

Navigating Researcher Developer career trajectories: a perspective from beyond higher education

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Abstract

This opinion piece explores the evolving professional landscape for Researcher Developers within and beyond the confines of academia, reflecting on the author's experiences as a former researcher and Researcher Developer. It discusses the multifaceted skill set required in the Researcher Developer role and considers the opportunities for Researcher Developers to advance within their institutions or pivot to roles in different sectors, exploiting their unique skills and experience. The importance of collaboration is underscored as an essential element for professional advancement, and synergies are drawn between the mindset of Researcher Developers and that of entrepreneurs, advocating for recognition of their critical contribution to the academic ecosystem and beyond.

Keywords: researcher development, careers, skills, higher education.

Introduction

In my previous professional existence as a researcher and Researcher Developer, juggling writing about the Shakespeare First Folio with running a training programme for Humanities researchers, I lost count of the number of discussions I had with researchers and colleagues concerning researcher career trajectories. Encouragingly, most of these discussions acknowledged that academia and higher education may not always constitute the ultimate destination for researchers, or even be their first choice for a career path. The vast range of exciting career steps I have seen researchers take speaks to the diverse skills and value that they can carry within and beyond institutional boundaries. Amidst these dialogues, a pertinent question would also occasionally arise: what about the careers of Researcher Developers (and other researcher training and career-related

professionals) themselves? What trajectories might they pursue, and what unique skills and value do they bring to the table?

Multi-dimensional roles

Richard Freeman and Anna Price (2024) note that the professionalisation of Researcher Developer roles was kick-started (in the United Kingdom, at least) by Sir Gareth Roberts' *SET for Success* report, published in 2002. The subsequent influx of substantial government funding into the sector to enhance researcher career prospects and professional development propelled universities to recruit professionals from a range of backgrounds into what has since become more formally known as the 'Researcher Development' space. At their core, the roles these professionals perform are designed to support the personal and professional development of a range of researcher audiences, often spanning groups as diverse as PhDs, postdoctoral researchers, and academic staff.

These roles have evolved significantly in the UK since the Roberts report 'big bang'. From 2011 to 2018, I worked with colleagues in other institutions in similar roles and with important partner organisations such as Vitae and the UK Council for Graduate Education, and I witnessed the evolution of a vast range of different approaches to supporting researchers and to resourcing this support across different institutional contexts. The operational, strategic, data analysis, logistical, and leadership requirements of the enterprise have grown, partly in response to policy drivers such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Concordat to Support the Early Career Development of Researchers (Universities UK, 2021).

Because of this, a Researcher Developer career now demands a multifaceted skill set and a deep-rooted understanding of research processes. The skills required of Researcher Developers have been articulated by Vitae in their Career Framework for Researcher Development Professionals (CFRD). CFRD highlights high-level competencies including: underpinning knowledge; leadership and engagement; analysis, problem solving, and evaluation; personal effectiveness; planning and strategy; and training and development. Researcher Developers often bring academic and industry experience to their roles, or develop them on the job (Vitae, 2020). Vitae, for instance, collates resources for new

Researcher Developers and runs workshops designed to help those new to the role identify and develop the skills they will need.

With a strong grounding in research, often accompanied by a PhD or equivalent research experience, Researcher Developers make their living as versatile, credible professionals. Their responsibilities can span managing a team and financial budget to engagement with external partners, and to be successful they must demonstrate effective leadership and strategic planning, often working independently with limited administrative or managerial support. They may also find themselves advocating for researchers' needs and concerns within their institutions or dealing directly with researcher health and safety and wellbeing. They may also interact with PhD supervisors, Principal Investigators, and other senior academic professionals to coordinate pastoral and wellbeing initiatives and interventions. In these cases, a robust grounding in HR policy is essential, as is an empathetic and considerate manner conducive to a supportive environment for a diverse range of people and their personal situations.

As well as these strategic and pastoral dimensions, there is of course the educational element of their roles. Researcher Developers must design and administer engaging and meaningful programmes of provision for researchers, to which they often contribute directly. They may go so far as to integrate sophisticated competency frameworks and other pedagogical concepts into their practice, as well as getting to grips with the latest technology to drive efficiency and accessibility. With a proactive, data-driven way of working, the initiatives and agenda they lead have become increasingly central to the strategic policies and direction of their institutions, not least due to their impact on research funding and assessment exercises such as the REF.

Career currency within and beyond institutional borders

The potential career trajectories of Researcher Developers are nearly as varied as the responsibilities they undertake within their institutions. They might start by focusing on growing their section, taking on more responsibility and a more senior role within Researcher Development. They may choose to pursue a purer administration-focused research or an education-related professional-services role, which may afford them more seniority than is possible when staying in a Researcher Development-specific career.

It is not unusual for Researcher Developers to have stepped into their roles from another section of higher education or from another industry entirely, so taking another such step to a different sector can feel like second nature. They might, for instance, build their own consultancy or coaching enterprise, or establish a portfolio career combining consultancy with a part-time institution role. Likewise, their experience and contacts can open up the possibility of a transition into (or back into) industry in an HR or training function, or to other roles connected to their experience gained in higher education. They may also consider engaging in other types of enterprise, such as a spin-out company connected to their research or dedicated to addressing a commercial gap they have spotted while working in their institution.

Collaboration as a mode of advancement

Standing between academia and the professional services, Researcher Developers are not typically confined to working within a specific research programme, nor do they tend only to a specific, siloed area of their institution. As a result, they can find themselves in a strong position from which to build and capitalise upon collaborative arrangements with external partners.

Some of these collaborative arrangements may come into being through necessity: in the UK, Doctoral Training Partnerships are driven by the research funding agenda, for instance, and hard limits to resource and capacity may mean that Researcher Developers regularly engage external partners for programme delivery and design. Others can be more elective in nature, such as choosing to introduce new technological solutions with a trusted partner or working on a shared research or teaching project with colleagues in another institution.

These interactions provide Researcher Developers with the opportunity to showcase the skills and qualities described above, and to develop them further. Collaboration is, I suggest, a cornerstone of professional advancement for Researcher Developers and more broadly for professionals working in the third space. Engaging in collaborative projects offers the opportunity to distinguish oneself and one's capabilities, demonstrating the ability to work at a national or international level, and to engage industrial partners (and

with them strategic investment of time, resources, and money). Partnerships like these provide Researcher Developers with the chance to demonstrate the patience, maturity, and professionalism essential to making collaborations successful, augmenting their professional profile profoundly and positively. When considering their next career steps, Researcher Developers should look to their personal records of successful partnerships as compelling narratives of their capabilities and take confidence in how much they enhance their professional marketability both within and outside academia.

Inspiring researchers and inspiring Researcher Developers

As a former Researcher Developer who still works closely with the Researcher Developer community, it is inspiring to observe the enormous range of world-leading professional-development initiatives run by third-space professionals globally. Moreover, it has become apparent to me, not least through my own experience, that there is a clear crossover between the mindset of Researcher Developers working in the third space in higher education and that of more commercially oriented entrepreneurs. Like entrepreneurs, Researcher Developers must be in command of their subject, they must work independently and with initiative and alacrity, and they often must find support and funding and take risks and responsibility. They must communicate across many audiences, and they must market and sell their offering, especially when their provision may not be mandatory and they must compete for attention and engagement. Researcher Developers' entrepreneurship, whether hidden or overt, has been recognised as beneficial to their universities (Seikkula-Leino and Salomaa, 2020) and should be encouraged.

We often talk about researchers' career directions, their adaptability and resilience, and about how they are invaluable assets to their institutions and to the world beyond academia. We should also be sure to acknowledge that the same applies to the Researcher Developers who support them and help to cultivate their professional competency and confidence. Theirs too is a role which branches many avenues and opportunities for the future.

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