

RESEARCH CAREERS AND TRAINING ADVISORY GROUP (RCTAG)

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES IN 2013-14

The Research Careers Training Advisory Group (RCTAG) and a wider consultative Research Careers and Training Network were established in 2012. RCTAG first met in January 2013.

RCTAG has met three times as a Group and held one joint meeting with the Network members (in December 2013). Membership of the Group is detailed in annex 1.

The Group and Network have provided a very useful mechanism for AHRC to understand and probe current developments in arts and humanities doctoral training and early research careers. The first year of operation has included:

- Wide-ranging discussions on the career development needs and opportunities for students and early career researchers (ECRs). At the first meeting, the Group took an overview, informed by comments from the Network, of areas around: funding; student and ECR needs; communication; and employment opportunities. This provided a platform for later discussions.
- A comparison with PhD training outside the UK, noting the roles of supervisory teams, student engagement in coursework and teaching, and differences in approach to the viva. Issues around how the language skills of PhD students can be developed were also discussed. In particular, how these skills can be developed further to enable more opportunities for UK students to collaborate with researchers overseas and to engage with source materials and research publications in ancient and modern languages.
- A Twitter Chat for students and ECRs where they discussed the training provision that had been made available to them and the areas in which provision could be improved.
- Communication between the AHRC and the student and ECR community was one area which was highlighted in the Twitter Chat. AHRC has since set up a JISCmail list for doctoral students where we can post opportunities and items of interest to students. There is a further aim to improve communication with ECRs and we are open to ideas on this.
- The Group discussed the extent to which a PhD can still be considered purely as an apprenticeship for an academic career and therefore, whether simply examining the thesis does enough to acknowledge the depth and breadth of training that students are now expected to receive. Other mechanisms for recognising these wider skill developments, such as accreditation, were also discussed.
- It is clear that extensive support and resources for skills and career development are available to students and ECRs both within and outside Research Organisations (ROs). Students need to be pro-active in researching and accessing the resources

that are available to them, but supervisors play a key role in encouraging their students to take up these opportunities.

- The complex questions of Master's support and PhD duration have also been debated but with no clear recommendations at this stage.
- The AHRC and British Academy have commissioned a [study](#) to understand the support for researchers in the period immediately following their PhD. This is a difficult period for many and the study will help us to understand how AHRC can better engage with ECRs and how we and other stakeholders can support them. RCTAG and the Network discussed the study at an early stage and their ideas have helped to shape the survey and interviews. The report from the study should be available by the summer.
- It is recognised that not all doctoral students will go on to an academic career, though we know that many students enter doctoral study with this as a goal. Whilst support for career paths outside of academia has improved over recent years, there is still scope for Research Organisations and supervisors to help students in exploring other opportunities and recognising them as positive career choices. In particular, enabling students and ECRs to recognise the skill set that they have developed during their PhD and post-doctoral research which is applicable in a wide-range of careers. The AHRC has issued a [report](#) and [case studies](#) on career destinations. In addition, a successful postgraduate careers conference for AHRC funded PhD students, looking at careers outside of academia, was held in March 2014
- The importance of developing teaching skills for those wishing to remain in academia is acknowledged at both doctoral and ECR stage. The Group noted that opportunities and support are not always available and the situation may become more difficult as undergraduates' expectations of contact time with senior staff grow. The Group also felt that more could be done to highlight the realities of an academic career, for example, how and where to publish, networking and administrative demands. Areas such as social media and public engagement could also be further developed.
- There has been discussion of the AHRC's Research Training Framework (RTF), which is in need of updating. The Group was asked whether the RTF was still needed, given the [RCUK statement](#): it was agreed that a guide specific to the Arts and Humanities was still beneficial. The AHRC will therefore be taking the Group's recommendations and revising the document, noting that it should be applicable for both students and ECRs.
- The Group also had a discussion on leadership which included presentations from two of the AHRC's Fellows. The Group's deliberations contributed to the wider discussion on leadership which was taking place over that period. AHRC has since renamed the Fellowship Scheme to the '[Leadership Fellows Scheme](#)'.

The Group will continue to meet twice a year with an annual meeting with the Network. The AHRC also engages with members between meetings and will continue to do so. AHRC launched its new [Strategy for 2013-18](#) last year and we will look to the Group and Network to provide advice on strategies around the crucial support for people, who are at the heart of Arts and Humanities research.

Annex 1

RCTAG Membership

Chair: Professor Greg Woolf, University of St Andrews

Dr Catherine Baker, University of Hull
Dr Jerome de Groot, University of Manchester
Professor Lisa Hopkins, Sheffield Hallam University
Mr Richard Hudson, University of Sheffield
Miss Claire Irving, Newcastle University
Ms Alison Mitchell, Vitae
Ms Caroline Starkey, University of Leeds
Dr Jane Wellens, University of Nottingham
Dr Alison Wood, University of Cambridge

AHRC staff:

Ms Laura Bones (Programme Coordinator)
Dr Sue Carver (Head of Research Careers and Training, and Peer Review)
Dr Ian Lyne (Associate Director of Programmes)