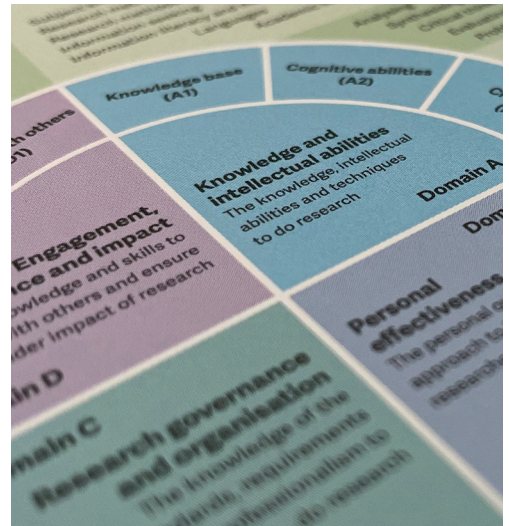


Methodology Report:

Understanding the experience of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) using the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF) at UK universities



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1. Key Findings and Recommendations

1.1 Overview

This research project aimed to understand the adoption and use of the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)¹ by postgraduate researchers (PGRs) as a career development, guidance and capacity-building tool. The project examined the experiences and perceptions of RDF users through a series of in-depth interviews, from which case studies were produced.

The project focused on themes including the RDF structure and language, and the overall experience of users, including the institutional support they received.

The project sought to understand:

- a) How PGRs were introduced to the RDF at the beginning of their PhD
 - Some saw it as an administrative task or ‘tick-box’ exercise rather than a career and professional development tool
- b) PGRs’ experiences of using the RDF as a career and professional development tool, and the extent to which they are benefiting from their current experience of using the RDF
 - While most PGRs found the RDF useful in theory, some found it difficult to use in practice, especially with limited support, guidance and mentoring from institutions and/or supervisors
- c) The nature and scope of support received by PGRs from their institutions in using the RDF
 - iii. PGRs would like more support in using the RDF:
 - Some PGRs found it difficult to match their experience and knowledge to a descriptor of the RDF, and were mindful of over- or under-estimating their own competencies
 - Most PGRs who used the RDF regularly tended to be self-taught users who were motivated to learn how to use the RDF by themselves
 - PGRs wanted to use the RDF in a more supported environment and on a more frequent basis

The outcomes of the project will contribute to the development and implementation of PGR training at an institutional level and may inform higher education research and skills related policy in the UK. Project outcomes have also informed Vitae’s ongoing series of RDF projects.

A set of accompanying case studies will also be released in conjunction with this methodology report.

1.2 Key findings

- i. PGRs’ first impressions of the RDF were varied, ranging from finding the RDF easy to understand to considering it intimidating:
 - Their first impressions were usually linked to the amount of institutional support they received
 - Although some PGRs said they found the amount of information presented in the RDF “overwhelming”, most said they understood the structure, content and language used, and some considered it self-explanatory
- ii. The benefits of using the RDF were not always clear to PGRs:
 - iv. The level of institutional support received by PGRs influences the degree to which they understand and engage with the RDF:
 - The nature and degree of institutional support received by the PGRs we interviewed varied widely
 - PGRs’ user-experience and perception of the RDF was varied and tended to be linked to the level of support provided by their institution
 - Most PGRs who had received extensive training better understood the importance of the RDF and were more likely to use it for career development purposes

- v. PGRs are more likely to prioritise their professional and career development if they receive encouragement from institutions and supervisors:
 - Without training, PGRs tended to see using the RDF as an administrative task or ‘tick-box’ exercise
 - PGRs process a lot of information when they start a new programme, making it difficult to prioritise tasks, especially when the task is not perceived as time-sensitive or when the benefits are not explicitly stated
 - Supporting PGRs to understand the importance of career and professional development, and the role of the RDF as a tool to support this, will encourage PGRs to prioritise this process
- vi. PGRs would like further integration of the RDF into their PhD programme:
 - PGRs wanted professional development provision at their institutions to be mapped to the RDF, if it was not already
 - Most PGRs wanted to be offered an introductory course/workshop on how to use the RDF and its importance for professional and career development
 - Some PGRs wanted to see the RDF further integrated into their PhD programmes as a tool to evaluate their skills and progression, possibly as part of their annual review
 - Some PGRs would like to be offered informal meeting opportunities to have conversations with peers about career and professional development, including RDF use

- vii. Most PGRs wanted their supervisors to be more involved with RDF-related activities:
 - PGRs may find it difficult to assess what phase they are at for each RDF descriptor and would like support from their institution and/or supervisor in determining their competencies
 - The PGRs we interviewed suggested that supervisors could be offered training on how to use the RDF during supervision

1.3 Recommendations

For doctoral researchers:

- You may want to reserve some time to explore the RDF on your own. Although training sessions and materials can help as an overview or introduction, the RDF is designed as a self-evaluation tool and therefore reflecting on your experience and competencies, and gathering evidence to show what you have achieved, is an important part of the process
- There are no right or wrong answers; every researcher is different so every researcher will use the RDF differently
- The RDF is not a deficit model; no researcher is expected to reach the highest phase in every descriptor of the RDF
- You may find it helpful to consult the Vitae website for materials that you can use to better understand the RDF, as well as examples
- Try to reflect on each learning experience you have, whether it is a training session, a conversation or a conference presentation, in order to understand if and how it has enabled you to develop your knowledge, skills, behaviours and personal qualities

1. www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf

- Remember that different people might learn different things from the same experience, depending on their experience, expertise or focus. With this in mind, try to do your own RDF mapping after a training session or activity because your key take-away might not be the one anticipated by the person who designed the session/activity

For institutions:

- If your institution has not already done so, consider mapping your researcher development provision to the RDF as this helps to guide and support PGRs' use of the RDF as part of their professional and career development
- Supervisors may like to use the RDF to initiate conversations about researcher competencies, future careers plans and options, and "life after the PhD"
- Consider offering virtual meeting spaces where RDF users could come together to share how they use the RDF. If possible, facilitate conversations about the RDF and career and professional development between PGR peers as well as researchers of different seniority
- Developing further awareness of the RDF as a career development tool amongst the PGR community and employers of doctoral researchers would increase adoption and contribute to PGR understanding of career pathways within and beyond academia

For the wider sector:

- PGRs' adoption of the RDF as a career and professional development tool can be improved by wider support, which could come from a variety of places, not only their own institutions
- Further awareness of the benefits of the RDF as a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) tool for researchers and encouragement of its use in research and academic communities will be beneficial to PGR researchers
- Similarly, employers beyond academia could benefit from further awareness and understanding of the RDF. More understanding of the awareness of the RDF among employers beyond academia who hire researchers would be welcome

2. Project Context and Rationale

2.1 Context

Researchers make an important contribution to the UK economy, both in sustaining our research base and as leaders in the workforce. Vitae is a global leader in supporting the professional development of researchers, working with institutions as they strive for research excellence, innovation and impact.

The Researcher Development Framework (RDF)¹ was developed by Vitae in 2009 in collaboration with the higher education sector and other stakeholders with the aim to positively transform the landscape of the professional development of researchers.

The RDF is a self-evaluation and career development tool for researchers. The framework sets out the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of researchers, which are appropriate for a wide range of careers within and beyond academia. The framework is aligned with the UK's commitment to enhancing the higher-level capabilities of the UK workforce, including the development of world-class researchers who are critical to economic success, addressing major global challenges, and building a leading knowledge economy.²

The RDF was created to meet the growing requirement to establish the career of researcher as an understood and valued profession, as endorsed in the European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (2005) and the UK Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2008). The development of the RDF was part of Vitae's mission to influence the development and implementation of effective policy relating to researcher development and enhance higher education provision to train and develop excellent researchers.

The RDF is structured into four domains that encompass the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of researchers. Within each of the domains, there are three sub-domains and associated descriptors.

Overall, the RDF contains 63 descriptors, which set out the wide-ranging knowledge, intellectual abilities, techniques and professional standards researchers need to do research, as well as the personal qualities, knowledge and skills to work with others and ensure the wider impact of their research. Each descriptor is mapped to between 3-5 phases so that RDF users can evaluate the level of their competencies in this area.

Vitae works to empower researchers to make an impact on their career and professional development and collect evidence of the impact of CPD support for researchers. The RDF as a self-evaluation and career development tool aims to motivate researchers to understand their own research journey and guide them, through clear and achievable milestones, to build on their strengths and develop their competencies in preparation for a range of careers within and beyond academia.

1. www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf

2. "The Vitae Researcher Development Statement – Vitae Website," Page, accessed July 20, 2020, www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework/the-vitae-researcher-development-statement

2.2 Rationale

This project aims to understand levels of PGR awareness and use of the RDF as a tool for researcher career and professional development. As an early evaluation of the RDF made clear,³ there is a lack of evidence to show how PGRs make use of the RDF and its impact on them in an institutional context, despite the fact that the RDF has been formally incorporated into researcher development and research and knowledge exchange activities in many UK institutions.

The project further aims to understand the nature and degree of institutional support available to PGRs in relation to the RDF.

It is expected that the study will provide institutions, Vitae and the HE sector more widely with fresh perspectives and valuable insights on how PGRs understand, engage with and use the RDF. It is hoped that this will help us to understand how to further support PGRs in using the RDF as part of their career and professional development.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Overview

The study collected qualitative data through interviews in order to understand the adoption and use of the RDF by PGRs as a career development, guidance and capacity-building tool. Interviews enabled the gathering of descriptions of RDF usage by PGRs in different institutional contexts and research environments.

A case study approach was used to generate an in-depth, holistic understanding of RDF use among PGRs within a real-life, day-to-day context.

The case study medium enables an understanding of the detailed experience of PGRs using the RDF, thus providing richer data than other instruments such as surveys. The flexibility of the case study medium allowed changes to be made as the research developed.

This method helps in exploring a spectrum of opinions that are pertinent to the topic and is appropriate when information is expected on specific attitudes or opinions while doing lengthy questioning as it is in the case of RDF use among PGRs. The survey method was not considered due to its relative rigidity. In comparison to SSIs, the application of a survey may have limited success in finding answers to questions that require more lengthy and complex responses. Due to Covid-19 travel restrictions, online interviewing replaced face-to-face interviews as the method of data collection. A pilot interview was conducted to test the clarity and efficacy of the question set and to test the virtual interview procedures, and therefore increase the prospect of successful interviews.

3.2 Research methods

3.2.1 Desk research

Documentary analysis was conducted through desk research in order to analyse and understand institutional protocols or policies around using the RDF. This facilitated the contextualisation and background understanding of the project and was helpful in limiting the scope of the research questions.

3.2.2 Interviews

Respondents were asked about their experiences and perceptions of using the RDF in semi-structured interviews (SSIs),⁴ which combine verbally administered questions with instructions or guidelines for follow-up questions and the interpretation and scoring of responses. SSIs are useful in asking probing questions and taking important leads from the answers given. They allow the researcher to offer flexibility and adjustment and the respondent to share information in a tentative fashion with flexibility and openness.

3. Robert Bray and Stuart Boon, "Towards a Framework for Research Career Development: An Evaluation of the UK's Vitae Researcher Development Framework," *International Journal for Researcher Development* 2, no. 2 (November 11, 2011): 99-116, [www.doi.org/10.1108/17597511111212709](https://doi.org/10.1108/17597511111212709)

4. Please see the appendix for the full set of interview questions.

3.2.3 Screening survey

A screening survey was used to select PGRs for interview to ensure that different institutional, disciplinary and national backgrounds, and levels of experience of using the RDF were represented in the research. The aim was that the case studies would represent the full range of UK PGRs in terms of institutional background, research disciplines, PGR status (full-time or part-time), nationality,⁵ and whether English was the first, one of the first or the second language. Section 3.3 provides a more detailed description of the participant selection process. The screening survey was circulated through various social media platforms, such as Twitter and LinkedIn, and was also shared through Vitae's newsletter with its members and partner institutions.

3.3 Participant selection

3.3.1 Selection criteria

A number of selection criteria were decided at the outset of the project, including type of institution, academic discipline, experience with the RDF, nationality, stage of PhD lifecycle and mode of study.

As the study was limited to understanding the experiences and perceptions of UK PGRs, a criterion for selection was that respondents needed to be a PGR registered at a UK university. Another important criterion was to ensure the representation of PGRs from a variety of higher education institutions (HEIs) in order to facilitate an understanding of how different institutions promote the RDF to PGRs and the diverse nature of the institutional support provided.

Interviewees needed to have a level of familiarity with the RDF in order to be able to share meaningful information on their experience and perception of the framework. It was essential to understand the experience of RDF users from diverse disciplines; as PGRs in different academic disciplines make use of a diverse range of methodologies, perspectives and frameworks in their research.

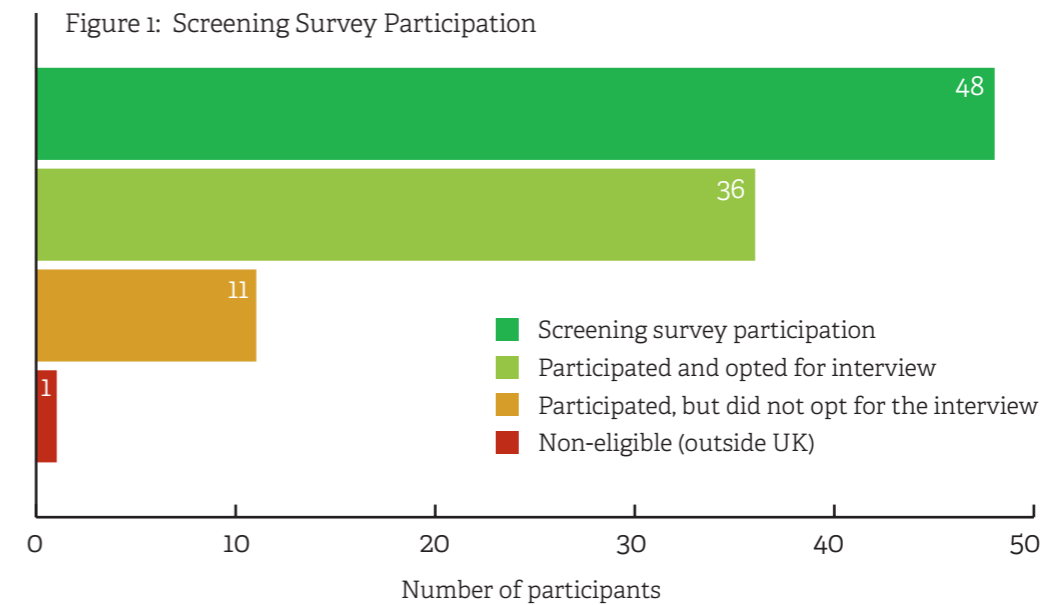
RDF engagement and experience may vary amongst PGRs with diverse nationalities studying in the UK so ensuring diversity in national representation was an important selection criteria. The research acknowledges linguistic diversity by ensuring that those for whom English is a joint-first or second language are represented, as these PGRs may relate to the language used in the RDF in particular ways.

It was important to understand the stage of the PhD lifecycle respondents were at, as those just beginning their doctorate were likely to have different experiences with the RDF than those who were further into their PhD. The research further ensured that both full-time and part-time PGRs were able to share their perceptions and experiences of using the RDF, as the nature of engagement may vary considering the length and intensity of the PhD.

⁵ UK/British National, National of a European Union Member State, National of a country outside of the European Union

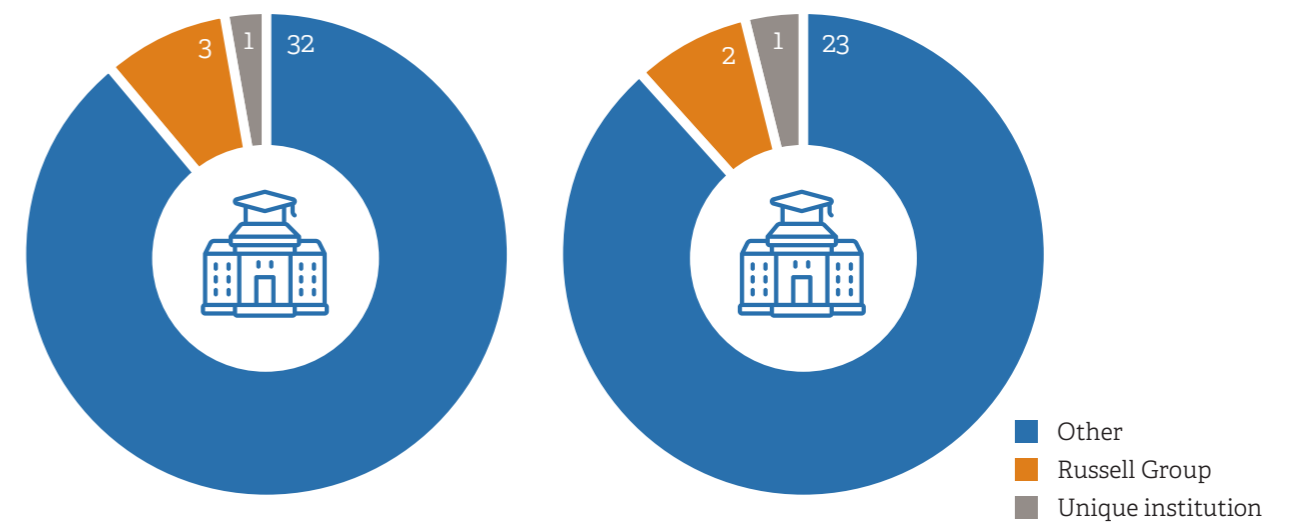
3.3.2 Response to screening survey

The screening survey elicited 48 responses. 36 of these met the criteria and opted to be part of the online interview process.



Type of institution

Figure 2: Institutional origin of the screening survey respondents (left) and those invited for interviews (right)



The screening survey received responses from various types of HEIs (Figure 2). Relatively, a greater number of responses were received from new and redbrick universities and constituent colleges of the University of London, which were grouped together. 23 out of 32 responses from this group were taken into consideration for interview, along with two out of the three responses from PGRs at Russell Group institutions. One response was received from a unique research institution and this was included. The aim of this process was to ensure fair representation of all kinds of institutions.

Academic discipline

Table 1: Disciplinary categorisation

Group A

Disciplines include: Clinical Medicine; Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care; Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy; Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience; Biological Sciences; Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science.

Group B

Disciplines include: Earth Sciences and Environmental Sciences; Chemistry; Physics; Mathematical Sciences; Computer Science and Informatics; Aeronautical, Mechanical, Chemical and Manufacturing Engineering; Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Metallurgy and Materials; Civil and Construction Engineering; General Engineering.

Group C

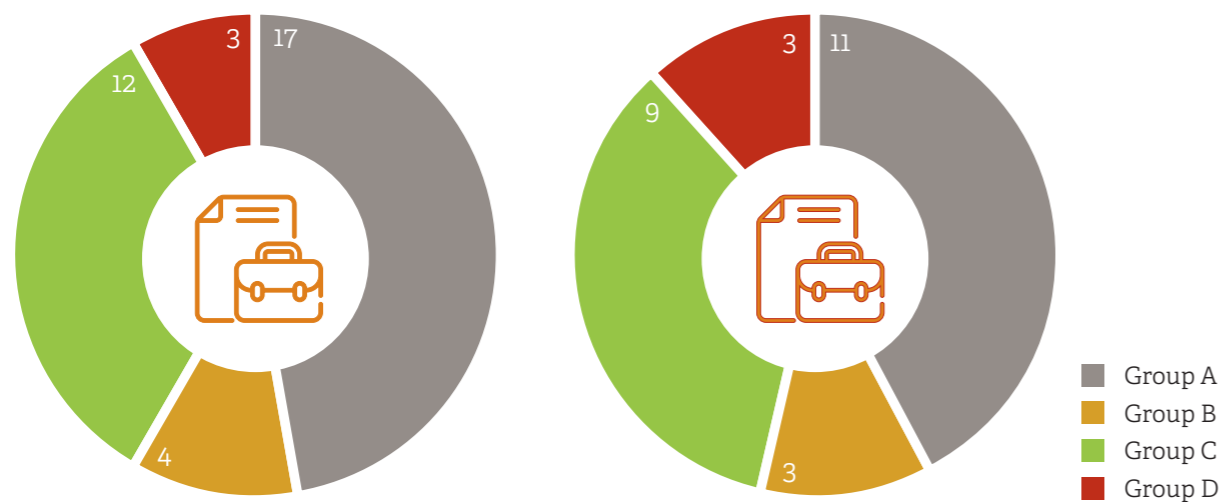
Disciplines include: Architecture, Built Environment and Planning; Geography, Environmental Studies and Archaeology; Economics and Econometrics; Business and Management Studies; Law; Politics and International Studies; Social Work and Social Policy; Sociology; Anthropology and Development Studies; Education; Sport and Exercise Studies, Leisure and Tourism.

Group D

Disciplines include: Area Studies; Modern Languages and Linguistics; English Language, English Literature; History; Classics; Philosophy; Theology and Religious Studies; Arts and Design (History, Practice, Theory); Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts; Communication, Cultural and Media Studies; Library and Information Management.

The academic disciplines were divided into four major categories (see Table 1: Disciplinary categorisation). Relatively greater responses were received from A and C. In order to reduce over-representation from these two categories, all other participant selection criteria were considered. Since only four from discipline B and three from discipline D opted to participate in the study, almost six out of seven were included in the study to ensure appropriate representation.

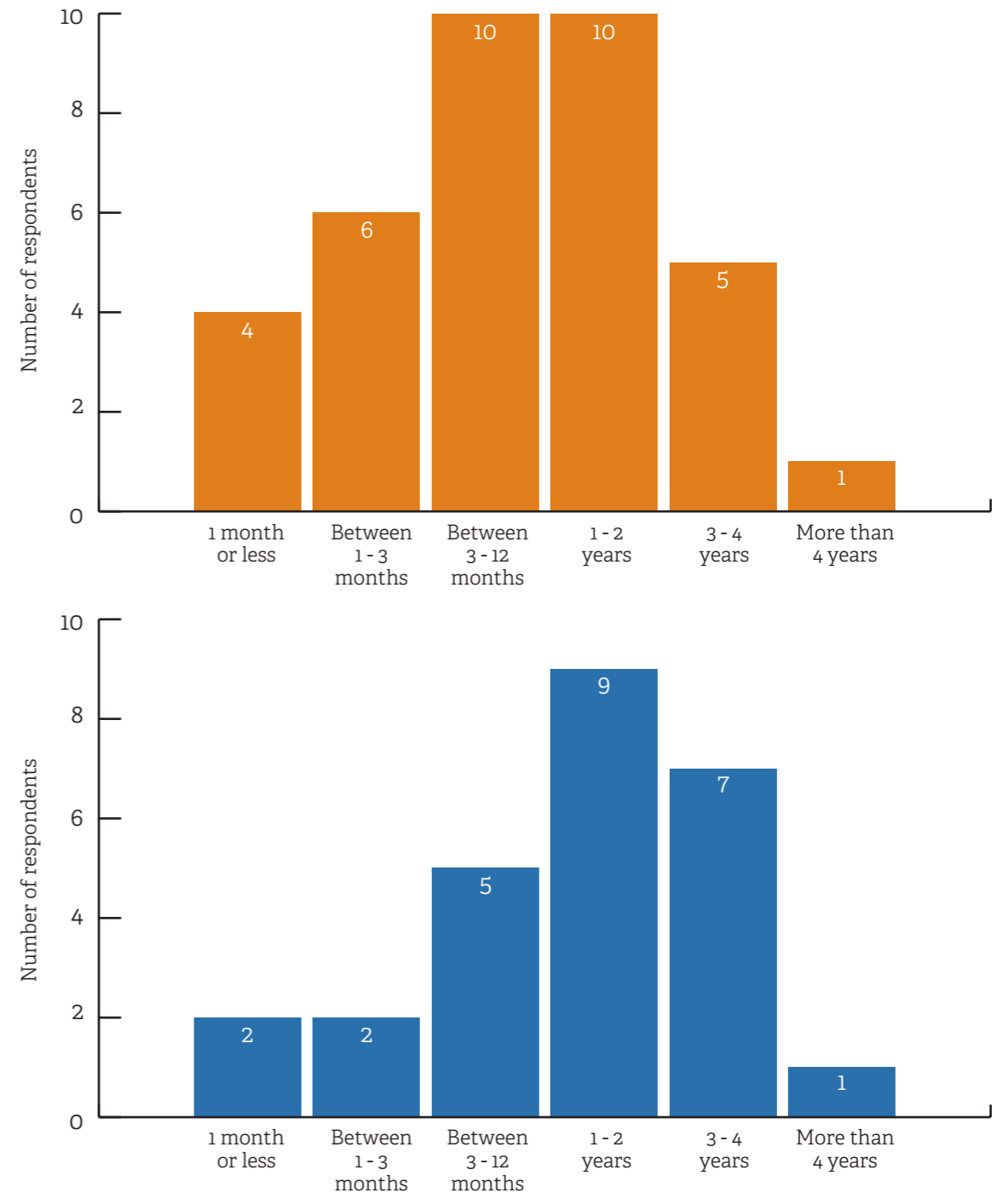
Figure 3: Academic discipline of screening survey respondents (left) and interviewees (right)



RDF Experience

The study aimed to balance different levels of usage and engagement with the RDF. However, those with very little experience of using the RDF (1 month or less) are less well-placed to engage with the detail of the framework. Therefore, those with experience between 3-12 months and 1-2 years were favoured.

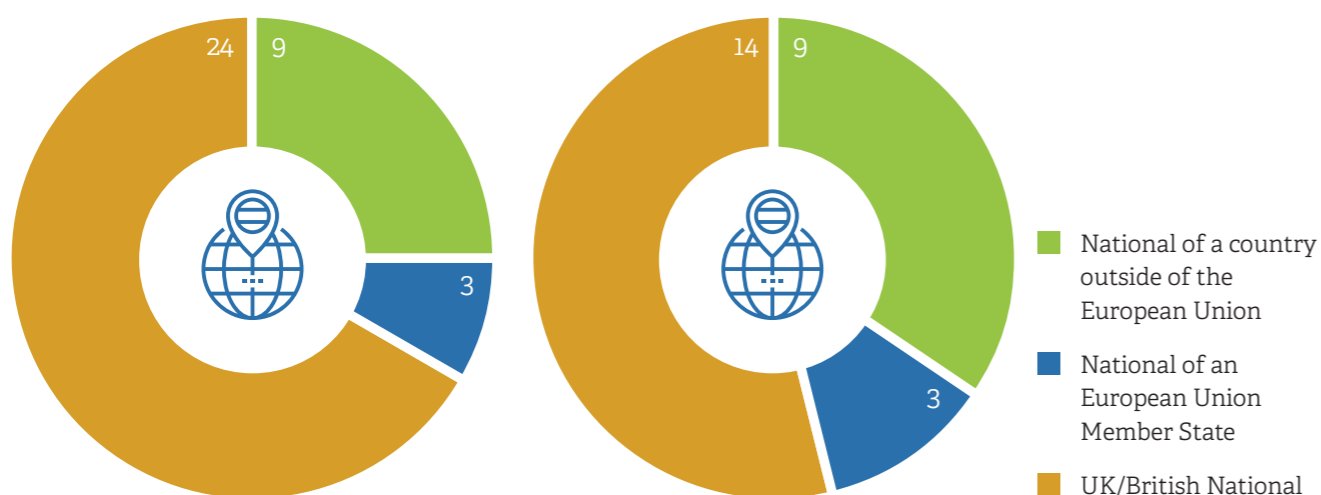
Figure 4: Level of RDF experience of screening survey respondents (top) chosen for interview (bottom)



Nationality

A greater number of responses were received from British nationals compared to European member state and International PGRs. Since numbers were relatively low, the study included all the European member state and International PGRs in order to ensure fair representation.

Figure 5:
PhD stages of screening survey respondents (left) compared with interviewees (right)



Stage of PhD lifecycle and mode of study

More responses were received from those in the first year of their doctorate than from those in the later stages. Since first year PGRs may have limited experience of and/or engagement with the RDF, the decision was made to reduce the representation of those in the early stages of the PhD lifecycle in order to bring more balance and raise the chance of interviewing PGRs who had more familiarity and experience with the RDF.

Figure 6:
PhD stages of screening survey respondents (left) compared with interviewees (right)

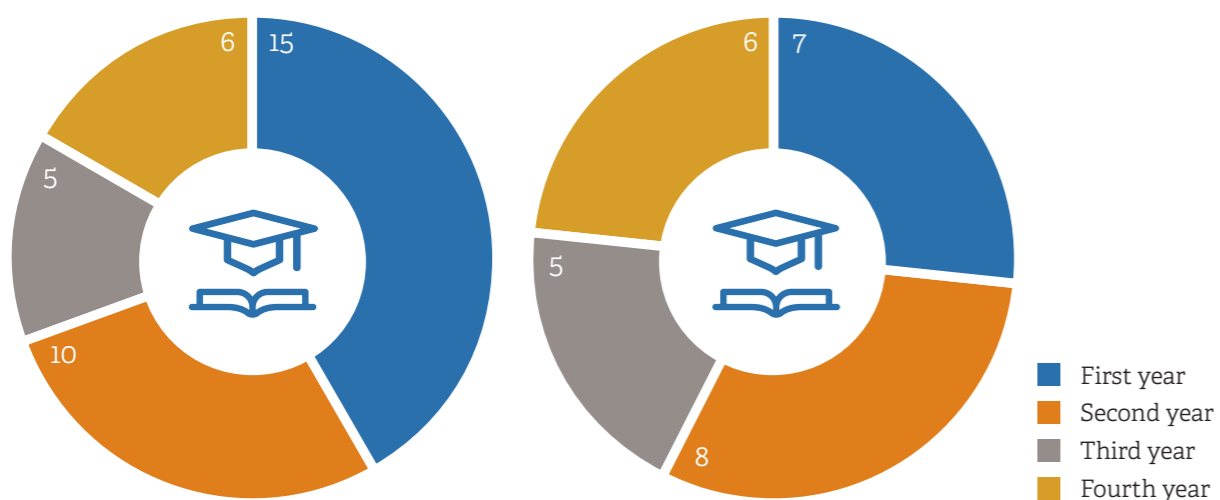
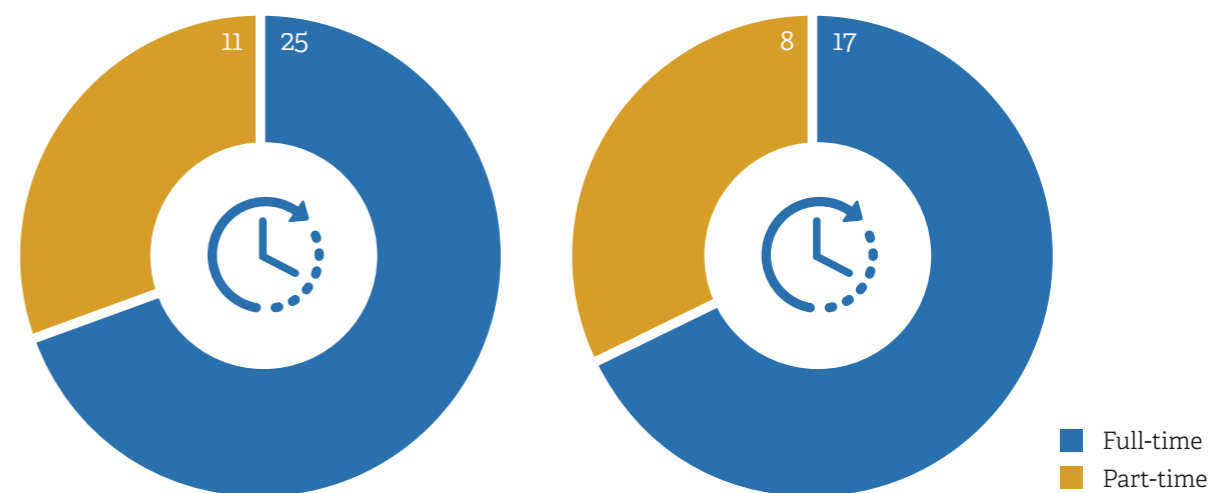


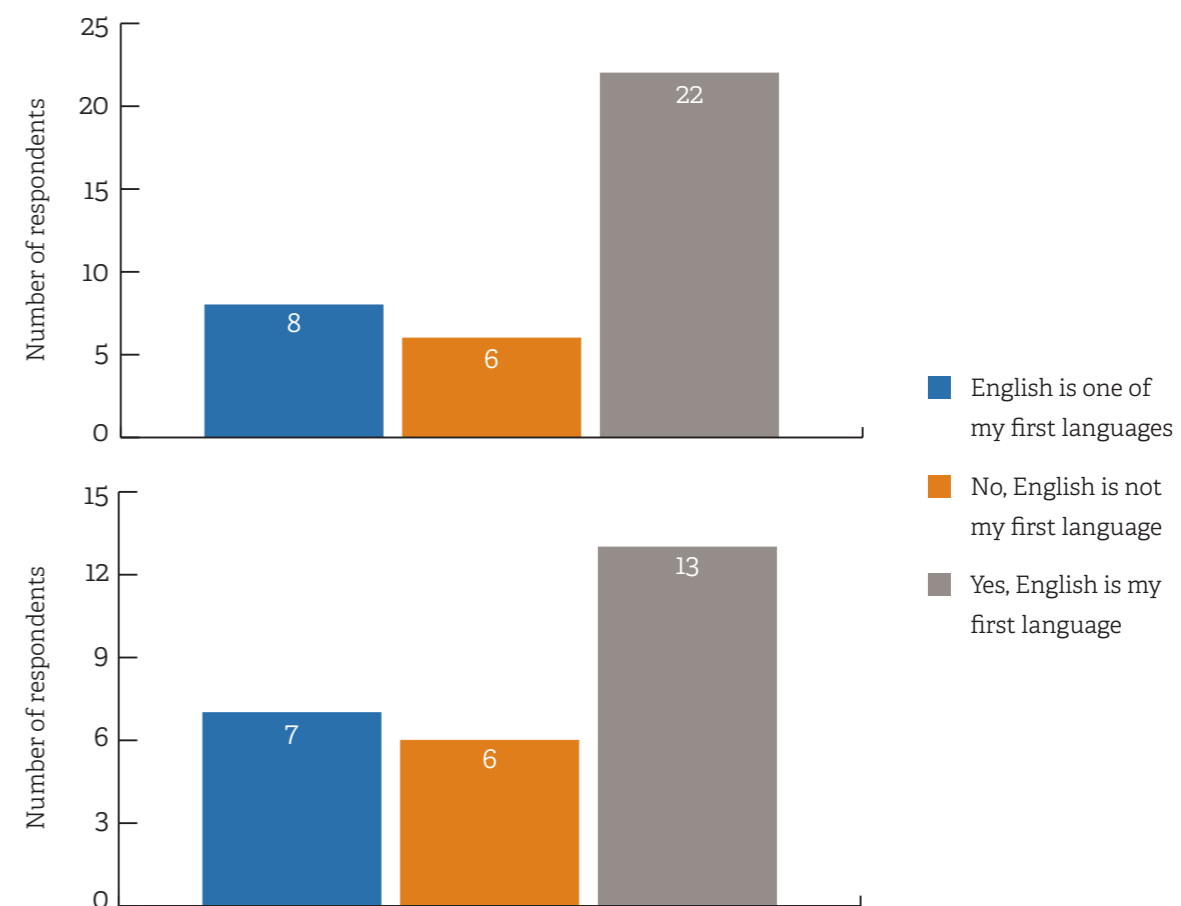
Figure 7:
Representation of full-time and part-time PGRs



The same process was followed to balance the representation of full-time and part-time PGRs in order to avoid overprioritisation of full-time respondents.

Finally, since one of the research objectives was to understand how PGRs whose first language is not English understand and respond to the language used in the RDF, the screening survey asked PGRs to indicate whether English was their first, one of their first or a second or subsequent language.

Figure 8:
Language as per screening survey respondents (top) chosen for interview (bottom)



3.4 Interview process and data analysis

The screening survey details were used to ask respondents to share their preferred date and time for interview. After receiving confirmation of interest to participate in the interview, an interview information sheet was shared with the respondent; this clearly outlined the purpose of the study and detailed information about the data privacy notice.⁶ The interview information sheet also included a section requesting prior permission to record the interview in order to focus on the conversation.

The conversation was only heard by the project team and the person/third party agency who transcribed it. The contents of the interview were stored securely and safely in accordance with current data protection legislation. The recordings were submitted to the third party for transcription and were deleted after analysis.

Thematic analysis was adopted to identify and analyse patterns or themes from the qualitative interview narratives.

3.5 Research limitations and challenges

The interview sample was limited since the focus was on an in-depth understanding of personal experience and perception on the use of the RDF (see 3.2.2). The research commenced under challenging circumstances during the first lockdown in Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of lockdown restrictions and then social distancing measures in the UK, virtual interviews were adopted instead of the planned face to face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). This strategy may have impacted on rapport-building with the interviewees. The pilot interview successfully tested the clarity and efficacy of the question set; however, because the interviewee was not as familiar with the RDF as they had stated in the screening survey, the questions dealing with the detail of the structure and language of the RDF were not piloted. The researcher did not have prior experience of conducting research interviews virtually and this took some time to get used to. Logistics needed to be adjusted several times, as 5 respondents did not attend the interview or postponed their interview to a new date.

4. Appendices

4.1 Screening survey

The screening survey consisted of the following questionnaire:

- Are you a postgraduate researcher (PGR)? (Also known as a doctoral researcher/PhD student)
- Do you have some recent experience of using the Vitae RDF?
- Approximately how long have you been using the RDF?
- At which University or other Higher Education Institution (HEI) are you doing your PhD?
- Are you a full-time or part-time PGR?
- What year of your PhD are you in?
- What is your PhD discipline?
- What is your nationality?
- Is English your first language?
- What is your (other) first language?

4.2 Interview questionnaire

1. What were your first impressions of the RDF?

For example:

- How were you introduced to it?
- When?
- What was your first impression of the actual diagram?
- Can you say a little bit more about that?

2. How are you currently using the RDF?

For example:

- Perhaps you are using it as a self-assessment tool
- Or perhaps you are using it as a career development planning tool

- Or are you currently using the RDF in another way? If so, please explain.
- How often are you using it? Occasionally, regularly

3. How helpful are you finding the RDF when used in this way? (the way the respondent is using it)?

- What, if anything, might help you to benefit more from it?
- Can you say a little bit more about that?

4. How are you supported when using the RDF?

- To what extent does your university/institution encourage you to use the RDF?
- Do you receive any support using the RDF from your school, department, PhD supervisor or university/institution? If so, what support do you receive?
- If you discuss the RDF or wider professional and career development planning with your peers (e.g. fellow PGRs) what kinds of conversations do you have?
- What could your university/institution do to further engage you with the RDF and professional and career development planning?

5. Understanding of the structure, language and content of the RDF

- What do you think about the language?
- What do you think about the content? Anything that doesn't need to be there or anything missing?
- What do you think about the layout? (colour coding/ is it clear?)
- What do you think about the structure? For example, you might like to comment on the 4 domains, 12 sub-domains or 63 descriptors

6. As per the United Kingdom's Data Protection Act 2018 in compliance with GDPR legislation.

CHASE Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to offer around 75 studentships a year over five years. Together we are seeking to shape a future in which the values and dispositions of scholarship in the arts and humanities - inventiveness, craft, rigour, intuitive and counter-intuitive insight - can flourish alongside developments in creative practice, digital technologies and media forms.

CHASE brings together 9 leading institutions engaged in collaborative research activities including an AHRC doctoral training partnership. These are the Universities of East Anglia, Essex, Kent and Sussex, the Open University, The Courtauld Institute of Art, Goldsmiths, Birbeck and SOAS, University of London.

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Global leader in supporting the professional development of researchers



Vitae is an international programme led and managed by CRAC, a not-for-profit registered UK charity dedicated to active career learning and development. Working in the UK since 1968, when we ran our first project to support transitions of doctoral researchers to industry, Vitae has great expertise at enhancing the skills and career impact of researchers locally, within a global context.

We work in partnership with UK and international higher education institutions, research organisations, funders, and national bodies to meet society's need for high-level skills and innovation.

Vitae aims:

- Influence effective policy development and implementation relating to researcher development to build human capital**
- Enhance higher education provision to train and develop researchers**
- Empower researchers to make an impact in their careers**
- Evidence the impact of professional and career development for researchers**

Vitae and its membership programme is managed by The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited. Further information on our activities with HEIs, researchers and employers may be found on this website: www.vitae.ac.uk

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