

## The newsletter for research staff at Lancaster University

Launch Edition - DECEMBER 2012

### Welcome to the launch edition!

**W**elcome to the first edition of our newsletter for research staff which has been put together by members of the Professional Researchers' Networking Group at Lancaster with the support of the Lancaster Branch of the University and College Union (UCU). The aim of the newsletter is to keep you informed of what's happening both at Lancaster and in the wider academic world so you can make the most of opportunities for your future career development, be that gaining new skills and broader experience, or contributing to discussions on issues affecting research staff. We also hope that this newsletter will provide opportunities for you to develop contacts across the institution and to share information about activities and events that are taking place for researchers. The newsletter is meant to be interactive, so if you know about events that you would like to circulate then please contact me in the first instance. We would also greatly welcome feedback on the content of the newsletter.

*Louise Banton*

*E-mail: [lbanton@ucu.org.uk](mailto:lbanton@ucu.org.uk)*

### NETWORKING GROUPS FOR RESEARCHERS ON CAMPUS – KEEP IN TOUCH

#### Campus-Wide Networking Group

The Professional Researchers' Networking Group has been set up by researchers at Lancaster - for all researchers and is actively supported and facilitated by Lancaster UCU. The Group meets about three times a term and the purpose and aims of the group are:

- to provide a forum for the discussion of matters of general interest or concern to staff on research contracts
- to create momentum for positive improvements to be made at Lancaster
- to raise the visibility of researchers at Lancaster
- to enable researchers from different faculties to network informally and support each other

All researchers on campus are invited to attend the networking sessions which are publicised via email and the local UCU Branch website at [www.lancs.ac.uk/users/ucu](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/ucu)

For further information, please contact:  
[lbanton@ucu.org.uk](mailto:lbanton@ucu.org.uk)

#### Faculty-Based Networking Groups

**Arts and Social Sciences** - a networking group for researchers in FASS is being established. The initial aim is simply to meet other researchers based in FASS though we may also want to raise wider issues within the faculty, our departments or the university. If you are an arts and social science postdoctoral researcher on a time-limited contract (or visit) and wish to find out more about the networking group, please contact: [a.carlsson-hyslop@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.carlsson-hyslop@lancaster.ac.uk)

**LEC** – this networking group was established some 18 months ago and meets to discuss various matters of interest to researchers in LEC. For further information please contact: [p.j.smith@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:p.j.smith@lancaster.ac.uk) or [m.ockenden@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:m.ockenden@lancaster.ac.uk)

**Health and Medicine** – The Faculty's Research Career Development Group was set up in Jan 09 by researchers and aims to strengthen organisational support for research career development and progression. For information about this networking group, please contact any of the following: [hazel.morbey@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:hazel.morbey@lancaster.ac.uk) [e.halliday@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:e.halliday@lancaster.ac.uk); [michelle.collins@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:michelle.collins@lancaster.ac.uk)

#### Any other network groups out there? It can be lonely on your own....

Please tell us about any other researchers' networking groups that you know about in your faculty. Not sure there are any? How about setting one up? Get in touch with any one of us and we'll be happy to try and help you find other researchers in your area – or just join us at the next professional researchers' networking forum on **Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> December at 12.30 in Bowland North SR11.**

JOIN  
UCU  
ONLINE  
TODAY

## THE UNION FOR RESEARCHERS

Join UCU today at [www.ucu.org.uk/join](http://www.ucu.org.uk/join)

UCU is the voice of the academic profession, and is committed to increasing job security and career support for research staff. We represent members' views to government and professional bodies on a range of issues including academic freedom, funding and pensions and are recognised by Lancaster University to negotiate policies affecting the terms and conditions of your employment.

Researchers in higher education form a large and distinct group of UCU members whose contracts of employment are often characterised by insecurity.

Many researchers remain on fixed-term contracts, despite legislation intended to halt the abuse of successive fixed-term contracts and other, whilst moved to 'open-ended' or 'permanent' contracts, constantly face threats of dismissal as research grants end or a particular funding stream runs dry.

**UCU believes there are better ways to treat researchers.**

The more researchers that join us the greater the opportunity we have at both local and national level to make much-needed improvements.

Local UCU officials are also on hand to provide advice, support and representation for members with individual problems - including researchers approaching the end of their contract.

Our UCU Researchers' Survival Guide offers practical advice on a range of issues. Download it via the national UCU website at [www.ucu.org.uk](http://www.ucu.org.uk) or contact Lancaster UCU (e-mail: [ucu@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@lancaster.ac.uk)) and request a copy.

Join today at [www.ucu.org.uk/join](http://www.ucu.org.uk/join)

### What about this Fixed-Term Contract Issue?

UCU represents members on fixed-term contracts who wish to make a case for their contracts to be acknowledged as permanent.

If you have been continuously employed at Lancaster on two or more contracts for at least four years, you can write to Human Resources stating that you believe that your contract should be permanent, in accordance with legislation governing the rights of fixed-term employees which was passed in 2002. Under these regulations, you can request a statement confirming your permanent status – and the employer must respond to this request within 21 days. You don't need to be a UCU member to make this request, but if you are, we can guide you through this process.



*"Thank you so much for all the hard work and effort that you put into helping me with this issue. I felt comforted and confident knowing that, through the UCU, I would be able to get my (fixed term) status changed."*

**Lancaster UCU Research Staff Member**

### Know your rights.....

#### To a permanent contract:

Any use of a fixed-term contract must be justified by the employer. Anyone who has been employed continuously on two or more contracts for a period of four years should be made permanent, unless the employer provides written, valid justification for why the contract remains fixed-term.

#### To equal treatment:

Staff must not be discriminated against on the basis of their contractual status. Less favourable treatment can appear in a variety of guises and we know that job insecurity, vulnerability, inequalities and stress are often closely linked to fixed-term contracts.

## Improving the Researcher Experience at Lancaster

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers is an agreement between the funders and employers of researchers in the UK, which sets out the expectations and responsibilities of each stakeholder in relation to researcher careers. Lancaster is one of the many UK universities to have signed up to the Concordat and the Concordat Monitoring Group (CMG) exists to oversee its implementation here at Lancaster. It is chaired by Prof. Geraint Johnes, the Dean of Graduate Studies, and consists of the Faculty Deans for Research, plus Joe Thornberry from Organisation and Educational Development and two researcher representatives, which, at the moment, are myself and Alex Finch.

The group meets once a term and much of the discussion is focused on ensuring that Lancaster's Concordat action plan<sup>1</sup> gets taken forward. However, one advantage of having us on the group is that we can provide a direct link to the reality of researcher experiences here at Lancaster, which means that the kinds of things that get decided at these meetings are – hopefully! – more likely to be appropriate to the everyday issues that researchers face here.

For example, at the last meeting, we were able to suggest the introduction of a mentoring scheme for researchers and better training for PIs in how to manage their researchers. We also discussed possible ways of finding out more about what happens to researchers after they leave Lancaster, on the grounds that this will enable us to learn more about people's longer term career prospects. The possibility of bridging funds to help researchers between contracts was even

discussed, as was the idea of having an official channel of representation for researchers at Lancaster and the possibility of allowing groups of researchers within the university to take some ownership of their training, by commissioning bespoke courses that meet their own interests.

Clearly, it is important not to raise false hopes here, since there's a world of difference between starting conversations about these things and making them part of everyday policy and practice. Consequently, while progress looks reasonably likely in some areas (such as improved training for PIs, an official channel of researcher representation to management and more localised control of bespoke training for researchers), others – most notably bridging funds – will prove much more difficult, since they stray into other areas of university administration where the response may be distinctly less favourable...

Given these caveats, is there still cause for optimism? I would like to think so. We may be a long way from the sweeping changes to policy and practice that many of us would like to see, but I still believe that there's value in having these conversations. In particular, having researcher reps on the CMG ensures that the university doesn't lose sight of how things actually work out for researchers in practice, and I know that Alex and I have been able to highlight many issues which might otherwise have been overlooked. On which subject, if anyone has anything they would like us to bring up at next term's meeting, please get in touch with us at: e-mail: [r.whittle@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:r.whittle@lancaster.ac.uk)  
e-mail: [a.finch@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.finch@lancaster.ac.uk)

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.lancs.ac.uk/hr/development/files/Lancaster\\_University\\_concordat\\_Actionplan\\_2011\\_v2.pdf](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/hr/development/files/Lancaster_University_concordat_Actionplan_2011_v2.pdf)

### Lancaster Researchers' Online Survey

Many thanks to everyone who completed the survey that we ran over the summer. 30.9% of you responded and told us about your professional career to date, your views, aspirations and experiences of being a researcher at Lancaster and what could and should be improved. The results will be used to assist discussions at Lancaster with regard to implementing the Concordat and improving policies and practices affecting researchers here.

The full report is available for download from <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/ucu/campaigns/researchers.htm>

**You are:** highly qualified (over 88% of you hold a doctorate), have a wide range of experience of working as researchers both within and beyond this institution and are committed to working as researchers within the HE sector. Yet, nearly 80% of you reported being on a fixed-term contract, over 70% of you have never been promoted whilst working here, and lack of sustainable funding, recognition, access to resources and career support are some of the main issues you have to deal with. You cited local initiatives and examples of good practice taking place at Lancaster but said that there was much that could and should be improved upon by looking at best practice which you cited was taking place elsewhere.

## 'Get thee to a training course'? some thoughts from the Vitae conference

**W**hen it comes to career development, a common criticism levelled at researchers is that we just aren't proactive enough. According to this view, we will gladly spend hours closeted away in the lab or office in pursuit of research excellence and yet, when we're offered careers training we don't show up – much to the frustration of the staff development officers who are employed to help us. Thankfully, Vitae's Researcher Development International Conference did not set out to perpetuate this stereotype and I spent a very informative couple of days in Manchester immersing myself in case studies of researcher support initiatives from all over the globe.

Three key themes emerged from the event, which may influence how researcher careers are discussed in future.

### 1) Supporting experienced researchers

There was much discussion about the need for increased support for more experienced researchers, with some presenters arguing that the current academic system is failing the 'solid performers' – staff who are excellent at their jobs but who do not have the ambition of the 'high fliers'. Linked to this debate was a thorny discussion on whether the workaholic culture within academia is also failing those who wish to have some element of work-life balance...

### 2) More innovative and bespoke training

Traditional staff development courses may be taking a backseat in favour of more innovative, bespoke training methods such as mentoring and coaching. Such techniques are already available to researchers at a number of UK universities, and they sit well with trends towards self-employment and 'portfolio' careers, where researchers are encouraged to create jobs which fit their skills, values and interests.

### 3) Changing university policies and culture

Thankfully, some universities appear to be moving away from an approach which lays all responsibility for career development on the individual researcher via the usual refrain of 'get thee to a training course'. For example, some institutions have been making a particular effort to ensure that PIs are properly trained in how to support their researchers, as they recognize that a researcher's experience can be drastically affected by the skill – or otherwise! – with which the PI manages them. A refreshing change of focus, if ever there was one...

I'm not yet clear about the extent to which we'll see these changes incorporated at Lancaster. However, the other articles in this newsletter suggest that there is definite cause for hope. So watch this space. And, in the meantime, why not come along to some of our network meetings and join the debate?

*Many thanks to OED for funding me to go to the conference! Beccy Whittle*

**For details of available training courses at Lancaster, please see:**

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/oed/>

Organisation and Educational Development (OED) supports the professional and career development of Lancaster staff. OED works with Faculties, Divisions and departments to ensure that all staff can access relevant and appropriate development that benefits both the individual and the University. OED supports teaching and learning enhancement, leadership and management training, researcher development, job skills development and personal effectiveness in work roles.