Working with others

Advice from academic and research leaders

- ■ Communicate, collaborate, connect and work collegiately
- ■ Learn to manage upwards and to ask for help
- ■ Be prepared to listen to others
- ■ Invest in developing working relationships over time
- ■ Have difficult conversations in an honest and supportive way
- ■ Understand how to get what you need from other people

Mapping to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

D1 Working with others

D2 Communication and dissemination

Without exception, all 18 senior manager interviewed for this study referred to the importance of working with other people to being able to achieve goals and lead well in an academic environment. There were a variety of contexts for this – networking, management, dealing with difficult people, meetings, giving feedback and the development of additional skills such as listening. What was clear in all of this is that academia is not a career option for people who want to work by themselves – contact with other people and the ability to interact with them in a way that achieves things positively is a key aspect of working in UK academia.

> "…In being a research leader you have a responsibility…not just in leading a particular research area but actually leading a group of people. If you can't lead the group of people effectively then you're not going to achieve what you want to achieve."

Communicate, collaborate, connect and work collegiately
The foundations of leadership with and through other people in UK academia were expressed by the interviewees as being able to communicate effectively, collaborating and networking to become known by others, and seeking out opportunities to work with others that might build new contacts and open up new opportunities in the future.

> "It's useful to build your network, it's useful to understand what's going on outside your immediate field, it's useful to make those contacts, and it's useful because…It will open up opportunities that you never think of, and increasingly as we do more and more collaborative work those things matter, you need somebody to be thinking of you."

Learn to manage upwards and to ask for help
One of the most important relationships you have is with your supervisor, principal investigator or line manager. It is important to be proactive about managing your projects through managing them. They are busy people and if you don't actively try to engage them in your work, they might just assume that you're getting on with it all right and that you don't really need the help.

"I always say to PhD students, 'Learn to manage your supervisor, your supervisor probably will be delighted to be managed,' and I think this applies throughout your whole academic career"

Be prepared to listen to others

Working with others gives you the opportunity to listen to many other people, such as collaborators, peer reviewers, your research group, and departmental colleagues. One of the key aspects of leadership is being able to gather all of this information together and process it effectively.

"Some of the most effective leaders I think are ones who draw in opinion and when you see them they're not threatened by that at all as a leader, they're very comfortable with both asking for and automatically receiving lots of advice from people, and that's perfectly fine and that's a good leader, in effect"

Invest in developing working relationships over time

It can take significant time and effort to find the right people to work with, to build a group that works towards a shared goal, and to develop positive relationships with the people you work with. However, our interviewees suggested that this effort is well worth it. By taking the time to find good people, you will be able to build a trusting and transparent environment that fosters long-lasting, effective and appreciative working relationships.

"I've been very fortunate to be able to work effectively with my research team and develop a good working relationship with them where we're supportive of each other actually and respectful of each other so that management of the team becomes a lot easier on a day to day basis and going forward, and even when they do leave the university that level of acceptance and respect still carries on and we continue to support each other in different ways."

Have difficult conversations in an honest and supportive way

Our interviewees expressed how challenging it can be to face up to some of the demands of leadership, such as having difficult conversations with colleagues and the people you lead. Having conversations around performance management and being able to give honest, critical feedback are important aspects of effective leadership.

"As happy as I am with them, I don't make it all sweetness and light or glowing, I'll say very positive constructive things but I'll always say, 'okay, what can we actually work on in order to make you stronger as an academic?'"

"These are difficult conversations to have but if I left it later and we were off track the last thing I'd want to do is you to say to me, 'Well why didn't you say something a year ago?'"

Understand how to get what you need from other people

An element of being an effective leader in UK academia is understanding the 'barter economy'. This means demonstrating your negotiation skills and your ability to negotiate to get things done. Cultivating relationships across the institution will help you to work across departmental boundaries and find colleagues who can share their expertise in areas such as finance and human resources.

"If you're going to be an effective leader you've really got to understand the barter economy, which is that people will do you something as a favour but they wouldn't dream of doing it just because it says in their job description that they have to."

Your reflections on working with others

Building networks

Advice from academic and research leaders

- ■ Make effective use of conferences
- ■ Use networking as a development opportunity

Mapping to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

B3 Professional and career development

> "It's useful to build your network, it's useful to understand what's going on outside your immediate field, it's useful to make those contacts, and it's useful because, you know... well it's useful in so many ways. It will open up opportunities that you never think of, and increasingly as we do more and more collaborative work those things matter, you need somebody to be thinking of you."

Our interviews with experienced academic leaders in UK universities revealed the importance of building and maintaining networks as a means of career progression, as illustrated above. The following quotes from the interviews are illustrative of the emphasis that our interviewees placed on networking.

Make effective use of conferences
Perhaps unsurprisingly, conference attendance came over as one of the most important ways that early career academics can build their network and get known within their research area. Our interviewees also emphasised the importance of starting early with this and not leaving it until a PhD or post-doctoral contract is near its end, and in particular to use conferences as a platform for meeting potential future collaborators, colleagues, and employers.

> "Engage with the academic community, engage with the practitioners as well, go to conferences. I hate the concept and term networking because I never feel very comfortable thinking I'm networking but get to know people because they're going to be your colleagues if you stick in that field for years and years and years to come."

> "Presenting at conferences and networking is probably more important than actually writing journal articles and really top drawer publications."

Use Networking as a Development opportunity
Our interviewees also commented on the importance of supporting networking activities for their own early career researchers and suggested ways in which this might be incorporated into training and development. They also acknowledged that social media is increasingly important for the new generation of researchers and academics – although they didn't always feel that they were the best equipped to advise on how to use it!

> "Identifying opportunities for your researchers, for example, going to the key conference they should be seen at, introducing them to the right people to talk to, you know, identifying other training events that they may need and facilitating these so that they can go and benefit. And developing their sort of profile and giving them more visibility as well"

"if I knew anything about it beyond the very minimum I'd say, you know, be out there on the social media and the virtual media. So I don't know a great deal about it but, for example, I use academia.edu, as a result of that I think many, many more people are aware of my work than would ever otherwise have been, and they're people that I didn't have to go out and bash around the head about it."

Your reflections on building networks

Building a research profile

Advice from academic and research leaders

- Grow your publishing track record
- Engage in the process of getting funding
- Perform horizon scanning and forward planning to build impact

Mapping to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

C3 Finance, funding and resources

D2 Communication and dissemination

D3 Engagement and impact

Our leaders came from a variety of academic backgrounds and had different emphases in their current roles on teaching and research. One thing that came across clearly from all of them, however, was the importance of doing the "business" of research in order to progress with their career as research and academic leaders. The following quotes are illustrative of the points that our interviewees made around these topics.

Grow your publishing track record
There was no getting away from this core message from our interviewees – publishing papers was key to progressing in their academic careers and, if anything, they felt that the pressure to publish is more intense now than when they started out.

> "if they want to be known for a particular piece of research they need to be the one that's writing the paper, presenting it and therefore they can't just give me a big pile of junk and expect me to re-write it, they have to take that responsibility. So encouraging independence is probably the most important thing."

Not only did the interviews reveal the importance of publishing for career progression, but our leaders also told us that they thought this was a key aspect their early career academics and research staff needed support and development for:

> "Well we've actually produced some guidelines … on how to get your papers more cited ... always make your work very clear, give it good titles that have broad appeal, write abstracts that people beyond your immediate field can understand, things of this kind. All of those give you more visibility."

> "Most post docs are three years' time, which seems like an awful lot of time when you start, but time flies enormously fast in science, so you want to come out with a couple of really good publications by the end of that, so that requires planning by yourself, together with your supervisor and I think it is important to really think about what are the publications likely to be and how do I get there and work hard doing that."

Engage in the process of getting funding

The interviews revealed that the other most important part of 'doing the business of research' is that of getting funding through grants.

> "So at that point I decided I wanted to stay in academia after I think the first postdoctoral term so I applied for my own funding to be a senior post-doc which I got, then I went through the fellowship. And getting the intermediate fellowship was the turning point because at that point I felt the academic world believed in me that I can be a successful researcher and deliver."

> "You have to get the grants. If you don't get the grants you can't do the research. And then you need to get the research completed in order to get papers."

Perform horizon scanning and forward planning to build impact

Our interviewees referred to the importance of not only keeping up to date with changes in priorities from key funders such as the Research Councils but also commented that the most successful researchers that they know, engage in 'horizon scanning' in order to predict what is coming up in the future and then plan accordingly. The process of research can be slow and, as the second quote below shows, a long-term funding plan and sustained effort can be the unseen story behind high impact outcomes and a high profile career.

> "And in trying also to scan the broader horizon as to how does the funding situation change, are there particular areas that are pushed by the Research Councils, by the government etcetera and how does that fit in to what we are doing here, so really trying to gather all the information and then from there trying to build up a vision of where we would like to be in five years' time"

> "I was talking this week to one of our top life science researchers, just got elected to the Academy of Medical Sciences and he was telling me that he and his collaborators have produced what he called 4* papers and I would say they're more than that, they're in Nature and so on, and he told me it was ten years work to produce those papers and they cost two million pounds of cumulative grants. So that's a real example of how forward looking you have to be to get to that point."

Your reflections on building a research profile

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Achieving a work-life balance

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Advice from academic and research leaders

- ■ Don't read or do everything – learn to delegate to other people, ask for help and say "no"
- ■ Take time out of work on a regular basis
- ■ Put family first and acknowledge that having a family will impact on career decisions
- ■ Create a boundary between work and home
- ■ Develop a strategy for dealing with emails and competing demands
- ■ Learn the "strategic yes"

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Mapping to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

B2 Self-management

Many of the leaders interviewed for this study commented on how important it was to put appropriate boundaries in place in their lives to stop work from consuming everything. This section identifies top tips from our leaders about things they do to help with this. Aspiring research and academic leaders are encouraged to think early on about how to manage competing demands and prevent overload.

Don't read or do everything – learn to delegate to other people, ask for help and say "no"
Our interviewees reflected on the steep learning curve that they encountered when they stepped into a leadership position and found that the workload increased exponentially. In particular, most of them made reference to the fact that you can't do everything and that prioritising and not saying "yes" to everything were important skills to learn.

> "I thought I had to read every document ... when we had to generate some random new document when I came into the new position, it never occurred to me to ask the people who had done the job in the previous year, or to ask for someone else to edit it for me. Or… I wouldn't have time so I would leave it too late to give someone else time to give me editing help. So start early and get other people to help you with editing, contributing."

> "You need to be writing grants, you need to do community service and by that I mean reviewing papers, sitting on grant panels and all these things. Sitting on college committees, administrative work, supervising and mentoring people, so these are all demands whether you are a leader of a lab or a small research team or in my position and these are so many demands and it is very difficult to manage them all. So your own time management is really, really important and prioritising the different demands and learning to just juggle because most of them, no researcher is prepared for."

Take time out of work on a regular basis
Our leaders also recognised the importance of taking time out of work to prevent burn out – although it was clear that work overload was the norm and pressures on a daily basis made this hard to do. They also mentioned the importance of communicating positive messages to other people about taking time out in order to support their staff and set a good example.

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"take time out….That's my other real lesson, because otherwise you burn out from it and it just becomes too much…making sure you take a lunch break and that is really, really important, make sure you do some exercise every day, you know, even if it's just making sure you walk; leave this office…I think that's really important to make sure other people are doing that as well, and that's a really, really important lesson to say, "Right, I'm switching off now. Alright, if I'm going to play a game on my computer at home that's fine, if I'm going to do the ironing it's fine," but don't feel guilty about it because there is another life outside of here."

Put family first and acknowledge that having a family will impact on career decisions

Several of our interviewees talked about balancing family and home life with work demands. In addition, several of our female leaders mentioned that you can't have everything at the same time and that being a leader and having a family can involve having to make some difficult decisions.

"I was invited to go to [US university], I was also headhunted to go to Australia and also move to [a UK Russell Group university], but I've got a family and the children were at a critical stage at school and I didn't feel the upheaval of moving was really in their interest."

Create a boundary between work and home

It came through strongly in the interviews that creating a boundary between work and home was considered to be very important. Many people mentioned that it was far too easy to take work and problems home with them, and that learning or creating strategies to prevent this from happening is important.

"I think my most important advice would be to make sure that the responsibilities and the tough things that you have to take on are something that you can leave at work and you don't take home with you. That would be my most important piece of advice. Stay human. And actually by doing that you don't grow too thick a skin to actually do the job effectively."

Develop a strategy for dealing with emails and competing demands

The interviewees felt that academic life had become increasingly demanding over the past 10-20 years and that there wasn't adequate support within the existing structures to help academics to balance competing demands. They commented on this and also on how they developed their own systems to help them manage. Aspiring leaders should think early on about whether they are prepared for the large workloads and competing demands and whether they would be able to devise effective strategies in order to cope.

"I don't think it's really clearly enough defined within the university structure about how you can manage those 2 parts, the essential elements of an academic's role if you like."

"I think what I've learned subsequently is I've got systems in place now which will allow me not to kind of fire through every single email before 10.00am, all the emails which had come through overnight, I can kind of find time during the day to do it. So I've developed mechanisms to help me balance that"

Learn the "strategic yes"

We identified the "strategic yes" from what our leaders were telling us about choosing strategically the additional activities that they wanted to be involved in, whilst acknowledging that they couldn't do everything. Their advice to early career researchers is to think strategically about being involved in activities that will contribute to career progression and are interesting – rather than trying to do everything.

"In this role you have to let stuff go I think. And I think there's power in letting stuff go."

"there's so much pressure on us to do things and to not speak up about it. I was on a research council panel meeting last week and I didn't mind the fact that I had very long days associated with it, but when they were sending me paperwork at midnight the night before the meeting I took the view that I wasn't going to read it. And I went to the meeting and said, "I haven't read this therefore I can't comment on it" and I was the person actually leading that section. And my advice was that they would have to defer it until the next meeting. Because there's a lot of pressure on people to do things and I just said, "Sorry that's not reasonable. You're asking me to do a job with integrity"."

Your reflections on achieving a work / life balance