N8 RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

Report from N8 workshop on the experiences of researchers in their mid-career

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Executive Summary

The N8 Research Culture and Environment Group (N8 RCE) identified mid-career researchers as the 'forgotten middle' and part of the Research Culture 'jigsaw' where the N8 universities could add value by working together.

Researchers in this career stage have established themselves as independent researchers and have delivered significant research outputs. However, they face complex and systemic challenges in the workplace which they are trying to navigate while also trying to find sufficient time and energy for responsibilities and pursuits beyond work. At the same time, many of the support structures which were there in their earlier career have fallen away and they have become 'assumed competent' in other aspects in which they may never have received training and in the absence of any structured mentorship or support. They often find themselves challenged by managing both strategic and operational roles on research grants.

The 'mid-career' researcher is in fact a broad and diverse set of researchers with correspondingly diverse needs. It is appropriate that there should be a variety of pathways between lecturer and Professor for those that wish to reach that level. While there are examples of good practice across the N8, there is no common benchmark for good practice in supporting researchers at this career stage. The UK research and innovation system is complex with many stakeholders. Multiple different actors can make a positive difference to the experiences of researchers in their mid-career. Alongside universities, funders and learned societies have a role to play.

Access to funding targeted at this career stage, mentorship, peer-to-peer support, coaching and training for new roles were identified as key elements of a support package for people in this career stage, as was transparency in promotion processes and equitable opportunities to take on responsibilities which might contribute to future success.

The N8 Research Culture and Environment Group will consider the recommendations made by this report, and develop responses at an individual university or N8 level as appropriate.

Recommendations

1. The N8 universities could usefully work together to redefine the language around the mid-career, with the aims of:
   - talking about this career stage in a way that reflects the achievement of someone reaching this stage; and
   - using positive and aspirational language.

2. The N8 universities could usefully work together to adopt and communicate a common understanding of the competencies, challenges and opportunities of the mid-career stage for academics.

3. Each of the N8 universities could usefully work with established researchers in their own universities to ensure that resources and funding opportunities are clearly signposted to them within their own internal IT systems. Consideration might be also given to how better to target communications with researchers in this career stage in the context of their needs and experiences.

4. Universities could usefully consider moving resources from undersubscribed internal funding schemes and creating funding opportunities specifically targeted at the mid-career stage.

5. The N8 Research Culture and Environment Group could usefully review the suggested activities that might make up a support package for mid-career researchers and recommend actions that can be taken in the short and medium term.

6. The N8 universities could usefully raise the profile of the N8 Research Partnership within the universities and in particular to researchers in this career stage who can benefit significantly from opportunities to collaborate.

Introduction

The N8 Research Culture and Environment Group (N8 RCE) have identified mid-career researchers as the 'forgotten middle' and part of the Research Culture jigsaw where the N8 universities could add value by working together.

The 'mid-career' is a broad and diverse set of researchers with correspondingly diverse needs. It is a career stage which, post-pandemic, is receiving an increased level of attention. There are blogs, podcasts and articles which examine the challenges of the mid-career:

Various N8 member universities have started to undertake reviews of needs for this group as part of their researcher development strategies but this is patchy.

The N8 RCE group identified a need to consult with our academic researchers in this career stage to determine the issues that we might pursue together. This discussion should be facilitated and outside of the usual line management career chains and structures.

The outputs of this discussion would be recommendations to the N8 RCE group and through them to N8 Strategic Executive Group (SEG) for further actions and/or programmes of activity that would address specific identified needs of this group of researchers and thereby improve working environment and/or research culture.

University of Sheffield :
• Lecturer
• Senior Lecturer
• Senior Research Fellow
• Reader

For the purposes of the workshop we adopted the University of Sheffield definition of a researcher in their mid-career as being in one of the job families in the box on the left.

There are other competency-based approaches to defining the mid-career, such as this one developed by the University of Edinburgh[1] as part of their competency framework for research funding[2].

EXPERIENCE:		Starting	→					Advanced	
Research	Fellowships	PhD	Post-doctoral		Early Career		Mid Career	Senior/Advanced	
	Grants	Project Studentship	RA/PDRF on collaborative grant	Small grant	Co-I on collaborative grant/ work package lead	PI on small collaborative grant	Scaling up PI role	PI on large collaborative grant	
	Research Skills	Develops new skills		Methods training		Interdisciplinarity		Develops new areas of expertise	
	Outputs & Publications	PhD outputs	Post-doctoral outputs		Continues to build portfolio		Targets wider academic audiences	Guides and co-authors with ECRs	
Engagement	Academic Dissemination	Conference poster	Conference paper	Organises panel	Invited speaker	Organises workshop/ conference		Organising commitee of major conference	Keynote speaker
	Wider Dissemination	Social media engagement	Writes Blogs	Hosts own Blogsite	Contributes to/ hosts public events		Contributes to articles in media	Media interviews	
	Knowledge Exchange	Engages with users	Specialised workshops		Advisory roles/ evidence		Consultancy	Specialised/ targeted briefings	
	External Partnerships	Practice background	Consulting users	Involving users	Collaborative project		Co-design	Co-production	
	Mobility	Collaborative PhD		Internships		Placements		Secondments	Dual roles
Leadership & Collegiality	Journals	Book reviews	Peer reviewer		Editorial Board member		Journal Editor	Launching new journal	
	Peer Review	Article reviews	Grant peer review	PhD examiner	Extenal appointment panel/assessors	Grant review panels	Chairs grant review panels	Grant funding strategy role	
	Collegiality	Peer support group	Informal peer review	Mentoring	Research coaching	Review panels	Initiates/leads research support systems	Leads by example/ shares experiences	
	Research Clusters	PhD or ECR network/ reading group		Co-leading research group		Centre Co-Director/ Launch new research group		Centre Director	
	Sectoral Leadership	Join/network in Professional Association (PA)		Lead a section/working group in PA	Establish new network		Leadership role in PA	Fellow of Learned Society	

CROSS-CUTTING VALUES: Equality, Diversity & Inclusion   Research Integrity   Collegiality & Support

Within the competency framework there are a number of researcher profiles which provide another way of describing career levels within academia; the one most closely aligned to the mid-career being 'Experienced Investigator':

[1] https://www.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/research_careers_tool.pdf
[2] https://www.ed.ac.uk/research-office/research-talent-and-culture/researcher-development/competency-framework-research-funding

Career-Level	Researcher Profile
Aspiring Investigator	High potential researchers who aim to drive their own research but have yet to do so.
New Investigator	Newly independent Principal Investigators beginning to manage and lead research projects and teams. Builds track record of research achievements appropriate to discipline.
Experienced Investigator	Experienced in securing research grant income appropriate to discipline. Consolidates and grows research profile.
Research Leader	Excellent research active academics who could or do run major grants, centres or networks. Demonstrates leadership in research cluster, centre, school or discipline.
Senior Research Leader	Major influencers internally/externally who are also research active. Sit on key boards/committees at national/international level.

Methodology

A small planning group was convened with the following terms of reference:

To scope and deliver a workshop for mid-career researchers across the N8 member universities, to seek their input on key issues and help us identify the ones where tangible action can be taken by the N8 universities in partnership.

The workshop was project managed by the N8, facilitation was contracted to an external provider, and logistics such as venue booking, participant registration etc. was carried out by the N8 Executive Assistant. Travel and subsistence expenses outside of the venue was provided from the home universities.

In order to enable the participants to speak freely and openly there were <u>no senior academics present at the event</u>. And yet it was still important that we heard from them why they are invested in the participants and the 10, 000 other researchers across the N8 in their mid-career.

To fill this gap, in advance of the workshop members of the N8 RCE group or a nominated delegate filmed short 'Insight Perspectives'. These were short addresses or 'provocations' of 3- 5 minutes to inspire and provoke the participants.

Detailed methodology and a facilitation plan is described in the Toolkit at the end of this report. This report provides an overview of the outputs of the discussions, raw outputs with more detail are included in the Annex.

What describes a researcher in their 'mid-career'?

Participants at the workshop were keen to explore a common understanding of the 'mid-career' of an academic researcher. In so doing, they identified a number of uncertainties around the career stage, such as its purpose and value, where it starts and finishes, and the absence of a positive definition of the stage- rather being defined by 'not being' other things.

Could it be enough to stay at this level without further promotion without being regarded as a failure?

Is it a stage to be *'got through'* as quickly as possible or could it have its own value?

What is the 'role' of this career stage?

Defined by 'not being' other things (early career, Professor)

Long career stage with blurred boundaries at the start and finish

> *"Could it be that we are suffering from an 'Early-Career hangover'? There is a psychological shift that we need as we move from establishing ourselves to being established.*
>
> *Could it be that we need help developing a different type of mindset to thrive at this stage of our career?*
>
> *There is the promise of this stage but it is unsettling."*

There was widespread agreement that this career stage could usefully be 'rebranded' or 'rebooted' by changing the language that we use. Mid-career evoked comparison with 'mid-life' or the 'squeezed middle' and other terms usually used in a negative context, associated with times of stress, time and financial pressure, times of transition and for some, a reduction in self-confidence.

It was highlighted that people in this career stage have already achieved a great deal and that this in itself was something to be celebrated and valued.

> *"We can sometimes feel like spinsters in a Jane Austen novel…but we want to feel valued."*

A suggestion made by the group was to think of people in this career stage as '*Established Academic Researchers'*. Others have noted that this use of language this might unintentionally lead to a more fixed mindset about where one's career might take them, and so the University of Edinburgh term of *'Experienced Investigator'* might be more helpful. There is more work to be done to explore the nuances here to redefine the stories we tell and the language we use to describe this important cohort of talented people.

Recommendation 1:

The N8 universities could usefully work together to redefine the language around the mid-career, with the aims of:
- talking about this career stage in a way that reflects the achievement of someone reaching this stage; and
- using positive and aspirational language.

The needs of researchers in their mid-career is not one-size fits all and it is appropriate that there should be a variety of pathways between lecturer and Professor for those that wish to reach that level. There is an unclear definition of this career stage and the N8 can usefully help member universities to adopt and communicate a common understanding of the associated competencies, challenges and opportunities.

Recommendation 2:

The N8 universities could usefully work together to adopt and communicate a common understanding of the competencies, challenges and opportunities of the mid-career stage for academics.

What has been positive about this career stage and what has worked in terms of support?

Researchers in this career stage have established themselves as independent researchers and have delivered significant research outputs. They recognise that there are positive attributes associated with this career stage, for example increased levels of autonomy and self-confidence, broader networks, opportunities to lead multidisciplinary teams and grants and that this career stage opens the door for more opportunities to be appointed to executive roles in a committee.

There were many examples of good practice that were shared, although use of this practice varied widely across the N8 . The awareness of good practice and opportunities was also variable within single institutions.

The most commonly cited support that was felt to work was mentoring, when it was appropriately structured, with a mentor that could understand both the discipline and the life stage of the mentee (e.g. have they had childcare responsibilities?). Another benefit that was

cited was that a mentor can help navigate institutional politics and has some sight of opportunities that might not be visible to the mid-career researcher themselves. Mentors were also able to help the mentee make more strategic choices about how they might best use their time, and where they might focus their efforts to strengthen a case for promotion.

Access to funding, fellowships and sabbaticals were also cited as providing opportunities for researchers in their mid-career to focus on research, to travel to conferences to build their networks and to undertake feasibility studies which might form the basis of a larger research grant proposal. The opportunity to compete for funding with their peers was considered positive as long as the application processes were minimally bureaucratic, with feedback provided.

The good practice identified at the workshop could usefully be adopted in those universities where it is not already standard, thereby improving the experiences for more of the researchers in the N8 across this career stage.

Structured mentoring	Well-matched mentee and mentor
	Long term- continuity across career stages
	Strategic insight into the instiution, processes and opportunities enabling better decisions about use of time.
Internal grant funding ring-fenced for mid-career (>10k)	Including non-standard costs e.g. childcare or directed support for exceptional circumstances e.g. Covid
	Seedcorn/pump-priming/feasibility/proof of concept/impact
Mid-career fellowships and sabbaticals	Protected time, should be available to all and fairly distributed
	Prestigious fellowships accelerate career
Career paths and promotion	Transparency in processes- what *really* matters?
	Moving universities can allow progress
	Teaching paths and other tracks being seen as equally valid
	Honest Personal Development Reviews / Appraisals

What are the challenges facing researchers in this career stage?

Researchers in this career stage are facing complex and systemic challenges in the workplace which they are trying to navigate while also trying to find sufficient time and energy for responsibilities and pursuits beyond work. At the same time, many of the support structures which were there in their earlier career have fallen away and they have become 'assumed competent' in other aspects in which they may never have received training and in the absence of any structured mentorship or support. They often find themselves challenged by managing both strategic and operational roles on research grants.

"How might we intervene where systems are not working?"

Some of the challenges identified by this cohort are not unique to this career stage, nonetheless it may be the first time that an individual researcher has had to manage this level of complex demands on their time and energy. This can take a mental and emotional toll, especially if they do not have access to helpful support structures around them. They may not have the flexibility enjoyed by more senior colleagues with larger grants and, having obtained funding, delays in recruitment can be experienced acutely, in turn impacting on their own workloads and mental health.

Challenges experienced by this group included:

Workloads	Transparency of allocation
	Volume
Learning and development	Absence of structured mentorship support
	Resourcing L&D in terms of both time and money
Holistic and sustained support for improving the research environment	Taking into account all of the dimensions of a healthy research culture.
	Resourcing roles which support mid-career researchers to free up time for higher added value activity e.g. project managers
Inclusivity and EDI	Different routes to entering UK academia at mid-career
	Lower levels of cultural capital for those with protected characteristics (also class and non-standard career paths)
Promotion and progression pathways	Transparency of process and support to understand what is really required and when you have done enough
	Can create competition and perception of two-track system
Pressure to win funding	Larger grants
	Impact of Brexit on availability of EU funding
Recruitment challenges	For PhD and PostDoctoral level researchers
	Short term funding makes it difficult to recruit

It was noted by the group that there are a variety of different routes to entering UK academia at the mid-career stage. This might include recruitment from overseas or from sectors beyond academia. These individuals might not have the cultural capital of those that have spent their entire career within UK universities and thus find it more difficult to navigate the complexities of the system and expectations placed on them. The same is true for other groups diverse in terms of race, disability, class etc. To set these people up for success in their mid-career may require targeted interventions and support.

Designing a mid-career support package

There was widespread agreement within this group that while there are examples of good practice across the N8, there is no common benchmark for good practice in supporting researchers at this career stage. With that in mind, participants worked in cross-institutional groups to design their own support package.

A wrap-around support package for mid-career researchers would contain a range of key elements. The single most referenced factor throughout the workshop was the need for 'humane' workloads.
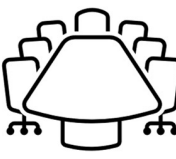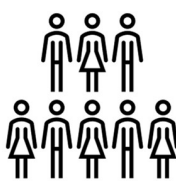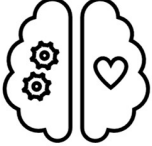

"If workloads were more humane then a lot of the other stuff will just fall into place"

Access to funding targeted at this career stage, mentorship, peer-to-peer support, coaching and training for new roles were also frequently cited, as was transparency in promotion processes and equitable opportunities to take on responsibilities which might contribute to future success.

The UK research and innovation system is complex with many stakeholders. Multiple different actors can make a positive difference to the experiences of researchers in their mid-career. Alongside universities, funders and learned societies have a role to play.

	Realistic workloads
	• Defining a reasonable workload model that take into account ALL the facets of the role, with associated realistic expectations of what performing at the level of the role looks like in practice and recognises the level of experience/trajectory of an individual. • Including admin, teaching, writing research proposals and/or outputs, research leadership and citizenship (peer review etc), personal development time, research planning and creativity, line management and supervision of PostDocs/PhD students. • Access to permanent core research support (project managers, Post-Docs) to enable researchers in this career stage to spend their time on the tasks commensurate with the role. • Efficient financial and legal support for grants e.g. Collaboration Agreements, Non-Disclosure agreement.

	Promotion pathways and processes • Multiple / flexible pathways to Professor. • Transparent, proportional, clear and well communicated promotion criteria. • Reward labour put into applications for grants etc.
	Effective line management • Honest feedback delivered with kindness. • Line manager has a route to address issues raised with them during personal development reviews/appraisals. These issues may be unique to a particular individual and not something that the line manager has experienced themselves during their career.
	Structured mentorship • Consistent, regular meetings • Institutional insight, sounding board and general support and/or for specific tasks and projects. • Tailored to current landscape • Diversity of mentors. • Training for mentors. • Locally and across the N8, or with the help of Learned Societies. • Accounted for in the workload models of mentee and mentor.
	Career coaching • Group facilitated or 1:1. • The right coaching at the right time, e.g. when starting to lead a team, when returning to research after a break. • A flexible discretionary fund to deploy when you need it would be ideal.
	Peer-to-peer support • Maintaining collegiality. • Building networks of high trust. • Online and / or face-to-face. • Understanding what is normal and reasonable and working together to facilitate this. • Action learning sets may have a role.

	Learning and development • Training for new roles e.g. teaching, admin, research leadership (leading a team), building leadership roles. • How to develop large, collaborative proposals. • Workshops on promotion/career development. • Impact generation and impact case study writing. • Building visibility and increasing your own ability to succeed in winning large grants. • Becoming a PI on your first big grant. • Mentoring others.
	Protected time for research related activity • Sabbaticals. • Bootcamp/retreat for writing books, papers or research proposals • Routes to buy out time. • Space to take risks and experiment with new approaches/directions.
	Equitable allocation of opportunity to get involved with the leadership of the department and faculty • Posts on management groups, committees, teaching, research admin, peer review and editorial boards, external examiners, grant review panels • Self-nomination where you can put yourself in a pool (cf EPSRC College)
	Collaboration building and Team Research • More means of exchange and collaboration. • Support to establish networks in different areas. • Celebrating teams and team success. • Support to facilitate interdisciplinary research. • Collaborative leadership.
	Mental health and wellbeing support • That goes beyond outsourced employee helplines to provide support tailored to the academic environment- 'academic wellbeing' advisers.

	Funding models
£	• Funding directed specifically to this career stage by universities, funders and learned societies • Support to level the playing field after life changing events, returners support. • Learned societies can play a role in seedcorn funding and awards/prizes • Simplified funding processes. • Small discretionary funds for research (allocated not applied for).

Case Study: Provision of training for Leading Researchers by 64 million artists[3].

64 million artists was commissioned by Kings College, London to develop a programme that would, *"encourage a new generation of leading researchers, already proficient in their area of study, to reach higher, work more cross-disciplinary, and manage ambitious, large-scale programmes and initiatives across the university".*

The programme works across 3 central pillars – Leadership, Collaboration and Innovation. It enables participants to generate, develop and express big ideas, identify their purpose and improve their communication and writing skills. It also encourages them to take calculated risks, collaborate across departments and innovate successfully with various partners, all in a supportive environment whilst learning from each other and senior colleagues.

The programme includes: full-day workshops, invited speakers, practical guidance on grant development and logistics, as well as personal development opportunities. 1-to-1 coaching sessions for each participant, action learning sets and time to develop ideas to present at an ideas summit.

Following the successful pilot, the scheme is being trialled in a number of universities across the UK, including some of those in the N8.

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[3] https://64millionartists.com/kings-college-london/#.ZDk8Ks7MLMY

Some of the key elements identified by the group are already available in N8 universities but can be unexpectedly difficult to access or even to find information about if you are in the mid-career. For example some relevant training materials are targeted towards earlier career stages when they are equally relevant to those in later career stages taking on new roles and responsibilities. In addition, we have heard that some internal university funding schemes are undersubscribed and that there are opportunities for mid-career researchers in these schemes; however often these researchers feel that they will lose out in competition with more senior colleagues or earlier career researchers who often are encouraged to apply for these funds.

"I was trying to help an academic find some training resources and I thought it would be easy as I knew we provided them….

but once I got into the IT system it was REALLY DIFFICULT to find- and I was in the position of knowing the information existed…

There is definitely an issue with how we share and communicate these resources that we can improve"

-Research Director, N8 University

Recommendation 3:

Each of the N8 universities could usefully work with established researchers in their own universities to ensure that resources and funding opportunities are clearly signposted to them within their own internal IT systems. Consideration might be also given to how better to target communications with researchers in this career stage in the context of their needs and experiences.

Recommendation 4:

Universities could usefully consider moving resources from undersubscribed internal funding schemes and creating funding opportunities specifically targeted at the mid-career stage.

How might the N8 universities work together to ensure that the support provided is as good as it can be?

Within the context of their ideal support package, participants were asked to reflect on how the N8 universities might work together to ensure the support provided is as good as it can be. Common messages emerged about consistency of workloads and processes, and sharing practice across the universities.

The value of being able to access a broader network for mentoring, peer to peer support and research collaborations was also noted, although many felt that the N8 itself needed a higher visibility with researchers in their mid-career. Shared training resources, and workshops to support interdisciplinary collaboration, access to funding, awards and celebrating the diversity and contribution of researchers in this career stage were also thought to be potential opportunities for the N8 universities.

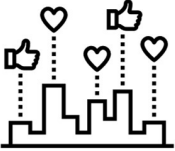## Case Study: The Academy of Medical Sciences Mentoring Scheme

The Academy of Medical Sciences has a mentoring scheme which pairs some early career researchers with Academy Fellows[4]. It provides mentoring masterclasses for prospective mentees and mentors and a suite of resources (a 'toolkit') to support the process. The steering group for the initiative has representation from early-mid career researchers to ensure the mentoring remains appropriate.

Workloads

- Design a reasonable workload model that is shared and adopted across the N8 which includes collegial activities and external contribution alongside teaching responsibilities e.g. contact hours, lectures, tutorials.
- Transparency in workload allocation across institutions
- Normalise administrative and project management support
- Sabbaticals for protected research time

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[4] https://acmedsci.ac.uk/grants-and-schemes/mentoring-and-other-schemes/mentoring-programme

	Sharing good practice
	
	• Shared research culture
	• Identify the good practice-
	   • at what level does it operate?
	   • Is it successful?
	   • Can we widen it out?
	   • Will it work for all?
	• Create a space on the N8 website to gather and exchange good practice
	• Acting as a conduit for common policies
	• Remove inconsistencies
	• Accreditation (cf. Athena Swan)
	• Can we share ALL practice not just good practice?

	Increase visibility and esteem of the career stage • Recognising and celebrating the value and contribution of mid-career academics and the diversity of those contributions • Award Scheme • Celebrate smaller scale successes • How might N8 help to increase their research visibility and increase their ability to win large grants
	Collaboration building and team research • Database of researchers and interests- 'Lonely Brains' • Interdisciplinary networks • Senior managers devolve collaboration to subjects • Mid-career research funding (>£50k) with exchange and collaboration with other N8 mid-career researchers • 10 thousand mid-career researchers across the N8 suggests that there is critical mass for large, multicentre grants
	Cross-institutional Mentoring and Peer-to-Peer Support • Career Coaching • Mentorship- a directory of mentors • Peer support networks (across N8, university, department)
	N8 relevance • Making N8 itself more visible and relevant to researchers in this career stage • How might the N8 help to increase the visibility of the research of these researchers?

	Learning and development • Workshops on subjects like grant applications, leadership

	Promotions, appraisal and line management
	
	• Transparency in promotion criteria across institutions
	• Valuing the diversity of pathways that mid-career researchers have.
	• Recognition for time spent developing and using 'soft' skills
	  • Professional standards fellowship (FHEA)
	  • Leadership
	  • Mentoring

£	**Funding opportunities** • Easy to apply for PhD studentships and PostDocs • Mid-career research funding (>£50k) with exchange and collaboration with other N8 mid-career researchers • Interdisciplinary sandpits for collaborative research projects • Regular workshops and flexible funds for mid-career researchers

Recommendation 5:

The N8 Research Culture and Environment Group could usefully review the suggested activities that might make up a support package for mid-career researchers and recommend actions that can be taken in the short and medium term.

Recommendation 6:

The N8 universities could usefully raise the profile of the N8 Research Partnership within the universities and in particular to researchers in this career stage who can benefit significantly from opportunities to collaborate.