible or strategic manner in relation to research. This is, to some extent, hampered by funding uncertainties and structural pressures within the sector (see #7, below) but it also reflects a long-term failure to innovate. When asked where they might go for specialised training or support, the vast majority of mid and senior research leaders suggested (i) that they knew of no sources of formal training that they could access, and (ii) that they would generally try to seek informal support by talking to colleagues who had faced similar challenges.

In some cases, this emphasis on what might be termed ‘traditional’ informal peer support or mentorship was viewed as an effective and legitimate support system. But for many other researchers this emphasis on academic collegiality and informality was problematic for at least four reasons. First and foremost, positive mentors were far and few between and not everyone could draw upon sources of positive informal support (see #4). There was also a sense (and secondly) that increasing academic pressures and structural shifts (see #8) had to some extent ‘squeezed out’ the space for informal peer-to-peer support and learning. Where it did exist (and thirdly) there was a concern that informal support was too reliant on ‘who you knew’ rather than ‘what you needed’ at a particular point in your career (see #6). The informality of support was also viewed as potentially reflecting and reinforcing structural inequalities, while the fact that researchers generally went to people they already knew for support and advice risked ‘locking-in bad behaviour’ or, at the very least, did little to help cultivate ‘range’ in the sense of being mobile across institutions, professions, or disciplines to learn new skills (see #5).

The fourth and final reason that an emphasis drawing-upon the tacit knowledge, experience and expertise of other researchers was viewed as highly problematic was simply because of an awareness that the scale and nature of research investments was rapidly changing (see Table 3, above). The shift towards an emphasis on boundary-spanning research structures and complex forms of co-production meant that a tier of senior researchers with experience of successfully leading these sorts of projects simply does not exist. Greater horizontal connectivity to forge opportunities for cross-learning, network mobility and mutual support was therefore recognised as a critical but currently non-existent element of the social science

research landscape. The key insight from a skills-based perspective (Table 5, above) can therefore be set out as follows: **there is a strong and broad appetite amongst mid-career and senior research leaders in the social sciences for a new and future-focussed ‘training offer’ forged around supported learning and peer-to-peer support.** The absence of any explicit national framework to foster connections, share best practice, create learning opportunities, and facilitate both formal and informal modes of peer-to-peer support is recognised as a barrier to systemic effectiveness. It is also viewed as a relatively high-gain but low-cost opportunity (discussed below).

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The research leadership challenge is simple. There is no real structure to support research leaders.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

I think research leadership is still ‘learning by doing’ on the job but there are informal ways of sharing best practice, but it takes a lot of effort as you need to proactively create those networks.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I never got any support from anywhere and to be honest I never asked for any... I am hesitant about the idea of ‘teaching’ people leadership...I think it is best acquired through supported experience.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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## Time

**[...] many senior research leaders suggest that they simply lack the time to maximise the scientific value and societal impact of the investments they oversee. Too often ‘in kind’ staff-time contributions are simply not honoured.**

As has already been highlighted, it is possible to distinguish between research management and research leadership. The former relates to, amongst other things, the completion of administrative tasks, financial oversight, reporting and review structures, regulatory requirements, etc. that are generally formal, bureaucratic and process-based (the focus of the next sub-section). Research leadership, by contrast is very often associated by researchers with less formal dimensions of professional behaviour such as promoting a research vision, nurturing and supporting staff, and maintaining a healthy research culture or environment. A lack of time is a major barrier to effective research leadership. All forms of research leadership from Level 1 to Level 6 on Figure 3 (above) are likely to include some elements of research management. Both elements combine to reflect the way in which research leadership is a multi-dimensional endeavour that demands sufficient time to undertake a range of roles and tasks. **One of the most striking findings of the workshops and interviews on which this report is based is that funded research time is rarely passed back to researchers in leadership positions.**

Very often costed teaching buy-outs or the in-kind contributions promised by institutions are not honoured which means that research leadership roles are simply added to existing responsibilities. The following statement reflects a far broader concern: 'Recognition is critical - if you are on a teaching and research contract very often you will get no reduction in teaching at all when you win a large grant. The money just disappears and is subsumed into university central costs with no benefit actually trickling down to those holding the actual grant. ESRC money comes to universities and disappears. The staff who secure the funding do not get given the resources they requested and secured that would allow them to take on the research leadership dimensions of the project in the way they should. That needs to be looked at.' This situation is unsustainable, has EDI implications and demands urgent review.

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This is my biggest bugbear, taking research leadership seriously and being genuinely really good at it is not compatible with having a large teaching load. I'm leaving my current role because of this job. The research leadership problem I faced was that I simply could not do it properly while doing loads of teaching – it left my research and time to support others squeezed in around the edges.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

The funding never seems to cover your teaching. I don't think this is specific to just where I work. It's a bigger problem. Too often significant grant income that brings major research leadership expectations does not lead to a reduction in teaching levels. You end up simply doing more work, and often in your own time.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

ESRC grants very often involve significant match funding from the applicant's institution but that is generally imaginary time. If you get the funding the university will not in fact provide the extra resources they have promised. And again, this is a generic issue and not just about my institution...so you end up being caught in a pincer movement. There are hugely complex rules about how FEC operates and about how institutions interpret those rules and pass on funds to staff. There is a lot of horse-trading that goes on, but it favours those researchers who have a lot of experience in this area and therefore can play the game. Mid-career researchers don't generally have that knowledge. That knowledge needs to be shared and passed on in a more transparent manner.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

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## Tick-Boxes

**[...] increasing management friction and the emergence of a post-Covid 'bureaucratic bulge' are frustrating those leading major investments. Collaborating across institutions is viewed as increasingly problematic.**

The previous section highlighted a lack of time as a major barrier to effective research leadership. It also suggested that a blockage seemed to be preventing

those holding research leadership positions from very often receiving any reduction in teaching roles. Grant funding was not, the evidence suggests, trickling down to the benefit of grant holders and institutional ‘in kind’ contributions were often not actually honoured. **The time challenge facing mid-career and senior level research leaders is, however, augmented by the widely held view that levels of institutional bureaucracy have increased significantly since Covid-19.** As a result, the demands of *research management* have increased in ways that reduce the time available for what is generally seen as genuine *research leadership*.

**Complaints that increasing management friction and the growth of a ‘bureaucratic bulge’ are acting as major barriers to effective research leadership formed a central theme within workshops and interviews.** What makes this finding particularly interesting was that the Covid period has been praised as one in which streamlined, flexible and adaptive processes and collaborative relationships were forged across the research, development and innovation ecosystem. But a constant complaint coming from mid-career and particularly senior research leaders is that their capacity to ‘just get things done’ has and is diminishing at exactly the time when it should be increasing. This led to a strong sense that if genuine research leadership was occurring then it was happening ‘in spite of rather than because of’ host (i.e. university) structures, and these challenges were multiplied when inter-organisational collaboration was required. The evidence suggests that the growth of what is often framed in terms of an increasingly rigid ‘tick box mentality’ matters for three reasons. First, it consumes time, frustrates staff, stifles creativity, prevents mobility, complicates collaboration and saps energy (individually and collectively) while imposing unnecessary financial overhead costs on projects. Secondly, the combined weight of these costs is encouraging some senior researchers to consider leaving academia, while at the same time creating a barrier that deters mid-career researchers from wanting to move to more senior (Level 5) positions. And third and finally, the scale and extent of bureaucracy is creating concern that the ESRC is committed to a mode of collaborative research (see Table 3, above) which universities structures are simply not able to administer. In this context it is mid-career and senior researcher leaders who are somehow expected to cope with this mismatch.

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There has been a massive bureaucratic bloat since Covid within universities. It hinders absolutely every component of research leadership and just saps time and energy.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

The main challenges are management frictions – just getting things done. Anything to do with collaboration is very hard – just getting two research offices to talk together. Then there are basic challenges around doing simple things like buying a dataset, commissioning a survey and particularly doing research overseas. This is all stuff that the ESRC does not control but it needs to factor in this work. It seems to have got a lot worse after the pandemic – management frictions have increased and its making research leadership really hard because you are not really leading you are just troubleshooting. Pull back on ambitions around collaborative projects

because these management frictions are really biting hard. Training for leadership is good but we need something to attack these management frictions as I am looking to step out of the university...I cannot deal with this any longer, it's just so dissatisfying.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

The biggest challenge is the increasing bureaucracy that seems to surround research. It has got far worse. The increasing bureaucratisation of research within universities means more contracts, more legality and this all increases massively once you involve multiple universities and outside partners. The ESRC also needs to look at itself. It is often far too slow in getting contracts out while research leaders are working to hold fragile research teams or collaborations together.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

Part of my story as a research leader is that I've always been something of an outlier – I purposely positioned my research team out of the mainstream. That has been a successful strategy, I tried to minimise the amount of contact I had with the rest of the university so that I could just crack on and focus on the research.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

## 5. Mentorship, Mobility & Mapping

### Mentorship

[...] mentors matter but good mentors are ‘few-and-far-between’ with luck and structural inequalities affecting access. Research leaders often feel isolated in their roles and would benefit from more peer-to-peer support.

**Positive mentorship is a critical component in nurturing research leadership skills.** Mentorship has, however, generally been framed in terms of supporting early career researchers, and the mid-level and senior researchers who participated in workshops or interviews generally identified the existence of a positive mentor in their careers as central to their career progression. Mentorship provided an informal support framework and links back to the notion of being ‘in the loop’ (see Introduction, above) due to the way in which mentors tended to ‘open doors’, ‘share insights’, ‘identify opportunities’, and ‘push in the right direction’. If an early career researcher is embedded within an established research centre, institute or major investment then they are likely to have more structural support around them in terms of both formal and informal mentorship. Those based in mainstream departments where teaching responsibilities must be balanced against research opportunities are unlikely to enjoy such support and are therefore placed at a structural disadvantage. Not having a positive mentor can therefore be seen as a major barrier to progression (Figure 3, above) as the support they provide is particularly crucial when it comes to successfully navigating key transition points.

**Mid-career and established researchers would also benefit from forms of peer-to-peer mentorship.** This would not only facilitate skill-sharing and structural support but could also form a connective tissue between different research investments and across different institutions, thereby filling a connective and catalysing role. Reverse mentorship might also see mid-career researchers playing a role in ‘upskilling’ senior researchers, and specific programmes might be designed to realise an ‘EDI opportunity’ which focuses on recognising and rewarding a broad range of talents and contributions vis-à-vis research leadership. More broadly, creative thinking about mid and senior-level mentoring provides an opportunity to increase the flow of people benefitting from and contributing to major investments. Hybrid mentoring that connects researchers with professionals from non-academic but research-related organisations could also help both sides of the relationship develop key skills and facilitate mobility.

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We are certainly well behind other sectors and especially private sector professions in thinking about talent management and providing structured support. Learning by doing is great if you have a mentor who is actually teaching you the right things. At the beginning of my career I was unfortunate enough to have a mentor who basically pushed me away from inter-disciplinary research ten years ago telling me that that was not the strategy my institution wanted to go down. It's all very haphazard and a lot depends on whether you happen to be in the niche area of a senior scholar at the



right time. In academe there is no real trajectory plan to support people through their whole careers and clear succession planning.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Black mentorship was really important to me. It was all about support and positive prompts...I was taken to meetings with funders and things like that which really helped me gain a broader understanding of skills and networks. I also had the opportunity to go into the civil service on secondment for six months – a really encouraging environment.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I've been lucky in the sense that I started my career in an ESRC research centre and that gave me the platform, opportunities and support to develop. I was the post-doc rep on the centre leadership team and so I was able to learn from a very early stage, but it does make me think how people who are not lucky enough to be embedded gain that sort of experience.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

To be honest there was never much there in terms of professional development post-PhD but what I did have was a very supportive mentor who invested a lot of time in my development. A career mentor really really helps – that is what funders need to focus on.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2

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## Mobility

**[...] world-class research environments facilitate the flow and mobility of people, skills and knowledge. This is a key element of research leadership but moving across professional boundaries or building 'braided' careers remains very difficult.**

How do researchers who have established an independent research reputation (i.e. they have navigated through Levels 1, 2 and 3, Figure 3, above) proceed to develop and expand their skills and networks? How do they identify new research topics, become established in major funding ventures, identify new data sets or sources of non-traditional funding, or draw upon new forms of professional support or encouragement? The answer to these questions focuses attention on the issue of mobility and **the core argument of this section is that a lack of mobility exists as a major barrier in terms of nurturing the skills and experience that successful research leadership increasingly requires.**

Incentivising and facilitating greater researcher mobility, especially during mid-career stages, provides a way of broadening the skills base and facilitating 'braided careers' where there are opportunities to flow in-and- out of academia. What mid-level and senior research leaders suggested consistently was that although they recognised the benefits of mobility 'making it happen' on the ground was actually very difficult due to the existence of an 'incentives mismatch' (see Figure 1, above) and

unnecessarily 'clunky' bureaucratic processes (#3, above). The 'incentives mismatch' was the way in which academic reward, recognition and recruitment processes still tend to over-incentivise peer-reviewed publications and external income generation to the extent that investing time in developing new skills and networks by gaining experience in non-academic but research related environments is viewed as a high-risk strategy. **The concern being – as one mid-career researcher described it - that leaving academia for a few years or even taking a short-term secondment would be a 'career-breaking rather than career-making experience'**. Mid-career and senior research leaders who have actually worked beyond academe are actually quite rare. Moreover, those who have managed to make a mid-career move *into* academe were often critical of the manner in which they were recruited and appointed on the basis that they had a non-traditional skill set only to find that those skills were generally not recognised or rewarded within academe. This lack of porosity, absorption and flow represents a major barrier to facilitating a future-focused talent management system for the social sciences.

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Leaving academia is the easy part, it's getting back in that everyone knows is basically impossible.

Interview, Senior Established Researcher, April 2023.

We talk about mobility but what is interesting is that when I moved sector I had to start from scratch. It was as if all my previous professional experience did not count – when it comes to mobility we need to recognise broader skillsets and experience beyond academe.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

There is a tension between what we see as research and research leadership as opposed to what we might call project management – this can be a real problem for individuals who want to transition out of academe. But it can also be a tension within academe as we are increasingly required to skill-shift...you need to have a credibility to flick between roles.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

Having come into academia from a private sector research background the contrast is that in my experience of leadership support and training it was always the organisation that carried you through, not the sector. Here we are talking about sector-level support at a more elevated level... My big reflection is just how isolated people are in this environment... it's as if everyone is self-employed...my main thought coming in from the outside has always been whether the sector could provide more support and clearer pathways. The connections and network points are so much more important in academia because there is a lack of structure. One of the reasons I've enjoyed being on one of the ESRC advisory groups is that it brought me into contact with people holding senior positions within the system, it provided a bit of regular structure through which I could learn from other people.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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## Mapping

**[...] there is no clear professional framework that identifies career stages, transition points, training opportunities, support structures or that facilitates forms of purposeful networking across the broader knowledge ‘ecosystem’.**

Academic careers in the United Kingdom have traditionally operated across just four levels (Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader, Professor) and in recent years this has reduced to just three as the American system of Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Full Professor has been adopted in an increasing range of universities. The problem with these levels is that they are very broad and generally include a combined emphasis on research, teaching and administration. What is currently missing - and that researchers suggest is urgently needed - is a clear and more detailed map or framework that indicates how the skills of researchers are expected to evolve in order for them to progress through their research careers and navigate specific transition points. **The lack of any explicit statement or set of guidelines to provide clarity and direction in relation to both self-leadership and the leadership of research groups is a major barrier to building research leadership capacities.**

There are, of course, established career development frameworks that have been developed by individual universities (see, for example, Figure 2, above) and national organisations (like those promoted by Advance HE) but these are not specifically focused on research. Vitae does promote a ‘Researcher Development Framework’ that is based on a five-phase career framework. However, the specific boundaries of each ‘phase’ remain unclear, the framework has not been updated since 2010 and while leadership-related elements feature in the framework there is no detail on how researchers could actually secure those skills, particularly in light of the contextual pressures highlighted above.

**It is important to underline that the evidence-base does not suggest an appetite for a rigid skills statement but what it does suggest is the need for greater clarity as to (i) what research leadership means in an academic context, (ii) what sort of skills are relevant at different career stages, and (iii) clarity as to where researchers can go to access or develop those skills.**

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I don’t think there is a clear career structure for researchers at all. You can bring people on, but you cannot stop them from leaving academe if there is no step for them to go on to.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

The problem is that there is no map and researchers are generally expected to learn where to go and what to do through osmosis. The problem with that is that they often pick up the wrong signals, are given bad advice or just get disillusioned with trying to play a game where no one really appears to know the rules.

Interview, Senior Researcher, April 2023.

I never thought about being a research leader or even what it meant until very recently, just a few months ago. I once applied for a Future Leaders Fellowship and was rejected because I did not write enough about my approach to leadership and skills development needs in my application.... I never really felt that I had someone who said to me in this academic career 'where do you want to go?' and the pathway that I would need to take. My PhD supervisors were great, but their focus was on the PhD. No one spoke to me about careers, no guidance and support. I have had no formal mentoring or anything like that at all.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I've just started thinking about research leadership in the last couple of months due to my new role where I am deputy director of a very large investment that involves lots of universities. I've never had any formal training at all in relation to research leadership, I've just had to pick up insights while working with senior colleagues. One of the reasons I wanted to attend this workshop was that I thought it might provide an opportunity for shared learning. It's really important to keep the informality and learn from your colleagues but at a certain level above small grants you really need a lot more than that.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

## 6. Angst, Architecture & Access

### Angst

**[...] insecure employment models and short-term funding streams create fundamental challenges for those in leadership positions. Recruiting and retaining staff is difficult, financial stability a constant distraction from research.**

The barriers and blockages to effective research leadership include both particular and systemic challenges. One of the biggest systemic challenges that was raised during the workshops and interviews undertaken for this report was precarity as it related to both research funding and employment practices. Although most mid-career and senior research leaders are on permanent contracts (but not all of them) the constant challenge of appointing, recruiting and retaining staff creates ongoing managerial and bureaucratic challenges. It also means that nurturing staff and encouraging them think about broader skills and development is difficult because the majority of ECRs in research roles are locked into relatively short-term patterns of thinking. The transition from post-doctoral researcher to mid-career (*t2* in Figure 3, above) is often fundamental to a successful research career as it is generally linked to securing tenure of employment. Many senior research leaders with responsibility for running large projects, centres or institutes report that staff management and issues relating to security of employment represents a major managerial leadership burden (#3, above) that detracts from them being able to focus on research leadership. 'I spend a lot of time managing' as one senior social scientist noted 'but very little time actually leading.'

**The evidence suggests that the distractions of managing precarious employment contracts represents a serious barrier to effective and inclusive research leadership.** It also raises issues about the mental health and wellbeing of those holding leadership roles, and also highlights the risk of 'lost leaders' who may leave academe relatively early in their research career and are then unable to bring leadership related skills and experiences back into the university system due to blockages in relation to inter-sectoral mobility (#5, above).

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It's very difficult to lead something which is built on sand. I spend most of my time juggling contracts trying to appoint people with multiple cost codes trying to work out when research spending on one project comes to an end, another one begins trying to generate some kind of continuity in employment. It's very difficult to fix strategically in that environment.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

One of the toughest research leadership challenges is looking after our very good early career researchers. Dealing with an insecure workforce is incredibly difficult.

Giving them great security is one of the biggest headaches that research leaders face – dealing with a highly insecure workforce takes a lot of our time and energy.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

I think that one of the key issues that make navigating your career development very difficult, particularly for early career Researchers are the precarious employment practices that go along with the way in which funding is done. I know this is a massive structural issue, and I'm not sure how far we can go there.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I'm on the cusp of early and mid-career...I see the challenges and pressures that other researchers face and I've taken the choice not to do that. I don't teach – I just do research, but the price I pay for that is that I exist on a succession of short-term contracts. And there are more mid-career staff who have now been in this precarious existence for 10-15 years.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

For me I don't feel ready to make the transition to a senior leadership role. I have too much on my plate and cannot see an opportunity for me to clear the decks to really focus on a new role. But then there seems to be a lot of bureaucracy and uncertainty in terms of recruiting temporary staff onto projects. I don't want to be responsible for people's lives when I cannot actually control their employment situation.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

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## Architecture

**[...] the architecture of academe is changing towards an emphasis on digital processes and on-line and platforms. Leading research projects with no or very limited 'in-real-life' interaction creates challenges that require review.**

**One of the most obvious shifts in research leadership in recent years reflects the changing nature and form of research investments and, more specifically, the dependency within those investments on increasingly indirect or networked relationships.** Put very simply, research leadership has traditionally been undertaken 'in the real world' and largely through direct 'face-to-face' relationships. Research centres and institutes brought researchers together in a physical space, and even large research programmes worked with an expectation that participants would meet at regular intervals. But what might be termed as the architecture of research investments has changed in at least four significant ways and which all focus attention on the issue of 'bandwidth'. The first change is simply that the intellectual architecture of research funding has and is continuing to expand away from mono-disciplinary investments to inter-disciplinary projects. Secondly, there is a much more explicit focus on co-production and co-design which tends to also expand the research boundaries along a very different dimension. Thirdly, in order to capture both of these breadth dimensions there is an increasing dependency within the research funding landscape on 'hub-and-spoke' models of

organisational design, as reflected in initiatives like the International Public Policy Observatory or the Local Policy and Innovation Partnerships (more broadly see Table 3, above). A fourth and final shift relates less to structures and more to relationships and highlights the decline of ‘face-to-face’ interactions and the increasing emphasis on remote and digitally mediated relationships.

**The main argument of this section is that without careful review and acknowledgement the increasing ‘bandwidth’ of research investments risks becoming a major barrier to effective and efficient research leadership.** Many elements of research leadership depend on the existence of subtle high-trust interpersonal relationships that take time to form, and generally involve some element of face-to-face interaction. Mentoring staff or providing support is a very different process when conducted almost exclusively online, and the structured serendipity of face-to-face conversations that tend to occur in an unplanned manner and in informal spaces – chance meetings between team members at the water cooler, or meeting with a new colleague as you pass in the corridor and deciding to grab some lunch or coffee - are by definition far harder to engineer remotely. Horizontal peer-to-peer relationships are also less likely to emerge organically in disaggregated settings which, in turn, creates questions about the strategic scaffolding that might usefully be put in place to facilitate coping with this bandwidth challenge.

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I think there is a link between research leadership and physical space. Post-pandemic people don't come into departments as much they used to, and informal spaces have been taken away. That was where informal support and guidance – mentorship – was often found in an academic context. Space was a form of research infrastructure that nurtured leadership-related skills and support, but as it has gone we need to find new support structures. Lots of people now feel even more isolated as they work from home and only go into their department to teach.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Physical space matters but the culture of academia has changed. People are now much more protective about their time. When I first started in academia it simply wasn't like that. People would meet in staff rooms for a coffee and discuss shared challenges or offer support. In some ways I cannot help but think that this conversation is really about putting back in interventions that replaced things that just happened more naturally in the past. We've lost a lot of the informal support structures.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I have lots of researchers that I've never even met. I know they exist and I've seen them online but I don't feel I know them or have a relationship with them. I'm sure that feeling is mutual but it is a shame as my relationship with them feels too transactional and remote. But how do I create a team-based culture when the members are spread out so much and have very different needs?  
Senior Researcher, Interview, May 2023.

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## Access

[...] although major investments have been made to support early career researchers, there are very few targeted opportunities for mid-career scholars. Innovative thinking about ‘supporting the middle’ could provide leadership-related skills, opportunities, and training.

One of the main benefits of stepping-back and adopting a whole of career approach (Figure 3, above) is that such mapping exercises identify gaps in terms of provision and blockages when it comes to developmental opportunities. **The key argument of this section is that a major ‘gap’ exists when thinking about the specific developmental needs of mid-career research leaders.** ‘Managing the middle’ in the sense of a strategic support framework and tailored opportunities was an issue that was raised in the ‘Fit for the Future’ report of 2020 which remains unresolved. **Mid-career researchers are often a ‘left behind’ constituency when it comes to nurturing talent.**

The workshops and interviews on which this report is based have delivered a more detailed understanding of this challenge to be developed which highlights two key issues. First and foremost, mid-career scholars face a funding squeeze. Targeted funding is generally designed to support ECRs, and the Matthew effect of accumulated advantage generally means that those who were identified as ‘future leaders’ at the outset of their career or hold senior professorial positions with a reputation for grant capture can ‘hoover up’ larger funding opportunities. (It is noteworthy that the term ‘Matthew effect’ was coined by Robert K. Merton to describe how eminent scientists will often get more credit than a comparatively unknown researcher, even if the latter was the main driver within the project.) Mid-career researchers who are based within large centre or institutes and are therefore ‘in the loop’ may be able to benefit from the current system. **But the bigger question is how those mid-career researchers who are based in mainstream departments but may have significant talents and skills (i.e. ‘lost leaders’) can break back into the funding streams.**

**The second issue, however, relates to reward and recognition.** The evidence suggests that it is not uncommon for mid-career staff to lead on the writing of successful research grant applications, either in part or in full. Recognition of this fact is, however, frequently denied because of decisions at an institutional level that a senior professor should ‘head up’ the proposal as the named Principal Investigator. While in many ways understandable, this practice has major implications for mid-career researcher development and recognition. It can also have major implications in terms of EDI, and more generally in recognising and rewarding team-based projects.



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The old 'put the big name on the grant' is stupid – they may never have even seen the application and certainly contributed very little to it – but it is still a common part of the funding game. The fact that seven or eight people might have led on pulling the application together does not really matter. But it does matter because if the grant is funded it will be the 'big name' that gets the credit not them.  
Interview, Mid-Career Researcher, May 2023

There is a big issue about only being able to put down one PI on a grant. In reality only the PI gets any recognition for getting a grant. Being a Co-investigator doesn't really count which is a major problem.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Don't start off in the research-intensive universities where they've got clusters and groups around them from the beginning. For me, there's a really interesting issue of equality, diversity, and inclusion, a politics of research leadership that we might want to think about.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

## **Part III. Opportunities & Options**

The aim of this section is to make recommendations that are designed to address the nine barriers and blockages to effective research leadership facing mid-career and senior researchers in the social sciences that were identified in the previous section (Table 6, above). These recommendations (set out in Table 7 below) have emerged out of initial conversations with members of the social science community but will need to be revised and tested through further consultation and pilot projects. Taken together, however, they provide the basis for a fresh and inclusive approach to supporting research leadership in the social sciences which is ambitious, aligned and agile. What this report has identified is a need for more strategic scaffolding at the national level when it comes to supporting research careers and joining-up existing investments. **It is for this reason that the core and underpinning recommendation of this report is for the establishment of a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network.**

*Table 7. Recommendations for Enabling Effective Research Leadership for Mid-Career and Senior Social Scientists.*

Innovate/Protect/Reduce		
1	Training	[...] <b>innovate</b> by establishing a new UK Research Leadership Network to organise purposeful networking and peer support while delivering experiential training. This would provide the future-focused national level scaffolding that is currently missing.
2	Time	[...] <b>protect</b> by producing a clear statement of expectations vis-à-vis 'in kind' contributions of staff time to ensure that staff fulfilling leadership roles on funded projects are actually given the promised time to focus on their roles.
3	Tick-Boxes	[...] <b>reduce</b> bureaucracy by working with universities and the social science community to review and explore where administrative costs and friction can be minimised or removed.
Nurture/Facilitate/Clarify		
4	Mentorship	[...] <b>nurture</b> research leaders through the design and delivery of a new national mentorship programme for research leaders that spans institutions, disciplines and professions while ensuring equality of opportunity.
5	Mobility	[...] <b>facilitate</b> greater inter-sectoral mobility through a clear statement and policy position on supporting 'braided careers', plus targeted investment into 'returnships' and 'sector-hopping' opportunities.
6	Mapping	[...] <b>clarify</b> exactly what research leadership entails, how skill sets are expected to evolve, what the main transition points are and where researchers at all levels in their career can go to access support and training.
Promote/Identify/Create		
7	Angst	[...] <b>promote</b> the significance of stability of employment and funding across and beyond UKRI, emphasising this as a strategic defining ambition across all workstreams and planning processes, plus a skills-building opportunity.
7	Architecture	[...] <b>identify</b> 'best practice' insights for leading 'at a distance' through distributed online networks where 'in real life' meetings become the exception rather than the norm.
9	Access	[...] <b>create</b> new team-based funding opportunities for mid-career researchers that are explicitly framed around developing skills, experience and networks in the context of boundary-spanning societal challenges.

## 7. Innovate, Protect & Reduce

Innovate (in response to the Training challenge, #1 above)

[...] innovate by establishing a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network to organise purposeful networking, peer-to-peer support, experiential training, etc. This would provide the future-focused national level scaffolding that is currently missing.

Research leadership matters. It matters for the reasons set out in Table 2 (above) and the evidence on which this report is based suggests that there is a general recognition within the social science community that a more strategic, inclusive and structured approach is needed because many mid-career and senior researcher leaders feel to some level unprepared and unsupported in their roles. There is also a clear recognition within the community that the increasing size, scale and complexity of grants, especially boundary-spanning initiatives, require not only a far broader skillset and support structure but also team-based leadership approaches which have not traditionally been central within the social sciences (hence this report's focus on the notion of 'bandwidth'). A focus on key transition points within a whole of 'career approach' also provides a fresh approach to thinking about support, cohort effects, training and mobility. **It is for this reason that the first and main recommendation of this report is that a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network is established.**

The aim of creating a new ESRC network is to provide the connective and catalysing strategic scaffolding that is currently completely absent. The role of the new network would be to facilitate reciprocal learning, peer-to-peer support and productive interactions. The aim not only being to provide an integrated and flexible pathway programme of leadership-related and development opportunities tailored to the need of social scientists, but also to connect that pathway horizontally into cognate leadership and development investments or initiatives within and beyond academe, while at the same time forging vertical mutual learning relationships between research leads and the research councils. **All the other recommendations in this section could be facilitated by the creation of a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network.**

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The nature of informality within research leadership cannot and should not be forgotten, but there is a place for a little more structure and support. The dominant message from this workshop is that most people feel they have been 'thrown' into their roles rather than prepared and supported to make the transition. I think there could be a clearer statement from the ESRC about what research leadership is, how the skills evolve and change at different levels, and where people can go for support. Even if there were just two or three workshops a year that brought people together, I think that would be very popular.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Without at least some new structures being put in place the structural inequalities that we all know about will simply continue and be amplified. But we don't want too much structure otherwise you'll tend to benefit those people who are just good at climbing frameworks rather than actually being good research leaders. So there is an issue of balance.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

The key theme for me is networking and learning. That's what has come out of this workshop and there needs to be a purpose behind that network. You are looking for a sense of connection and cohort effect – thicker connections and more transparent opportunities. The key issue is that a network can be seen as slightly exclusionary and cabal-like. I think that is not a reason not to do it because it is too important but you need to link it into the ecosystem to increase porosity. Where is our cohort of future leaders and the inclusive growing talent pool?  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

The ESRC needs to play more of an enabling role – identifying people already in those positions and connecting them up but also thinking about the porosity issue – research leadership is not just about running ever bigger research groups – it is also about moving into more policy-facing roles or an international research leadership role. So does the ESRC want to retain people like us within UK HEI or support to progress into more international roles? But a lot more could be done to enable those sorts of jumps through informal networking, structures connections, mentoring, etc.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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Protect (in response to the Time challenge, #2 above)

**[...] protect by producing a clear statement of expectations vis-à-vis 'in kind' contributions of staff time to ensure that staff fulfilling leadership roles on funded projects are actually given the promised time to focus on their roles.**

Research leadership is a resource-intensive activity. It takes time, energy and emotional commitment to support the careers of other researchers, but this report has highlighted two issues. First, the evidence suggests that in many cases those who take on research leadership responsibilities are not being provided with the funded or promised relief from other roles (notably teaching-related) that they expected. The second issue is that the existence of a fragmented research community means that not only are researchers unable to identify if they are facing an institutional as opposed to a systemic challenge (i.e. there is no opportunity for collective conversations) but there is also no clear or established docking-point or framework that facilitates community dialogue between researchers and funders in a transparent, inclusive and positive lesson-learning manner. An ESRC Research Leaders Development Network would create this capacity for positive feedback and mutual engagement, with the issue of clarity around funding processes and clarity of

expectations around time and capacity potentially being a suitable topic of discussion. At the very least **the evidence would suggest a need for the ESRC to produce a clear statement of expectations, especially in relation to committed ‘in kind’ contributions of staff time, to ensure that staff fulfilling leadership roles on funded projects are given the time to focus on their roles.**

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We have many of the same issues around time and the overlaying of leadership responsibilities on top of what people are already doing rather than extra resource space to do it properly.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Something I have been really struggling with it that I still have all my teaching. It is fixed and I can't just get rid of it – it's very time consuming. There is no reduction in those kinds of responsibilities that come with this research leadership position... so when am I supposed to do all of this additional work and to do it well?

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I simply don't have the time to step back and think about the big questions.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Having children, dropping to four days, etc., it's hugely challenging. I want to model good practices and to demonstrate a healthy work-life balance - I want to show that you can have a family and have a life and do the job well without breaking...but I'm not really sure how possible that is actually. As a woman I do think this is a structural problem... but I think it is a big part of the research leadership conversation. There is still a culture in academe where advanced academics are almost wearing their

excessive workloads as a badge of honour.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

The university contributes to the cost of the centre in-kind, or more specifically they pledge the time of me as centre director. But that has invidious implications because although I am nominally working on a large grant the university is still paying all of my salary and feels it can therefore continue to load me. How does the ESRC intend to deal with this in terms of laying down the expectations that an institution must

fulfil?

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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Reduce (in response to the Bureaucratic challenge, #3 above)

**[...] reduce bureaucracy by working with universities and the social science community to review and explore where administrative costs and friction can be further minimised or removed.**

In many ways the finding of this report resonates with the conclusions of three major, recent government-commissioned reviews – the December 2021 [Independent Review of UKRI](#) [the Grant Report], the July 2022 [Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy](#) [the Tickell Report], and the March 2023 [Independent Review of the Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape](#) [the second Nurse Report] – which all in their own ways highlighted how and why an incremental growth in bureaucracy was hampering inter-organisational trust, co-ordination, partnership working, mobility and knowledge exchange. The new UKRI Simple and Better Funding (SBF) Programme is currently being rolled-out with the intention of streamlining processes and reducing the bureaucratic burden.

**Senior research leaders who oversee the day-to-day running of major funding investments are, however, very keen to work with the ESRC to explore further opportunities to reduce or remove administrative costs and management frictions.** This creates a need for at least some strategic scaffolding to harvest insights and ideas and then feed them into discussions with ESRC staff. An ESRC Research Leaders Development Network would therefore provide the structural capacity for enhanced and solution-orientated information flows across the existing funding landscape, and out across the broader research, development and innovation ecosystem. The added value of such an initiative is that mid-career research leaders are well aware of the need to develop an understanding of research governing processes but often feel detached from ‘high level’ discussions within their own institution when it comes to funding negotiations, areas of discretionary funding or the legal dimensions of collaborative agreements. (Which explains why they often feel ‘thrown into the deep end’ and under-prepared when appointed to senior leadership roles). Thinking creatively and collaboratively about research management processes and responsibilities, bringing in experiential insights and elements of peer-to-peer learning, provides a positive and future focused way of nurturing research leadership skills (as set out in Table 5) so that mid-career researchers are prepared and supported to make the transition to senior leadership roles (Figure 3, above).

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Streamlining...as universities became more professionalized and consumer-centric in relation to students, there has not been a parallel professionalism in supporting research across tasks that seem to come up again and again and again – legal liability in data set acquisitions, for example – it’s a conversation I’ve had time and time again in relation to different projects and we always seem to start from scratch.

The routinisation of some professional services would be very useful.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

A template for research collaboration agreements from the ESRC would help to lessen friction and bureaucratic processes. In one of my projects it took two and a half years to get all the partners to sign an agreement – and it was a three-year project!

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

Templates and routinisation to reduce bureaucracy are constantly reinventing the wheel. Getting investment directors together every year and making it really interesting – purposeful networking would provide a way of identifying shared challenges and working with the ESRC to develop practical solutions.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.



## 8. Nurture, Facilitate & Clarify

Nurture (in response to the Mentorship challenge, #4 above)

**[...] nurture research leaders through the design and delivery of a new national mentorship programme for research leaders that spans institutions, disciplines and professions while ensuring equality of opportunity.**

The mentorship challenge is very simple: how can gaps in provision be filled in ways that facilitate inclusivity, mobility and shared learning throughout a ‘whole journey’ approach? Again, the issue comes back to the need to innovate when it comes to strategic scaffolding and the need to be able to identify and forge connections that build capacity in an integrated manner. One of the main roles of a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network would therefore be to work with the social science community and learn from best practice within and beyond the UK, to design and deliver a new national mentorship programme for research leaders that spans institutions, disciplines and professions while ensuring equality of opportunity. **A Research Leaders Development Network could provide an agile form of research infrastructure with connective, catalysing and collaborative capacities.**

Many universities run their own staff mentorship programmes but they tend to be generic in purpose and ambition rather than being more explicitly focused around skills development in a research leadership context. They also tend to vary, research suggests, in terms of access and quality with mentors themselves often lacking the skills and knowledge they are expected to promote to mentees. Moreover, very few programmes offer cross-institutional mentorship or boundary-spanning (i.e. inter-sectoral) opportunities that are likely to furnish the skills and insights necessary for successful research leadership in the future (i.e. the capacity to range). Notwithstanding existing time pressures, senior and experienced research leaders provide a valuable source of experiential and tacit knowledge that is generally under-utilised to its full potential across the research community, while people with leadership experience in research related environments also provide valuable sources of knowledge and insight that are currently untapped to inform and sustain research leadership at the national level.

**Team mentorship, facilitated group mentoring, reverse mentorship, flash mentoring – to mention just a few variants – all provide creative ways of potentially sharing knowledge, building support and developing skills across the research community in ways that could nurture more inclusive and dynamic approaches to research leadership.**

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Great mentors are hard to find – is there more that can be done to reward and promote mentorship?  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

To be honest there was never much there in terms of professional development post-PhD but what I did have was a very supportive mentor who invested a lot of time in my development. A career mentor really really helps – that is what funders need to focus on.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Mid-career and senior staff need mentors. There should be a formal national mentorship system to bring in external perspectives from other institutions and from beyond academe.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Most of us here had informal personal mentors to some extent but this happens along class, race and gender lines – we know that from the evidence and data – so to break out of that we need more formal ‘wide’ mentorship to cut across boundaries.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

I had a coach at a key transition point and I found it incredibly useful.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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Facilitate (in response to the Mobility challenge, #5 above)

**[...] facilitate greater inter-sectoral mobility through a clear statement and policy position on supporting ‘braided’ or ‘blended’ careers, plus targeted investment into ‘returnships’ and ‘sector-hopping’ opportunities.**

The government’s [R&D People and Culture Strategy](#) of July 2021 contains an explicit commitment to ‘better support interdisciplinarity and broaden career paths and entry routes..., thus increasing mobility across the sector and fostering leadership.’ The UKRI Strategic Plan for 2022-2026 – [Transforming Tomorrow Together](#) - echoes this ambition with a commitment to ‘build a fully connected, creative and agile research and innovation system through which people and ideas can move freely, across disciplines and across sectors.’ While the 2022 [Independent Review of the Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape](#) that was led by Sir Paul Nurse identified ‘permeability between sectors, disciplines and organisations’ as one of ten core attributes for a successful RDI landscape. The challenge, however, is that – as the evidence underpinning this report has found – the standard appointment frameworks, assessment processes and incentive structures do not encourage positive behaviour, facilitate mobility, or promote an inclusive culture.

This matters because facilitating forms of mobility, even through researchers taking relatively small ‘STEPS’ (i.e. Short-Term Experiential Placements), provides possibly the most effective way of supporting the sort of skills, experiences and insights that mid-career and senior research leaders are likely to require in the future (see Table 5, above). **A systemic weakness for the social sciences is that there is no clear statement or policy position on supporting ‘braided’ or ‘blended’ careers, nor**

are there targeted investment into ‘returnships’ and ‘sector-hopping’ opportunities for mid-career or senior researchers. A new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network could fill this gap - working with research funders and across the sector to pilot new initiatives.

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When I started to try and come back into academia I listed all the skills and experience I had gained in working in the private sector and government on the basis that these reflected what universities said they were looking for. But I couldn't even get an interview. So I stripped out all the non-academic content of my CV and statement and basically reinvented myself and I was suddenly offered a job. And when I started it was as if nothing I had ever done before beyond academe counted for anything. But then, of course, as I progressed into leadership roles all those broader skills that I had developed beyond academe came into their own.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I'm in a similar position to other people in the sense that I have also recently been thrown-in to a research leadership position out of nowhere really. It's a very large investment and it has taken me a long time to adapt to the position – in the sense that it is a highly inter-disciplinary investment, large funding, lots of very different people being expected to work together. I really enjoy the challenge and, in some ways, my non-linear career and inter-disciplinary status was a bit of a problem but now all of a sudden it is the right place to be.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

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Clarify (in response to the Mapping challenge, #6 above)

[...] clarify exactly what research leadership entails, how skill sets are expected to evolve, what the main transition points are and where researchers at all levels in their career can go to access support and training.

Of the most basic challenges for researchers now is a lack of understanding about the skills they need to develop to progress beyond their own intellectual field or even beyond academe, and *how* and *why* those skills are leadership related. 'It's all been very informal' as one mid-career research leader noted 'I'd have liked a lot more formal training so that tips and skills could have been presented to me more explicitly while allowing me to get a sense of the 'bigger picture' beyond my own institution.' While skills and experience-based 'full career' tools are being developed (like Figure 2, above) a focused framework for research leadership has not been developed as a sector-wide tool to clarify how progression is linked to skills development and therefore how researchers at all stages of their career – including those moving between research and research-related sectors and professions – can prepare for key transition or re-entry points. There is currently no map, and where institutions currently seek to develop and support skills frameworks it is predominantly at the early career level. **One of the key roles of a new ESRC Research Leaders**

**Development Network would be to work with the social science community, research funders and research-users to clarify exactly what research leadership entails, how skill sets are expected to evolve, what the main transition points are and where researchers at all levels in their career can go to access support and training.**

The role of the network would be to cultivate a national conversation about inclusive research leadership with a focus on skills, training and continuous professional development. It could also facilitate greater understanding and transparency around existing initiatives and opportunities, identify potential collaborative synergies, undertake a longer-term horizon-scanning function while also promoting and supporting Level 5 to Level 6 transitions (i.e. into strategic and policy-focused research leadership roles).

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There are many practical elements to research leadership that are simply never taught. There is also a major need for those with senior successful research leadership experience to talk very openly and honestly about their career and what worked and the mistakes they made.... that would make research leadership more tangible.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

The ESRC could have a much clearer set of expectations, definitions and conditions about what it expects universities do to facilitate and support Level 5 and Level 6 research leadership. Greater clarity because the current situation is too patchy. A clear set of ESRC expectations would really help staff, and [might] ensure mid-level and senior staff actually get the time and resources they need to be effective research leaders.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

Leading a centre or a large initiative really does 'skill you up' in an incredible manner but we've never really thought about how we harness those skills or develop the senior researcher once their period leading a specific investment has come to an end. They just drift away.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

Once you are transitioning out of a directorship it is very difficult to think about the next move...more support for that would be good.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

Level 6 is from my understanding is really about emphasising opportunity and underlining the range of roles that people who have led centres or institutes might like to consider going into, and then supporting them to do it. It provides a transparency of opportunity that should get us beyond the old 'who you know, tap on the shoulder' ways of working. It's not about forcing another artificial level, it's about career crafting at a senior level.

Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

## 9. Promote, Identify & Create

Promote (in response to the Angst challenge, #7 above)

*[...] promote the significance of stability of employment and funding across and beyond UKRI, emphasising this as a strategic defining ambition across all workstreams and planning processes, plus a skills-building opportunity.*

As the Independent Review of the Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape that was led by Sir Paul Nurse and published in March 2023 underlined with great clarity, **issues around funding uncertainty and a heavy reliance on short-term contracts for research staff creates a major challenge for the overall stability, efficiency and ambition of the sector.** As has previously noted in Section 6 (above), this overall issue of precarity as it relates to both funding and staffing created a large amount of angst for both mid-career and senior research leaders in the social sciences. Mid-career researchers were often responsible for line managing staff on fixed-term contracts and felt unsure about how best to offer support, sustain confidence or advise on other career options. Senior researchers underlined the constant pressures that came with trying to run a research centre, institute, or investment, specifically in terms of audit-based bureaucracy and recruitment challenges but more generally in terms of constantly having to explore new sources of funding.

This emphasis on funding and employment uncertainty matters for at least three reasons. First, it creates additional bureaucracy and managerial friction (Barrier #3, Table 5, above). Secondly, the evidence suggests that it is creating a major disincentive to leadership progression. Mid-career research leaders are aware of the pressures faced by senior leaders and simply find the idea of moving into such positions as an unattractive offer. Thirdly, **understanding and dealing with the financial and personnel issues arising from uncertainty is actually a key skill set that senior research leaders need to undertake their role effectively, and mid-career researchers need to have in order to transition into more senior roles.** As the [People and Teams UKRI Action Plan](#) of March 2023 makes very clear, 'addressing precarity in research careers is essential to a high-quality research and innovation system and to our ambition as a more knowledge intensive economy.' The document includes a stating aim of 'supporting leadership development...rewarding those who support the careers of their staff and those around them'. There is an urgent need to develop communities of practice and peer-to-peer support for research leaders that provide skills-based insights and training in relation to financial and personnel issues. These skills are actually more likely to be found amongst researchers with less traditional track-records, and the creation of a new ESRC leadership network could help in terms of sharing knowledge and facilitating peer-to-peer support.

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At the moment the idea of stepping-up to the next level feels a bit of a poisoned chalice.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I've just been promoted and therefore only just been introduced to meetings about budgets, staffing and all the headaches that come with it. To be honest it makes me wonder if I'd ever really want to fill that senior role. It is not attractive when thinking about the next thirty years.  
Mid-Career Researcher, April 2023

I'm looking at the senior leaders that I am working with and I do wonder if these people sleep at all at night. That's how busy they are. The amount of stuff that they are juggling, and the balls they are dropping... I find myself just going around and trying to help.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I'm at a position in my mid-career where I'm actually quite happy taking co-investigator roles as I can see the pressure that comes being a PI on a major project.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

The simple thing the ESRC could do would be to get major investment leads together to identify problems and good practice. When I became a senior research leader heading an institute, I was astonished there was no national forum that I could learn from and contribute to.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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Identify (in response to the Architecture challenge, #8 above)

*[...] identify 'best practice' insights for leading 'at a distance' through distributed online networks where 'in real life' meetings become the exception rather than the norm.*

The existing research base on research leadership as an element of professional practice is incredibly limited. This creates a major risk that interventions that are designed to nurture research leadership skills are themselves not based on an extensive or firm evidence-base. Understanding 'what works' in different contexts, investments, and areas of the scientific spectrum is therefore critical, especially in light of an increasing transition away from direct face-to-face modes of inter-organisational and inter-personal relationships towards more remote and digitally mediated research relationships. **A fresh programme of research should be commissioned to produce a far more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of research leadership than is currently available.** This could be undertaken through forms of co-production and co-design with researchers, funders and research-users to identify, for example, 'best' and 'worst' practice insights, how different modes or forms of leadership are required at different stages in the research process, what failed leadership looks like in a research context, how to embrace and inject forms of disruptive research leadership, how research leadership differs in private sector or third-sector contexts, and how to embrace a constant challenge dimension into training and development structures.

In terms of identifying successful research leadership a new ESRC Research Leadership Development Network could play a consultation and commissioning role, while also ensuring that research insights were folded back into skills and development opportunities across the sector. In term of additional 'areas of research interest' three deserve immediate review. The first relates to embracing an international dimension and exploring how other countries are innovating in relation to promoting research leadership. The second is a focus on the link between digital structures and emotional intelligence or subtle signalling within research relationships. The third area is of fundamental significance to the health of the 'ecosystem' and relates to the centrality of questions of equality, diversity and inclusion within specific and systemic reforms to the research system. Where and how have research leadership related initiatives sought to explicitly address embedded structural inequalities within research, development and innovation ecosystems?

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In the past when I have led research programmes and big projects my research leadership was all 'IRL' – 'in real life'. Virtual leadership is very different. It's new and not easy. It's a whole new challenge about bringing people together and building trust and a shared culture.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

Structured serendipity matters but we need to get far better at promoting the opportunities and supporting people into them.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

One of the more effective ways of perhaps doing that might be channelling information requests, highlighting opportunities for informal workshops and formal workshops directly with the early career in mid- career research, rather than challenging it through the PI's and centre leaders. I haven't had any experience of them not passing information on. But a direct approach might be more effective. So it's not necessarily dependent on people picking out who might want to be involved through leading centres but giving perhaps a wider opportunity. Often, perhaps, more unthinking rather than a kind of a political exercise.  
Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

I would actually love a Level 6 role. I'm just finishing a Level 5 role and am keen for a new challenge, but I have no idea at all about how to find these roles. At the moment, the system seems to work through informal approaches and that has implications...you only have to look at the gender balance in this meeting...and I feel very constrained by that. I also feel that there are Level 5 scholars who have been running their centres or institutes for a very long time and denying mid-career researchers the opportunity to develop. I think there should be a point where funders say to investments that they need to find someone else to take this on.  
Senior Established Researcher, Workshop 2.

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Create (in response to the Access challenge, #9 above).

[...] create new team-based funding opportunities for mid-career researchers that are explicitly framed around developing skills, experience and networks in the context of boundary-spanning societal challenges.

Mid-career researchers have generally been overlooked when it comes to thinking about talent management and research leadership. New resources are generally targeted towards early career researchers, and large grant funding and the research centres competition is generally viewed as the preserve of established professors. The UKRI Future Leader Fellowships (FLFs) are designed to provide a supportive bridge across a key career transition point (i.e. from post-doc to tenured and established mid-career researcher) but the overall number of FLFs is relatively small, as is the proportion of those fellowships going to applicants from the social sciences (see Table 8, below).

**Table 8. UKRI Research Leaders Fellowships: Social Science Success**

UKRI FLF Applications Rounds 1 to 6	ESRC Remit			All applications received		
	Award	Received	Success rate	Award	Received	Success rate
Round 1	5	62	8%	41	349	12%
Round 2	13	77	17%	76	387	20%
Round 3	16	79	20%	88	351	25%
Round 4	21	91	23%	100	387	26%
Round 5	22	147	15%	96	616	16%
Round 6	18	189	10%	84	774	11%
<b>All rounds</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>645</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>485</b>	<b>2864</b>	<b>17%</b>

An opportunity therefore exists to think about ‘supporting the middle’ in the sense of piloting a new funding stream that was not only focused on mid-career researchers but was also explicitly crafted around future-focused leadership skills and aimed to address several of the barriers and blockages identified in this report. Reflecting the preliminary skills-statement provided in Table 5, a team-based approach should be adopted that embraced a boundary-spanning emphasis on mobility and included reciprocal learning sessions, peer-to-peer support and productive interactions with a clear ‘leadership lens’. More specifically, **one element of this innovation should be the capacity to nominate more than one Principal Investigator to ensure equality of credit and reward across all participants.**

I just have a quick comment that is not radical, not disruptive, and not particularly innovative either, but surely it would be possible to have two PIs... that could be a senior and mid-career researcher working together and submitting the grant



together. I think that is actually a very nice way of getting a mid-career researcher used to more research leadership roles, because at the moment it's just either super big grants where the mid-career is a Co-I [even if they have actually written the grant] or it's small grants where you can be a PI - this innovation would cover the middle ground.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

There is a need to have more targeted investments for mid-career staff that are developmental and designed around making transitions, either horizontally or vertically.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

Very often Co-I's have actually written large parts of a grant application, sometimes all of it, but the 'big name' professor is pulled in to act as the PI – and then gets all the credit.

Mid-Career Researcher, Workshop 2.

## 10. ESRC Research Leader Development Network: Role & Specification

The central recommendation of this report is that a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network is established to provide a framework of strategic scaffolding to support mid-career and senior research leaders. The aim of this section is to briefly sketch-out what a new network might do and how it connects with a skills-based agenda. As a starting point a new network might be commissioned to conduct and facilitate activities around three inter-connected workstreams and three themes:

*Table 9. Suggested Research Leaders Development Network Workstreams and Themes*

Workstreams	
1. Connect	Providing a networking capacity that facilitates discussion and dialogue both horizontally (i.e. across the research community) and vertically with funders with an emphasis on inclusion and learning.
2. Catalyse	Unlock the value of existing professional knowledge and value through the development of new forms of peer-to-peer support, inter-institutional and inter-sectoral mentoring, shared learning and productive interactions.
3. Collaborate	Look beyond academia to identify potential synergies and collaborative opportunities with other leadership-focused initiatives that are being developed in other non-academic research related sectors or professions.
Themes	
1. Research	To commission further study on the theory and practice of research leadership to help strengthen the existing knowledge base and ensure that new investments are based on a solid evidence base.
2. Reflexivity	Being 'fit for the future' rather than 'fit for the past' when it comes to research leadership demands a commitment to constant review and reflexivity to prevent narrow thinking and inject constant challenge.
3. Reach	The biggest danger of any leadership-focused initiative is that it becomes exclusive and elitist in ways that define a minority 'in the loop' and a majority very much 'out'. An explicit emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion is therefore critical.

The three workstreams and three themes in Table 9 are designed to provide a starting point for discussions. **The six component features are intended to be mutually supportive and should be seen as interlocking lattice-like strands which when taken together serve to promote a new approach to research leadership** (i.e. the principles and values emerging out of community consultation as set out in Table 1, above). A workstream based around *connecting* might, for example, provide opportunities for senior research leaders to meet as a group and engage with senior staff and board members from the ESRC and other councils or funders. An annual research leadership in the social sciences conference, for example, could provide a platform for such an event, while also facilitating

connectivity across and between researchers running projects in different places or at different career stages. Doctoral students and post-doctoral staff could be invited to participate and attend specific skills-based seminars or labs, and representatives from leadership development initiatives in cognate research related fields could outline collaborative opportunities and learning insights. There would, of course, be opportunities to glean insights and forge partnerships with those development networks that currently exist to support early career researchers. **The emphasis being on supporting mobility within and across the network to develop the skills necessary to be an effective research leader.**

*Table 10. From Themes and Workstreams to Skills-Focused Specifics*

<b>Connecting</b>
Annual ESRC Research Leadership Network meeting with ESRC Staff Annual ESRC Research Leadership Conference Annual ESRC Research Leadership Prizes Annual ESRC Research Leadership Lecture ESRC Research Leadership Network Seminar Series ESRC Research Leadership Network Mentoring Scheme
<b>Catalysing</b>
Facilitated Reciprocal Learning Sessions Peer-to-Peer Support Systems Productive Interactions Crucible-Type Events Innovations in relation to Boundary-Spanning Mentorship. Landscape Mapping
<b>Collaborating</b>
Co-produced Research Mid-Career Team Grants Returnships and 'Sector-Hopping' Schemes International Initiatives Partnership or Joint-Ventures Secondments, Placements or STEPs (Short term experiential placements)

The main aim of creating a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network is to **facilitate the provision of new forms of training and support, and specifically to support skills that span sectors and institutions in ways that align with the shifting nature of research leadership at the mid and senior levels** (Delivering Recommendation #1, Table 6, above). The USP of the network should be that it facilitates a level of range, mobility and collaborative capacity that is generally very difficult for any single institution to provide. The creation of new 'docking points' between members of the research community, funders and other organisations through the creation of an ESRC Research Leaders Development Network would provide a positive professional space in which issues including time, bureaucracy and precarity could be discussed in an open, balanced and solution-orientated

manner (Delivering Recommendation #2, #3 and #7, Table 6, above). A focus on connecting might also see the launch of a **new ESRC Research Leaders Network Seminar Series where experienced research leaders from around the world (and from beyond academe) are encouraged to reflect upon what research leadership means to them and how it may have changed throughout their career.** This seminar series could be designed as a learning tool for mid-career researchers, but its insights would likely benefit a far larger audience.

**Catalysing activities focus on forging new developmental opportunities, especially those that build positive cadre effects in the sense of mutually supportive and integrated professional communities of practice.** Examples here might include facilitated reciprocal learning, peer-to-peer support, productive interactions, crucible-type events and innovations in relation to boundary-spanning mentorship (see Table 10, above). These activities focus attention on the relationship between knowledge, space and emotional intelligence in the context of research leadership and through this would deliver recommendation #4, #6 and #7 (Table 6, above). Collaborative activities aim to bridge sectors and professions to foster new skills, gain experience and disrupt dominant assumptions or ways of working. This might include the commissioning of co-produced research, mid-career 'team grants' with more than one PI, 'returnships' and 'sector-hopping' schemes, international initiatives that aim to learn from best practice abroad and forge new linkages, or participation in partnership or joint-ventures with other councils, academies, funders or research-users. **The end-point vision that drives these specific ideas for networked initiatives is the creation of an infrastructure that drives talent and realises potential through an explicit skills-based developmental framework.**

The specific skills-based activities outlined in Table 10 are simply suggestions that demonstrate how a more integrated and inclusive network of strategic scaffolding to support research leaders might be established at a practical level. The aim being to create a flywheel effect whereby relatively small but carefully planned interventions serve to signal the significance of an issue (in this case research leadership) and then the combined impact of those interventions serves to build positive momentum and multiplier effects. Many of the suggestions in Table 10 are **actually about the facilitation of informal networks of peer support which many researchers felt had been lost due to a combination of factors but urgently needed to be re-established in a more inclusive and integrated manner.** This matters because it is very often informal relationships that provide the connective tissue within large organisations and especially within complex networks like the research, development and innovation ecosystem. It also matters because the recommendations made in this report are designed to emphasise shared responsibility amongst individuals and organisations to make the system work (see final row, Table 1, above). More specifically, **they are designed to emphasise and enhance the agency of research leaders in the social sciences to engage with funders to identify challenges and develop solutions as part of a collaborative process.** The structures and process for maintaining open two-way relations (i.e. clear linkages and docking points) simply do not exist but urgently need to be established, not least

as they would in themselves provide key learning and skills-development opportunities for mid-career research leaders.

**There is, however, one final and concluding issue that deserves to be raised and this focuses on what might be termed the politics of research leadership.**

As a social and political scientist who has studied public appointments, patronage networks and talent management systems all over the world there is a need to be honest and open about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) from the outset of any recommendation to establish a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network. The theme of 'reach' (final row, Table 9, above) and how the network can work to benefit not only the full social science community but also to contribute to the active resolution of long-standing structural inequalities within academe is critical to the network's reputational credibility, practical impact and ability to build an international reputation for excellence. As the 'Fit for the Future' report of 2020 argued, what is often viewed as an EDI 'problem' or, at best, 'challenge' can actually be reframed as a positive 'EDI opportunity' in a context that is increasingly seeking to recruit, recognise and reward a wider range of talents. Many of the *connecting*, *catalysing* and *collaborating* skills-focused ideas included in Table 10 (above) could actually be accessible (directly or indirectly) to a far larger number of people than are usually considered when thinking about talent management. In some areas new initiatives could be targeted towards supporting under-represented groups in academe. **Issues around inclusion and engagement with a new ESRC Research Leaders Development Network cannot and should not be avoided. But they should not become a reason not to develop the skills-focused strategic scaffolding that is so urgently needed, and that cannot be provided by any single institution.**