Research enablers: their value, contribution and role

Contributing to a positive research environment

Prepared on behalf of Midlands Innovation

March 2023

Research enablers: their value, contribution and role

Report commissioned by:

Midlands Innovation
https://midlandsinnovation.org.uk/

Contact:

Helen Turner

Director, Midlands Innovation

Report authors:

Dan King, Angharad Roberts

www.research-consulting.com

Silke Blohm

4sciences.co.uk

Contact:

dan.king@research-consulting.com
Report dated: March 2023

© 2022 Midlands Innovation

Executive Summary

Research enablers are staff in research-performing organisations who support the successful delivery, co-ordination and implementation of projects, programmes and strategic initiatives.

Research enablers are staff in universities, research institutes and centres and other research-performing organisations who support the successful delivery, co-ordination and implementation of projects, programmes and strategic initiatives. Their roles include job titles such as Project Manager, Programme Manager or Centre Manager.

They work closely with academics, funders, a range of external collaborators and various internal functions and professional services (such as the research office, finance teams and HR departments) within HEIs and research institutes. Their work is often (but not exclusively) funded by an external organisation.

Developing the evidence base on the **benefits and contribution** of research enablers.

This report considers the value, benefits and contribution research enablers make to research excellence, collaboration and culture. It considers how this contribution supports the research environment and a positive research culture.

With a view towards informing future interventions and support, Midlands Innovation (MI) commissioned Research Consulting to provide further evidence on the nature of these roles, their benefits, the skill sets involved and the challenges and risks.

Working with the recently established Professional Research Investment and Strategy Managers (PRISM) Network, which comprises nearly 300 research enablers, the report, findings and recommendations are based on interviews and fieldwork which took place between June and September 2022.

The **methodology** included interviews, a focus group and a survey of stakeholders, involving a total of 86 participants.

The primary evidence was gathered through interviews with research enablers and academics, and supplemented with evidence secured through an online survey. In total 86 participants contributed via survey responses, interviews, and a focus group. Career trajectory analysis was also conducted using a sample of research enabler LinkedIn profiles to review career pathways into and moving on from these roles. The research questions for this project considered:

- What are the benefits from research enabler roles? How do they benefit projects and how does this deliver benefits for research in the wider university and also for the project funder?
- What risks are connected to these roles?
- What are the experiences of research enabling staff in delivering their role?
- What are key challenges experienced by research enablers within their institutions and how could these challenges best be mitigated?
- What skill sets are required in these roles?
- What are motivations to enter these roles and what evidence is there on progression within or from them?

Research enablers undertake a wide range of functions that support **effective implementation, management and**

Research enablers undertake a wide range of functions to support the effective implementation, management and delivery of major programmes. They work closely with the academic teams and external partners (funders and collaborators). Research enablers are found in a number of areas, including:

delivery of major research initiatives and programmes

- supporting the development and operations of research centres, institutes and groups;
- major externally-funded projects and programmes, including centres for doctoral training, large research programmes and funded networks; and
- supporting internally-funded strategic research initiatives and interventions within universities.

These draw on a combination of skills including experience as researchers, project management and people management (co-ordination, facilitation, pastoral care, resource allocation and understanding / implementation of practices supporting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Their role can be likened to that of a chief operating officer (COO) for a small business.

The **benefits of research enabling roles are experienced by a wide range of stakeholders**, including academics, collaborating partners, and funders

This research supports the view that research enablers are an integral and crucial part of the research ecosystem, co-leading the delivery of large strategic investments in the form of externally funded centres and research collaborations.

The benefits of research enabling roles are experienced by a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, collaborating partners, funders, and the wider organisation in which the research enabler is based. In particular, the responses from participants indicate strong benefits and contributions to:

- **Academics and research teams**, by providing complementary resource and expertise that delivers benefits in terms of the dedicated time and focus of their work, supporting a positive research environment. Academic participants cited the value of these roles in enabling academic time to be focused on areas where it was most needed, reducing the opportunity cost of time spent on other areas. Project management, collaborator co-ordination and financial management are high frequency tasks. Pastoral support to doctoral and early career researchers was also commonly cited.
- For **employing institutions** research enablers work across a wide range of internal interfaces, supporting compliant project delivery, reporting, co-ordination and addressing delivery risks. Research enablers also report high levels of activity for external communication, reporting and co-ordination, particularly with funders, collaborators and industrial partners.
- For **sponsors / funders** research enablers are a significant asset in reducing delivery risk and supporting effective and timely implementation. They are also often key points of contact, supporting project design, effective delivery and management that delivers direct benefits to the sponsor and follow-on or additional funding.

A **dedicated, highly skilled and experienced** group of staff

This research identifies research enablers as a highly skilled and experienced group of staff, supporting a specialist area of work. Over 50% of the survey respondents had been working as research enablers for six or more years (and 24% had over 10 years of experience). Whilst their contribution is acknowledged within their local environment, the role lacks visibility, recognition and understanding beyond this. Some institutions are now recognising the collective capability that this group of staff bring and are taking steps to address their working environment.

Research enablers are frequently recruited from research-active roles, and some retain research delivery as part of their wider research enabler work. Others are drawn to these

roles, having worked in industry or other areas of HE where project management, coordination and facilitation skills are highly transferable into research enabler roles.

Risks and challenges: the benefits of research enabler roles are not fully realised for institutions and funders and are vulnerable to risks in the employment modes typically used.

The report identifies a number of risks and challenges given the current landscape of recognition and job structures for research enablers. This confers risks that include the retention of critical skills within the sector and a reduction in how the benefits of research enablers are realised – for academics, funders and for the wider research environment.

Currently, there is little sector-wide understanding on job descriptions, role profiles or grades meaning that internal variability and inconsistency is evident. Pathways need to be established to better integrate these roles into the wider institutional landscape for research. The project funding context for most research enablers means that there is widespread use of fixed-term contracts. Individuals report experiencing multiple consecutive fixed-term contracts. Research enablers are frequently staff who are recruited locally to groups / departments, usually by project PIs. In particular, there is little coherent management oversight of them as a group within institutions, affecting role profiles, progression and importantly the quality and availability of training and induction. There are also risks and inefficiencies in losing skills and experience.

There is some (currently limited) evidence of positive change: one university has adopted a managed approach to a group of research enablers, with institutional underpinning funding to give security and managed deployment into relevant externally funded projects and programmes. This model may provide an important example for wider consideration.

For funders, how research enablers reduce delivery risks and improve the wider research environment is not yet (seemingly) fully recognised. This places a further risk on the sustained development of these roles and benefits that could accrue in future. The report identifies that research enablers provide important benefits in areas of importance to funder priorities and delivery of research programmes. The implementation and start-up of major programmes is an area of high benefit, linked to meeting early financial targets. Research enablers are also instrumental in shaping operational practices including those relating to reporting, impact capture, pastorals support and advice and co-ordination of external stakeholders.

Conclusions: the benefits of researcher enablers need wider recognition and support to realise further benefits.

The report concludes that the contribution of research enablers to project delivery is strong but underrecognized outside the immediate team. Clear benefits for institutions and funders are identified and justify greater recognition and understanding of the value brought by these roles and associated career paths.

These roles bring identifiable benefits for research culture and environment. This include alleviating academic workloads and enabling academics to focus on area where their knowledge is most valuable, providing pastoral support and resource to delivery EDI interventions, and supporting communications and coordination with internal and external stakeholders. The capability that research enablers bring as a group to the wider university was cited as an important enabling factor in success with major, short notice opportunities.

Summary of **recommendations** and areas for further review and progress

The report identifies a number of recommendations for institutions and funders and these are grouped into the following **four areas**:

- establishing a recognised professional identity for research enablers;
- improving the management of research enablers within institutions;

- a leading role for research funders; and
- enhancing training and development for research enablers

Actions and further recommendations associated with each of these four areas are outlined below and discussed in more detail within the main report.

Recommendation:

Establishing and implementing a recognised professional identity for research enablers

- Universities should identify the cohort of research enablers active on programmes, projects and initiatives within the organisation, building on the evidence in this report to understand local value, issues and ways forward.
- Improve the visibility and recognition of these roles, drawing on successful approaches adopted for other staff groups (e.g. technical staff), developing and disseminating an improved role profile and understanding of the role strengthening the professional identity of research enablers. This will also aid consistency across the sector.
- Establish institutional and regional peer networks of research enablers to support well-being, sharing of best practice and to help establish their professional identity.
- Enhance engagement of research enablers with national professional networks: PRISM, ARMA and PraxisAuril and consider forming special interest groups (SIGs) within these networks.

Recommendation:

Improving the management of research enables within institutions

- Consider the approaches to the development of more formal structures for the institutional management and deployment of research enabler skills.
- Use the evidence of the pathways into research enabler roles to allow further discussion and exploration of the link between research roles, administrative roles and research enabler roles. In particular considering the porosity and dynamics of movement between these roles and associated opportunities.
- Mitigate risks to universities by identifying mechanisms to improve the continuity of knowledge and experience of research enablers, informed by greater understanding of the role(s) and benefits.
- Maximise the benefits of research enabler roles to the wider research environment and communicate / disseminate them so research enabler roles are used effectively when required and are resourced properly into projects.

Recommendation:

A leading role for research funders

- Research funders should demonstrate their appreciation of the value and benefits of these roles through explicit inclusion in funding calls, enabling inclusion of research enablers as Co-I's when appropriate or featuring research enabler contributions in initiatives such as the 101 roles in research.
- Funders should establish mechanisms to ensure that projects are well resourced, not only from start to finish but also in the design and start-up phase as well as immediately after project closure. This should enable institutions to plan for these roles more strategically and move to longer-term, ideally permanent, contracts.
- Better guidance to stipulate the necessity for senior research enabler roles working in tandem with PIs on large project-based awards. Where necessary, further administrative support should be costed in.

Recommendation:

Enhancing training and development for research enablers

- Ensure appropriate training is available to enable research enablers to deliver their roles effectively, including support for coaching or mentoring and internal connections to relevant professional services.
- Ensure all research enablers receive an effective induction that extends to the various university functions that they will interact with not just the academic group in which they will be based.

Contents

1. Introduction and approach

1.1 Introduction

About this report

This project considers the value, benefits and contribution research enablers make to research excellence, collaboration and culture.

Research enablers are staff who support the successful delivery, co-ordination and implementation of research projects, programmes and strategic initiatives. They work closely with academics, funders, a range of external collaborators and various internal functions and professional services within HEIs and research institutes.

With a view towards informing future interventions or support, Midlands Innovation (MI) commissioned Research Consulting to provide further evidence on the nature of these roles, their benefits, the skill sets involved and the challenges and risks.

The project aimed to generate insights and evidence to build understanding aligned to the challenges for research enabler staff nationally and at member universities of Midlands Innovation.

The report is structured in the following sections that align with the grouping of evidence and views from participants. Section 2 considers the value and contribution of research enablers. In section 3 we explore the evidence on the motivations, career progression and training and development. Section 4 considers the opportunities and risks for stakeholders, including the employing university, the research funder and the individuals in research enabling roles.

The report features seven research enabler profiles to illustrate the range of roles and functions fulfilled.

Background: emerging evidence of research enablers as a staff group providing distinct benefits for research delivery and environment

There is growing recognition of an important staff group within universities, often connected to supporting the successful implementation and delivery of major research investments, including major projects, strategic research investments by institutions and significant collaborations. However, this staff group is fragmented and tends to sit outside the functions and structures that would otherwise provide coherence and governance for this staff group as a whole.

The PRISM Network was formed in April 2020 to reflect this and to provide a framework to articulate the value of these roles, the skills and training required and to support peer-to-peer networking. The network for "Professional Research Investment and Strategy Managers" (PRISM) currently has around 290 members from ~40 institutions.

Research questions explore the benefits, skills, training and challenges associated with these roles

The research questions for this project considered:

- What are the benefits from research enabler roles? How do they benefit projects and how does this deliver benefits for research in the wider university and also for the project funder?
- What risks are connected to these roles?
- What are the experiences of research enabling staff in delivering their role?

- What are key challenges experienced by research enablers within their institutions and how could these challenges best be mitigated?
- What skill sets are required in these roles?
- What are motivations to enter these roles and what evidence is there on progression within or from them?

1.1.1 Defining research enablers

Defining research enablers: their role, working environments and responsibilities

Defining research enablers is one of the challenges in helping to raise awareness of these roles and understanding the collective value and needs of this staff group.

"These are really difficult roles to describe adequately. You describe them more by what they're not than what they are"

Research enabler roles are varied and diverse roles within universities or similar environments. They are predominantly focused on enabling the delivery and growth of large research investments, projects, programmes or initiatives. They bring together day-to-day operations, project work, and strategic growth activities.

These roles have emerged outside well-established research offices in institutions, creating a small group of individuals scattered across departments that are not well embedded in institutional support and governance structures. A wide range of job titles, and the potential for research enablers to be classed in different staff groups, adds complexity.

Importantly the features of research enablers overlap with other existing roles. The PRISM network website recognises this and augments their definition seeking to distinguish these roles from (i) the established roles of "Research Managers / Research Development Managers" who are often pre-award focused (although we observe research enablers playing a key role in developing new projects); and (ii) "project managers" who can be working to a clearly defined brief and focused on deliverables.

The PRISM Network notes some research enablers are also active researchers who undertake research enabling activities as part of their role.

Definitions for high frequency terms used in this report

We will use the following approach to the use of high frequency terms in this report.

Research enabler(s): meaning the individuals undertaking the roles which are the focus for this work and defined above.

Research enabling roles: meaning the positions or jobs which focus on enabling research in the context outlined above.

PRISM Network: references the established network for research enablers.

Research office: a generic term for the, usually centralised, research office functions within a university, including variants such as 'research and innovation'.

Research Development: refers to the roles and support involved in developing research at institutional, departmental or group levels. Typically includes building collaborations and external partners, proposal development and strategic assessment of future directions and opportunities. Research development roles may be based centrally or locally within departments, and are often part of the research office.

1.1.2 Previous work and evidence

The phrase 'third space professionals' was first used by Celia Whitchurch[1] in 2008. In her seminal work, Whitchurch describes the changing roles and identities of professional staff at universities with the emergence of blended portfolios of both academic and administrative nature.

Subsequent work[2] has identified dilemmas for these roles offering significant space to innovate on one hand, while at the same time being risky to both the individual and institution, as they are often not well embedded in the wider institutional context. The work also reflects on leadership and observes that third space professionals are more likely to lead by facilitation and motivation rather than exerting formal power, which post holders often don't have owed to the lack of direct line managerial responsibilities in many of these roles. In recent years a body of work[3] has emerged exploring third space professionals in higher education. A recurring theme of this work is the perceived invisibility of post holders in this transient space.

Another body of work comes out of the research around team science and research culture. A survey of research management professionals conducted by ARMA in 2020[4] has highlighted a perception that a switch from an academic to a professional services 'support' role might be perceived as a 'failure' rather than a natural career progression. What this work has in common, is an observation of a diverse group of highly-skilled professionals that is not well embedded in classical university structures creating risks not only for individuals but also institutions and their funders.

Prior surveys by the PRISM Network provide further information on the working conditions and experiences of research enablers.

Previous surveys and analysis[5] by the PRISM Network have identified:

- a high proportion of women undertaking these roles (90% of survey respondents), and use of fixed-term contracts (70%);
- these roles are undertaken on a part-time basis in ~25% of responses;
- individuals with significant experience, with 60% having over 11-years' experience in relevant roles and salaries commonly over £40k;
- roles that require a wide range of skills, and interfaces with the local research team, wider institution and external partners and collaborators; and
- concerns over career progression and development, job security and recognition and belonging.

Additionally, the report identifies that it is not clear how these roles map against the competencies and experiences required for senior management roles (within and beyond academia). This is an area explored in this work.

---

[1] Whitchurch, C., 2008. Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of Third Space Professionals in UK Higher Education. Higher Education Quarterly 62, 377–396. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00387.x

[2] Whitchurch, Celia. 'The Rise of Third Space Professionals: Paradoxes and Dilemmas'. In *Forming, Recruiting and Managing the Academic Profession*, 79–99. Springer, 2015.

[3] See, for example, McIntosh, Emily, and Diane Nutt. *The Impact of the Integrated Practitioner in Higher Education: Studies in Third Space Professionalism*. Routledge, 2022.

[4] https://arma.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ARMA-Research-Culture-Survey-2020.pdf

[5] About PRISMs – an introduction to the management roles at the heart of research universities, July 2022. Sourced from: https://www.pris-managers.ac.uk/

How commonly are research enablers found within universities?

The overall numbers of staff working in research enabler roles is relatively small (for example when set against the number of technical, administrative or research staff). They may also be employed against administrative or research job families. This makes it difficult to identify and engage with this staff group coherently.

As a result, systematic approaches to identifying research enablers are difficult. Within institutions they can be employed in many different departments and role titles are not definitive (there is no consistently used term for research enablers). Typically, there is no accountable function at an institutional level for this staff group and their training or development needs. The emerging PRISM Network provides some evidence of the scale and prevalence of these roles.

Midlands Innovation universities have been involved in 140 UKRI awards exceeding £3m in the last 5 years.

Additionally, research enablers are often associated with major projects funded by UKRI and the landscape of these provides a working assessment of the likely numbers working in these roles. Via Gateway to Research and considering those projects where the collaborator, partner or lead organisation is from the Midlands Innovation universities we can see that **over the last 5 years UKRI have awarded 143 projects with a value of over £3m**:

- of these 143 projects, 22 were awards of over £10m;
- 20 involved at least two Midlands Innovation universities; and
- 23 are centres for doctoral training / doctoral training partnerships.

These numbers indicate that there are likely a significant number of senior project management staff in a diverse range of roles supporting large-scale grant delivery. The presence of research enablers supporting *internally* funded research investment augments this.

Future work may consider the potential for additional evidence that may exist within UKRI through analysis of funded project and the cost / expenditure returns to identify staff costs associated with project management and co-ordination.

1.2 Methodology

The methodology included a survey, interviews and a career trajectory analysis of public profiles.

A mixed-methods research approach was used to conduct this research, considering both quantitative and qualitative approaches to evidence gathering. The approach adopted included:

- Desk research, which considered previous work and reference to these roles.
- An online survey aimed at current and past research enablers (67 responses);
- Interviews (14) with research enablers and other stakeholders (e.g. academic beneficiaries);
- Career trajectory analysis of 28 public LinkedIn profiles of research enablers; and
- A focus group with 8 participants to consider the emerging findings and recommendations.

In total over 80 individuals actively participated via the survey, interviews and focus groups. Further details are provided in **Appendix A**. Recommendations and findings are based upon primary research evidence gathered between July and September 2022.

1.3 Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the many participants who gave generously of their time and provided considered and thoughtful responses. We would like to acknowledge the input and advice from the project steering group, Helen Turner, Midlands Innovation; and Debra Fearnshaw, University of Nottingham. We also express our thanks to the support from colleagues at the PRISM Network, in particular Anja Roeding at the University of Exeter for support in promoting the survey.

2. The value and contribution of research enablers

About this section

This section presents key findings from the survey, interviews and LinkedIn analysis on the value and contributions of research enablers to the research ecosystem and environment.

2.1 Benefits of research enablers

Summary of benefits from research enablers

The research identifies a number of benefits from the role of research enablers, these are summarised as:

- Leading on project management and administration of large research investments and grants, including financial reporting, ensuring that deadlines and reporting requirements are met and delivering against agreed objectives.
- Dedicated single, named point of contact for the project or initiative and a central connecting point acting as interface between internal and external stakeholders.
- Having an overarching overview of the project, with a strategic, coherent and cohesive perspective.
- Saving academics' time, enabling them to focus on the research.
- Providing specialist expertise in delivering large, externally funded projects /centres, incl. project development and design. In some cases, research enablers are active researchers, making substantive contributions to the research.
- Identifying and developing new opportunities, project ideas or potential new relationships.
- Leading on communication strategy and pastoral care for staff and/or students; EDI.
- Providing HEI-level insight, engage in HEI's work and save the time of other professional services.

The benefits of research enabler roles are experienced by a wide range of stakeholders, including academics

The benefits of research enabling roles are experienced by a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, collaborating partners, funders and sponsors, and the wider organisation in which the research enabler is based. In particular, the responses from participants indicate benefits and contributions to:

- **Academics and research teams**, by providing complementary resource and expertise that delivers benefits in terms of the time and focus of their work, and supporting a positive-research environment. Most commonly this was expressed as providing the support to allow academics to focus on the research, but pastoral support to doctoral and early career researchers was also commonly cited.
- For **employing institutions** research enablers work across a wide range of internal interfaces, supporting compliant project delivery and addressing delivery risks. They also report high levels of support for external communication and support, particular funders, collaborators and industrial partners. It is also noted that research enablers provide a capability for institutions that is increasingly important in being able to design and deliver major collaborative projects against fast response opportunities.
- For **sponsors / funders** the research enablers are key points of contact and counterparts, supporting project delivery and management (in particular regarding

expenditure) that delivers direct benefits to the sponsor (slow to spend, or year 1 underspends are a consistent issue for research funders).

"The benefits that these roles bring to the university is the implementation, the successful implementation of processes, because research enablers know how to set out a schedule and delivery of those projects, through different processes"

"Research enablers are vital for cohesion, governance and delivery"

"Feedback from academics in my team is that they cannot deliver projects without their research enabler, it is that simple. As these roles have developed, awards have also developed in complexity and require skills that are often not possessed by academics."

Research enablers report high significance benefits to academic project leaders collaborating partners and project funders.

Survey responses indicate that research enablers see the significance of benefits from their work as being highest for **academic project leaders** (96% of respondents); **collaborating partners** (82%); **project sponsors or funders** (78%); and to the **organisation** (such as the university) employing the research enabler (74%). This has been echoed in the interviews.

"Research enablers are often a consistent source of organisational knowledge and experience…a source of knowledge and expertise, institutional memory, experience and mentoring earlier career staff."

"Research enablers reduce the administrative/reporting burden from the researchers so they can focus on scientific delivery."

Key benefits outlined in the survey responses and interviews include those experienced by **academics** and members of the core project or initiative team, for whom the competence and effectiveness of research enablers **saves a significant amount of time**, enabling academics to focus on their research.

"I would even argue that you are almost misappropriating academic time when you have these tasks done by academics, whereas the research enabler roles are seen as overhead, so they don't attract an overhead."

Responses have also highlighted the complementary contribution of research enablers, providing skills that are not normally covered in the academic portfolio.

"Academics, PDRAs and students are supported to achieve their best in a very complex environment."

"If you've got a network grant like we have, you cannot manage without these roles." [Academic]

Funders benefit from the work of research enablers as they reduce project delivery risks and add project management capability

By leading on project management and administration, including financial reporting, research enablers ensure that deadlines and reporting requirements are met, **satisfying funder requirements** and delivering against agreed objectives.

"We adopted a business-like approach to dealing with finance, HR, and handling the project. The academics know, it's managed well, it's structured etc. You can still have academic freedom and direction and curiosity, but in a well-managed environment."

"Funders need people with focus on the detail of finances, project management, KPIs etc"

Research enablers in many cases also bring specialist expertise to the delivery of large, externally funded projects /centres, including stakeholder engagement, IP protection, project development and design, in some cases including the design and development of a physical building. Their fundamental role has been recognised in the recent EPSRC

Centres for Doctoral Training (CDT) pre-announcement[6], where research enablers are invited to apply as co-investigators where they are integral to developing the bid.

Research enablers act as key co-ordinators, with a particular role in facilitating communication and information exchange between stakeholders

Research enablers provide **a dedicated single named point of contact** for the project or initiative and a central connecting point acting as an interface between internal and external stakeholders (including HEI and industry partners) and leading on a communication strategy for the project and initiative.

They can combine this co-ordinating role with an overarching overview of the project to provide **a strategic, coherent and cohesive perspective**, driving the project or initiative forward, whilst also identifying and developing new opportunities, project ideas or potential new relationships. This may also feed into valuable insight about the wider organisation (such as the HEI) within which the project or initiative is located and save the time of colleagues providing other professional services within that wider organisation.

"It's that broader contribution that these roles make that often goes unnoticed, but I think they are so critical. People do not realise until it goes away. We've certainly seen it at [my university], when we've had folks leave and then realise there's a huge gap that we can't fill with just a normal appointment."

"Someone can focus on reporting and tracking to keep everything in perspective"

A capability that is increasingly important

As a group there was recognition that research enablers represent an increasingly important capability that directly enables the university to address new or emerging opportunities. This is particularly the case with opportunities that require the rapid design, development and (often) implementation of funding.

A small number of examples of certain institutions taking a more coherent management approach to these roles was referenced by participants. These brings with it benefits in terms of recognition and possibly continuity of employment, but may impact on the autonomy and independence that research enablers indicated as positive aspects of the role (see section 3).

Research enablers report a strong pastoral role, supporting researchers across a range of issues and experiences

Research enablers also frequently reference a pastoral role in working with doctoral students, early career researchers and academics. These are not always defined within job descriptions but emerge in delivering what is needed in response to issues emerging on the ground.

"Academics have so many pulls on their time - teaching, travelling to the university, examining PhDs, worldwide conferences. Academics do a fantastic job...but they weren't always there. And my job was to be there - my door was always open"

Many research enablers are employed within doctoral training programmes or centres, and for these a strong interface with doctoral students and early career researchers was evident. Examples of support provide included simply listening to issues, or connecting individuals to other appropriate support across the university.

"I'm less threatening than academics ... if the students feel they trust me and then you can signpost them to help and get things sorted. Make sure they are all well or support is available,

---

because sometimes when you're not well, it's really hard to ask for this from people you don't know."

In some cases, this extends to supporting the design and delivery of interventions and advice relating to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), embedding EDI within and across projects, and feeding into proposals beyond the initial programme. The **EDI** aspects of these roles were also referenced in both surveys and interviews, with research enablers in a unique position to foreground EDI considerations at every stage of projects and programmes – a "golden thread".

"Embedding EDI - we are the golden thread for our research projects"

"My expertise in EDI in my area has benefited multiple proposals beyond the programme I manage."

The nature of recruitment into fixed-term research enabler roles and expertise means strong **benefits in the design, start-up and closure phases are often lost**.

Benefits are provided by these roles throughout the lifecycle of the project or initiative, but are particularly noted at start-up and completion stages. However, these are often the stages at which research enabler support may be limited, either because research enablers have not yet been recruited (start-up stage) or because contracts have already ended / research enablers have needed to move on to their next role (end stage).

"It's not in the best interest of the project to lose all the staff on the actual day it finishes, because there's things like final reports and papers. They come out after a project has finished."

The survey and interviews explored the project lifecycle and where the benefits of research enablers were felt. Research enablers are often recruited into project after funding has been awarded, and therefore may not have input into the design, or possibly even the initial start-up phase of the project. But these are both areas where strong benefits are reported.

"One of the challenges is that we're bought in to manage projects at a later stage, decreasing opportunities for role to make positive impact (from proposal stage)"

"The academics initially had no idea of the resource needed to deliver this [large collaborative doctoral programme], and had a lack of understanding on what was needed"

In particular, survey responses noted that the start-up phase is the point where the benefit of research enablers is greatest (Figure 1) – but people may not have been recruited into these roles at that point. Similarly, potentially high impact benefits of research enablers in project completion and in supporting the transition of good practice may be compromised by the need for research enablers to find new roles as their fixed-term contracts come to an end.

*"I was involved in the bidding phase for the project, then moved into a research enabler role delivering the award. It was then the University's biggest ever award and delivering the year 1 spend was a major task, being there in that role accelerated this by 3-6 months"*

Research Consulting

Research Consulting Limited is a Company Registered in England and Wales, Reg No. 8376797   16
www.research-consulting.com

Figure 1.

Survey responses which show the level of benefit of research enabler roles at different stages of the project or initiative lifecycle
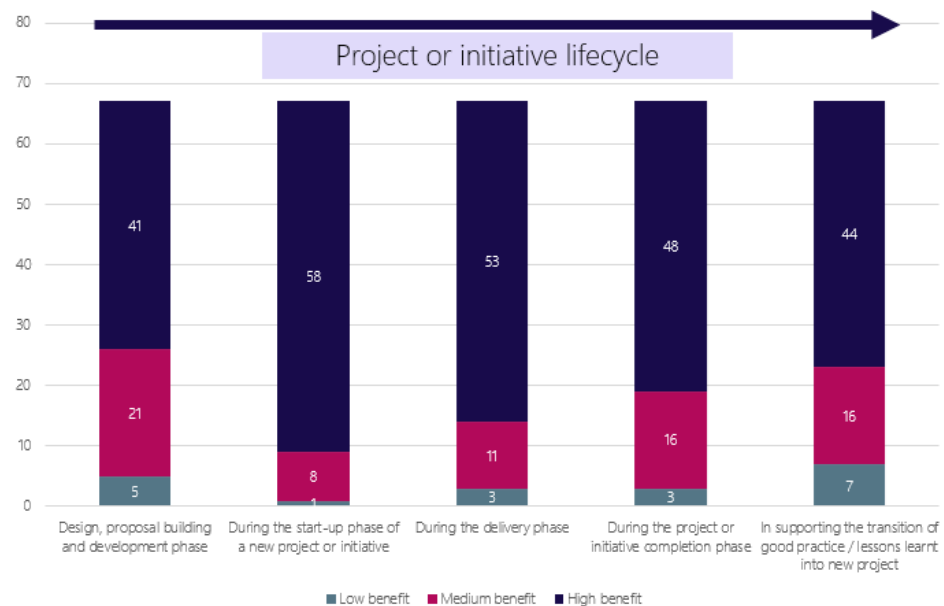
More details of free-text survey responses describing example benefits at different points in the project or initiative lifecycle are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Examples of the benefits of research enablers throughout the lifecycle
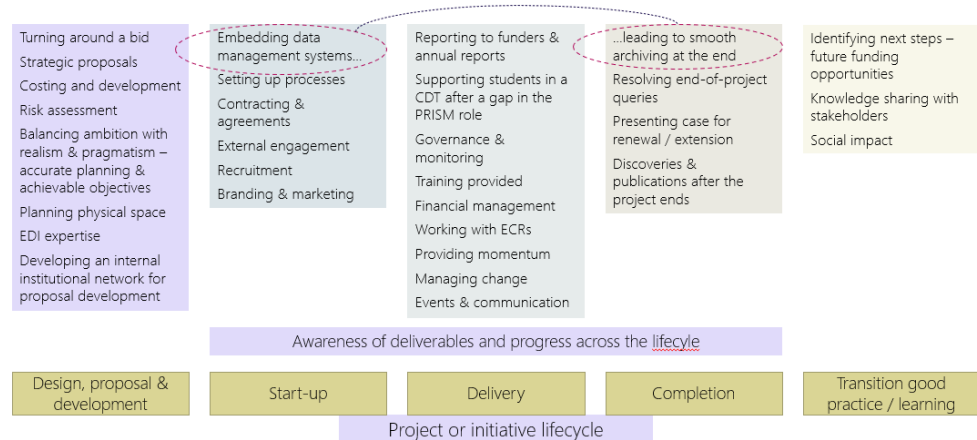
Research enablers can extend the impact and sustainability of major investments

In some areas there was evidence of research enabler support providing the platform that supported researchers to go beyond the initial funded project, and to draw on additional external funding. This has strong benefits for sustainability, and which confers benefits to the academic team, the host university and the funder.

"The staffing and allocation processes I established for the main project meant we could bring in and successfully deliver additional grants, enabling us to double the annual income."

2.2 Key interfaces for research enablers

Overview

The survey sought to understand more about the **interfaces** that research enablers support and develop in their roles.

Research Consulting

To an extent they are influenced by the nature of the project or programme the research enabler works to deliver. For example, doctoral training centre managers will have significant interactions with students, whilst managers of large network grants need to focus more on liaising with partners.
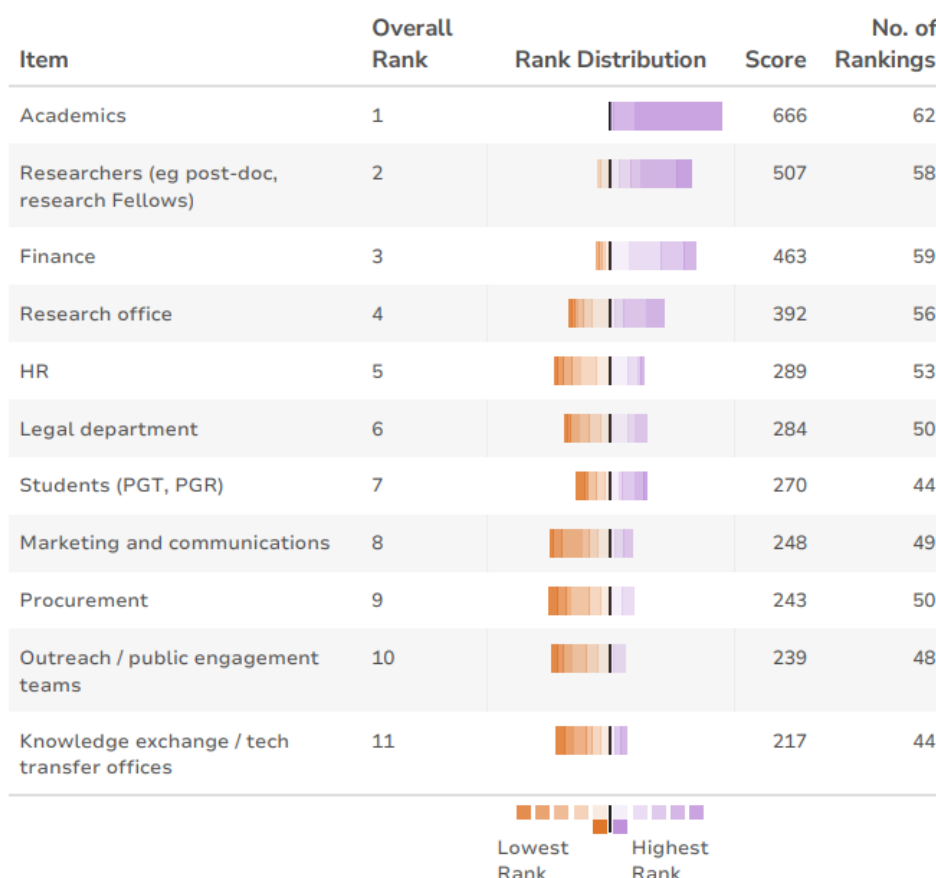
Key internal interfaces are with academics, researchers and finance

The survey asked respondents to prioritise the internal interfaces that they engage with on a regular basis. 11 internal options were presented, and participants were invited to rank as many or as few of these as they wished, with the most important interface ranked first.

The results are presented in Figure 3. Prioritisation of interfaces with **academics and researchers** reflects responses in other parts of the survey regarding the benefits of research enabling roles to those working as PIs and to teams carrying out research. But for many a wider set of researchers (ECRs and post-doctoral students) are key interfaces.

Finance emerged as the 3rd most highly ranked internal interface, and is testimony to the reported functions of the roles – connecting on the ground delivery and project management with reporting to the funder.

Figure 3.

Key internal interfaces

Item	Overall Rank	Rank Distribution	Score	No. of Rankings
Academics	1		666	62
Researchers (eg post-doc, research Fellows)	2		507	58
Finance	3		463	59
Research office	4		392	56
HR	5		289	53
Legal department	6		284	50
Students (PGT, PGR)	7		270	44
Marketing and communications	8		248	49
Procurement	9		243	50
Outreach / public engagement teams	10		239	48
Knowledge exchange / tech transfer offices	11		217	44

Lowest Rank   Highest Rank

Notably, internal interfaces to **knowledge exchange, public engagement, procurement** and **marketing & communications** are lowest priority. This may reflect the extent to which these types of activities are undertaken by research enablers themselves, working in the specific context of their project or initiative. They might also reflect the

fact that these interfaces play a role only for a subset of projects, whereas working in tandem with academics as well as interactions with finance, HR or the legal team will be required on most projects.
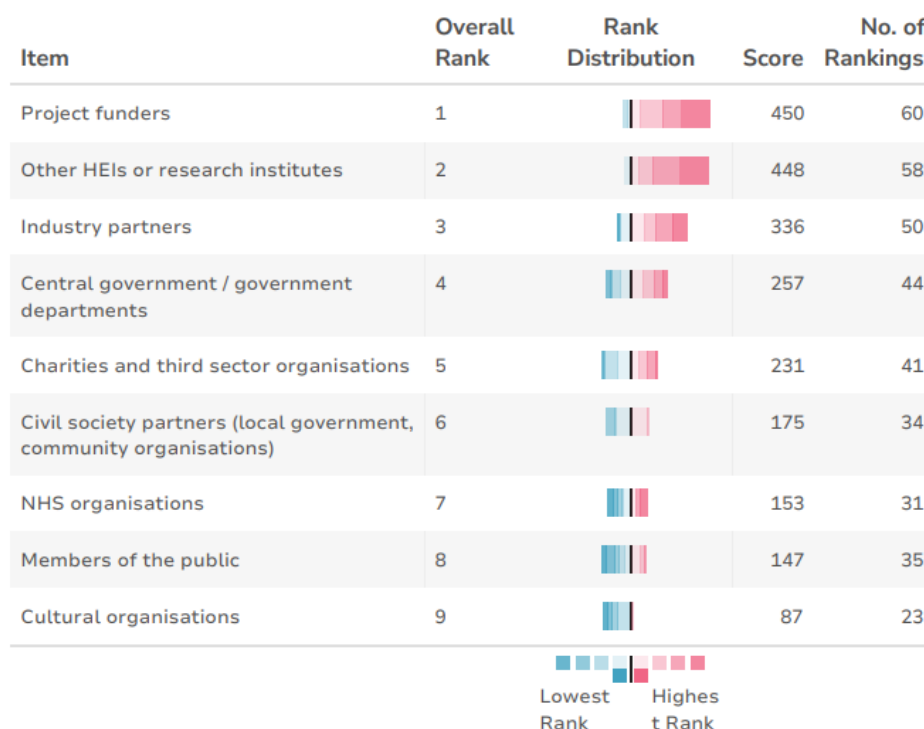
Key **external interfaces** are with project funders and collaborating HEIs, with industry partners also being a key interface

The survey asked participants to rank up to 9 external interfaces in order of importance. The **project funder** and **collaborating HEIs** emerge as the highest ranked external interfaces with which research enablers engage on a regular basis (Figure 4). **Industry partners** (who may also be co-funders) also emerge strongly as a key external interface.

Interviews and free-text comments indicated the regularity and proximity of research enablers to the project funder, and this may not always be evident to the traditional research office functions. Research enablers reported attending funder meetings, particularly when these formed part of a wider programme, with (and in some cases in place of) academics.

Figure 4.

Key external interfaces

Item	Overall Rank	Rank Distribution	Score	No. of Rankings
Project funders	1		450	60
Other HEIs or research institutes	2		448	58
Industry partners	3		336	50
Central government / government departments	4		257	44
Charities and third sector organisations	5		231	41
Civil society partners (local government, community organisations)	6		175	34
NHS organisations	7		153	31
Members of the public	8		147	35
Cultural organisations	9		87	23

Lowest Rank   Highest Rank

Research Enabler profiles

Tim Miller

Making a difference in a research institute

Tim Miller is Director of Engagement at the Energy and Bioproducts Research Institute (EBRI) at Aston University. He moved into his current role from working in the corporate private sector and in local government supporting economic development and start-ups as well as running the University of Nottingham's consultancy company for a while, including founding and managing a spin out company.

His key motivation is to make a difference and make things happen. He describes his skill mix and experience as combining public sector, private sector, entrepreneurial and start-up work. The projects he has worked on as a research enabler have been mostly funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) grants, and he notes uncertainties about potential future sources and availability of funds for comparable activity. Apart from working with academics, industry

engagement is a core aspect of his role. Tim considers facilitating student projects and placements as an important contribution to education and career development.

There is a risk to universities that reliance on individual research enablers may create single points of failure, not so much from a delivery point of view but rather the availability of specific skills and capabilities that are lost. He uses networks of local organisations as sounding boards for project activities, and values the networks created within the LEP in particular.

Research Enabler profiles

Emma Callaghan

Sustaining collaboration in an industry focussed national research centre

Emma Callaghan is Business Manager for the National Centre for Combustion and Aerothermal Technology (NCCAT) at Loughborough University, which includes the Rolls Royce University Technology Centre (UTC) in Combustion System Aerothermal Processes, and joint Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) in Future Propulsion and Power with Cambridge and Oxford Universities.

NCCAT, a global open-access centre of excellence, is funded through a partnership comprising the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Aerospace Technology Institute, Innovate UK, with support from Rolls-Royce plc and Loughborough University. The Centre focuses on the development of future low emission aerospace combustion systems designed to reduce the environmental impact of aircraft and will play a key role in moving towards sustainability and helping meet the government target of a carbon neutral economy by 2050. Beyond aerospace NCCAT is also actively involved with supporting the development of technology within several other key sectors for the UK such as distributed power generation and the development of measurement technology for harsh environments. Industrial problem-owners, from SMEs to multi-national companies, can visit and work collaboratively with world-class academic researchers, offering a truly unique environment in which to support commercial research.

Emma brings 20 years' experience of research support and development within the HE sector, including support roles covering pre and post award for international and UK grants, with experience in the contractual negotiation process. As a member of the NCCAT senior management team she is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Centre, including financial management, human resources, as well as research and business development, strategic planning and managing relationships with industry partners.

"My unique skills and expertise and the professional contribution I make to the Centre is highly recognised and valued by the academic leads and industry partners."

Research Consulting

3. Motivations, career progression and training and development

About this section

This section considers the motivations of researcher enablers, perspectives on career progression and associated training and development.

Research enablers are frequently seen as a varied and inspiring interface between the academic and administrative career and these attributes are referred to when research enablers discuss their motivations to undertake these roles.

The survey, interviews and LinkedIn analysis provide insight into career trajectories showing how people come into research enabler roles, their prior organisations, experience and sectors. The nature of participants current or most recent research enabler role is considered. Evidence is provided to show how the skills and experiences obtained within research enabler roles supported career development and progression beyond research enabler roles.

The section concludes by considering the training and development needs of research enablers, with a particular need identified in relation to the induction of new research enablers.

"In my experience our research enablers are some of our most highly skilled professional staff, but they are often invisible and not given opportunities to step outside of their role (even temporarily) to develop or progress. We can lose excellent staff because they are just not visible, and organisations need to be more aware of their potential."

Overview of key messages: the characteristics of research enabler roles are viewed positively, but concerns exist over progression and longer-term career development

Research enablers consistently point to a number of positive motivating factors linked to these roles but alongside this exist some significant concerns over security of employment and career progression. Key messages include:

- Research enablers are motivated in their work by the independent, proactive, autonomous nature of their roles, with a wide variety of tasks and responsibilities.
- Many research enablers come from previous employment in research environments, particularly in Higher Education, or industry.
- Many research enablers (though by no means all) have PhDs, with a significant level of STEM expertise.
- The most frequently referenced skill individuals bring into research enabling roles (from previous employment) is project management.
- The skills seen as being of highest significance for research enabling roles are co-ordination, communication, and people and project management.
- Where training is available it seems to focus on current role requirements rather than future career development.
- Induction appears to be a particular weakness in the training lifecycle for research enablers and is an area where improved coordination of these roles would add value.

3.1 Motivations

Research enabling roles are seen as a varied and inspiring interface between the academic and administrative career

The survey asked participants to respond to a series of statements about **the significance of a range of characteristics of research enabling roles**. Characteristics which were identified as being of high significance included opportunities to work **independently and proactively**, undertaking a **wide variety of tasks** using a **wide range of skills and expertise**, and working with a high degree of **autonomy**.

Figure A6 (see Appendix) shows fuller detail of the responses, clearly demonstrating how strongly the first two sets of role characteristics are felt to have significance ("interesting and varied work that requires a wide range of skills and expertise" and "opportunity to work independently and proactively"), compared to other role characteristics.

Trust and empowerment from academic colleagues working closely with them

Additional responses and comments emphasised the importance and value of **trust from colleagues** and the work done by research enablers to earn the trust and confidence of the wider investigator / project / initiative team.

Survey free text responses and comments also mentioned **high commitment** to making a **meaningful contribution** – to research, society, health and well-being outcomes.

Strategic understanding is also seen as key characteristic of research enablers, helping them to inform decisions about proposals and programme design, retain a broad sense of the high-level perspective on a project, and influence decisions which take account of internal and external political considerations.

"The job varies from day to day and spans many different areas, that's what makes it a challenge and interesting …but there is no progression pathway to recognise achievements for me, while the researchers can take credit through their promotional pathways."

These characteristics are also reflected in the motivations people have for undertaking these roles.

These echo survey responses about the **motivations** for undertaking research enabling work, which appear to be intrinsic to the role itself. The roles provide opportunities to work independently and proactively; include a varied range of tasks and responsibilities and provide the satisfaction of seeing high value projects through to completion – and these are the most frequently cited high significance motivations.

Engagement with internal and external stakeholders and professional development opportunities are less frequently identified as high significance motivations, although even so 79% of respondents felt that "Working at the interface of academia and administration" was a medium or high significance motivation.

Despite points raised elsewhere about development and progression, 91% of respondents gave "professional development" as a high or medium significance motivation for their work. It appears that individual research enablers value the experience they gain in their roles and the skills they develop, even if a formal progression structure of an obvious promotion track (for example) is lacking. This is an important feature of the context in which research enablers work – a role that is positively valued in terms of satisfaction – but one where the lack of wider structure or management raises concerns over longer term progression.

In free text comments, individual motivations also included:

- Opportunities to engage with research (6)
- Opportunities to learn (4)
- Conditions of the job (4) – pay, stability, flexibility, autonomy
- Outcomes (3) – embedding EDI, adding value for the research enabler and the institution, "delivering useful outcomes"
- Opportunities to use their skills (2)
- People they work with (2) (academics, or "a fun, interactive team")

The top challenges experienced or perceived by research enablers: the impact of extensive use of fixed-term contracts, the wider lack of recognition for these roles and progression.

The survey sought participants' views (free text) on the top three challenges or issues they perceived in terms of the working environment as a research enabler. A thematic analysis of these indicates high frequency concerns such as:

- The impact of **high use of fixed-term contracts** on individuals, but also the disconnect this causes in terms of ensuring the benefits of research enabler experience flow into new projects;
- The (lack of) **recognition** of the skills and value of the role beyond the immediate project team; and
- **The absence of clear career paths,** in contrast to their academic peers, with a view that progression is strongly affected by the project-based (and funded) nature of these roles and perceived as very difficult to achieve without securing an entirely new job.

All three points have also featured strongly in the interviews conducted. Interviews highlighted that moves between research enabler roles were often horizontal moves. Despite the significant managerial responsibility progression to a higher graded role is seen as challenging.

"Fixed term contracts and no career progression within my research team make me wonder why I should stay in academia. I love my job, but the lack of security and progression without having to change the field is frustrating."

Several participants reported that despite significant leadership and accountability responsibilities held by many research enablers, these are typically not direct line-management responsibilities which are reported to have limited opportunities for re-grading and progression. Often as a result of being compared to other (non-research enabler) roles at departmental or school level. A call for recognition of these transferable skills was made.

"Sometimes colleagues view these roles as 'the admin' and not recognised for the valued contributions made at higher levels e.g. strategy, management, facilitation, brokering."

"(There is) no funded time to deliver the necessary grant preparation work but it is much better if this can be done by the same person who will be responsible during the "delivery" stage."

3.2 Career progression

Research enablers tend to come from prior roles in universities…

…but around a third come from roles outside HE.

The survey asked about the roles and organisations where participants worked prior to becoming research enablers (Figure 5). Research experience, in HE or other organisations, is the main area of experience for people taking on research enabler roles. **The single biggest group for entry into research enabler roles is researchers within the university environment.** University-based administration roles form the second largest group.

However, it is also notable that these roles draw in expertise and talent from a range of other organisations: including the NHS, charities, and industry. **Around a third of participating research enablers came from roles outside HE,** bringing valuable expertise into the sector.

Figure 5.

The nature of roles and organisations before a research enabler role

Role categories are shown on the left, organisation types shown on the right.
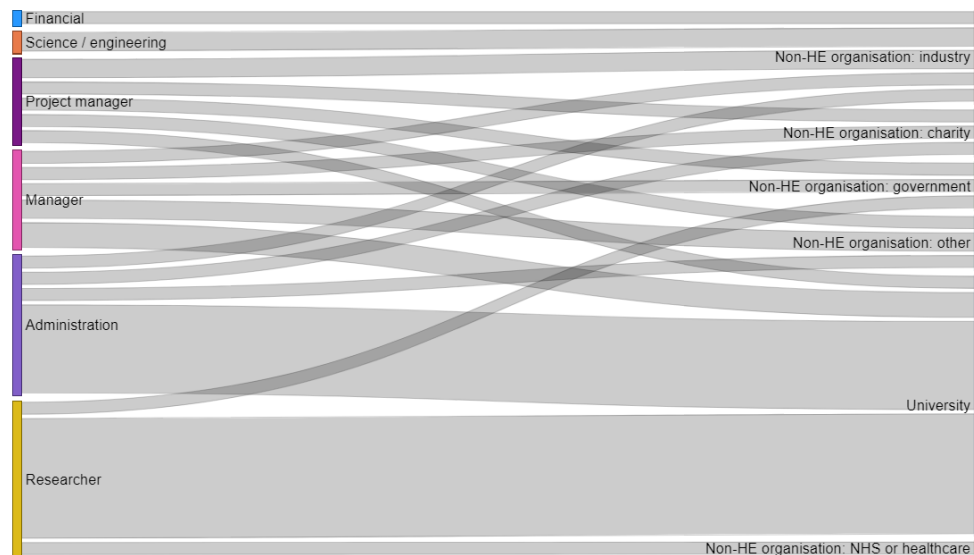
Most research enablers come from a prior background in research – management, administration or as a researcher

Figure 6 shows the pre research enabler roles and the context in which they were sited. The data showed 'research' environments as the most common context – this includes academic, government and industry employment contexts and roles which were managerial, administrative, project management or researcher. A small number come from wider HE administration or management roles. About a third come from other sectors / contexts.

Figure 6.

The nature of roles and the context for that role.
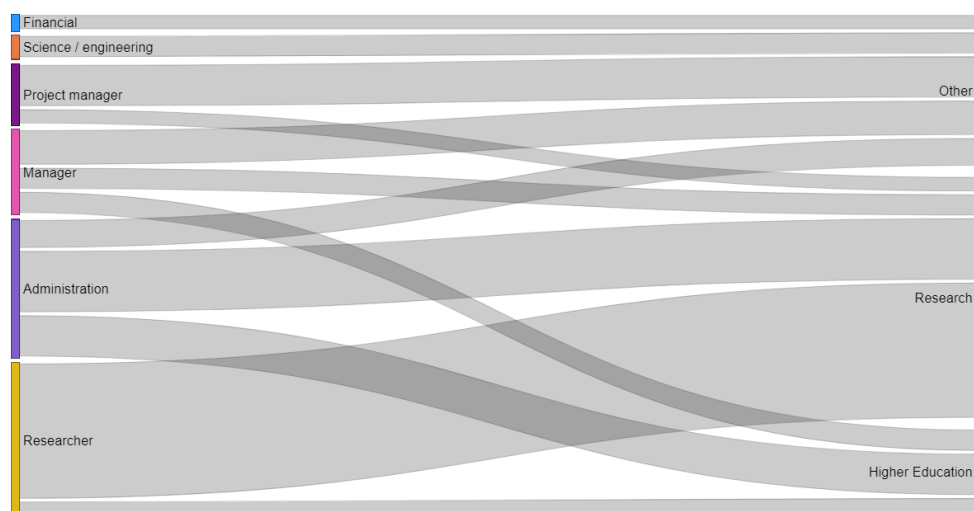
Research enabling roles tend to be at a managerial level. Previous roles include administrative,

From the LinkedIn analysis, it is possible to trace a pattern of broad job types from pre-research enabling roles, into research enabling roles and then, in some cases, on into

executive or professional roles

post-research enabling roles. **121** employment roles were identified in the **28** LinkedIn profiles, of which **58** were identified as being research enabling roles.

Examining career trajectories over time from **earlier employment roles** prior to becoming a research enabler (as recorded in the dataset for each individual), through to **post-research enabler roles**, there is some evidence of the value of research enabler roles to individual progression.

For example, roles prior to research enabler work include less senior job titles ("Assistant", "Associate", "Facilitator", "Officer", "Executive"). Out of 20 individuals for whom roles prior to research enabler work are noted, only 5 include job titles such as "Head" or "Director". Role titles for research enablers frequently include terms such as **Programme Manager**, **Project Manager**, **Centre Manager**, **Operations...**, or **Research Development Manager**.
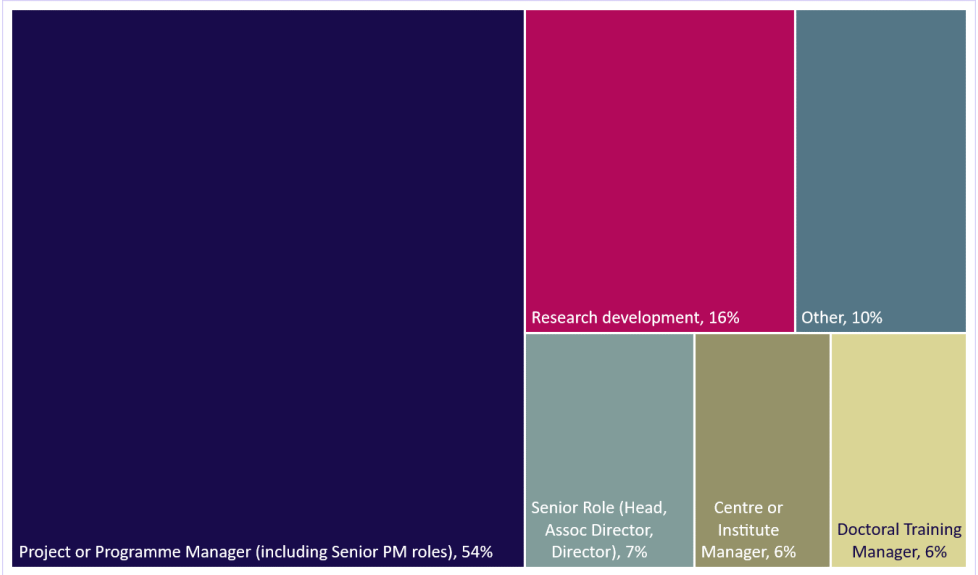
Job titles of people in research enabling roles tend to emphasise project or programme management

Survey participants indicated **the job title** of their current research enabler role (or their most recent role for those who had moved on into other roles). These were grouped to provide an overview of research enabler job titles. the majority of survey respondents give their current or most recent research enabling job title as Project or Programme Manager, alongside Doctoral Training project managers, centre / institute managers and research business development. Figure 7 presents the summary data.

54% of the roles were identified as having "project or programme manager" job titles. A further 12% were in managerial roles in centres/institutes or doctoral training programmes.

Figure 7.

Survey respondent job titles in their current or most recent research enabler role.

Project or Programme Manager (including Senior PM roles), 54% · Research development, 16% · Other, 10% · Senior Role (Head, Assoc Director, Director), 7% · Centre or Institute Manager, 6% · Doctoral Training Manager, 6%

Research enabler roles appear to enable employment moves without the need to change location.

Research enabling roles identified in the LinkedIn analysis are generally found in Higher Education. Movement between different research enabling roles may take place without the need for a significant change of location (e.g. without needing to move to another city).

People have moved into these roles, mostly from a Higher Education background, but also from charity and commercial sectors.

Peer support networks are important resources for research enablers and also open up opportunities for future employment.

In the survey responses, internal organisation networks were indicated as being most important for research enablers (43% reporting this as a high importance network). In interviews, participants noted their own experiences of finding new jobs through their network of internal organisational contacts.

In the survey responses, the PRISM Network was also seen as relatively important (26% high importance), although over a third of respondents saw this as low importance (which is perhaps surprising, considering that the survey was circulated to the PRISM Network and many respondents may therefore be members of this network). This may reflect the issue of capacity for the developing (and volunteer-driven) network to deliver or facilitate supporting activities for research enablers. In this regard, working with established organisations (wchapter hich is funded through institutional memberships) and organisations like Midlands Innovation, both of which have executive teams and existing delivery programmes, may be opportune.

Free text comments mentioned other networks including:

- **Sector specific** – e.g. NHS, UK Trial Managers, regional HEI networks (N8, SES), UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE)
- **Non-UK national research management networks** (e.g. Australasian Research Management Society)

People who have progressed on from research enabler roles positively recognise the importance of skills and experience gained as research enablers.

How the experiences of research enablers map against the competencies and experiences required for senior management roles is an area where the PRISM Network has identified a knowledge gap. Some of this may result from the fragmented nature of research enablers – the peer-to-peer knowledge of progression opportunities may be less evident when compared to more visible staff groups. The PRISM Network should help in this regard, not least by connecting research enablers working in different institutions.

Survey respondents who identified themselves as having moved on from research enabling roles noted the value of their work in helping them to progress.

"All of them [previous research enabler roles] informed and added to the bank of knowledge and contacts I could draw on."

"It was a huge influence, as it built my knowledge of clinical interface with NHS and research funding, research project management and administration. …has given me a breadth of knowledge and understand of the research landscape and of our academic community"

"The knowledge of managing a big international network was essential."

Skills gained from working as a research enabler are valued as helpful to career progression with hindsight. Evidence from the LinkedIn analysis suggests that skills gained from working as research enablers have contributed to the progression into senior roles. But these tend to be different roles – that are not research enabler roles or represent an entirely new job. Progression within research enabler roles is evidently more difficult.

"I was put forward for a promotion and it was declined. There wasn't an understanding that running an externally-funded institute is complex, with all the diplomacy, external stakeholders and everything else that we had to do."

| Longitudinal analysis indicates that research enablers move on into senior management roles in a range of roles and organisations | The LinkedIn analysis provides evidence that skills gained from working as a research enabler enable individuals to progress to more senior roles, both within and beyond Higher Education. |

The LinkedIn analysis provides evidence that skills gained from working as a research enabler enable individuals to progress to more senior roles, both within and beyond Higher Education.

Of **11** individuals within the LinkedIn sample who had progressed from research enabler roles into other roles, **6** included the words "Head of…" or "Director" include senior management roles (eg Head of… or Director of…). There is onwards movement into charity and commercial roles, including significant sector bodies such as Jisc, research councils and a national scientific laboratory.

The nature of these roles includes:

- leadership in non-university R&D-related organisations (e.g. director of strategy, director of business development);
- head or director-level roles linked to university research management, strategy, operations and business development; and
- other roles include product development, consultancy and partnership development.

Roles in high education organisations dominate, and many of the other roles are within related organisations.

Research Enabler profiles

Emma Kelly

Research enabler skills supporting career development

Following an initial role in industry as a safety and reliability engineer, Emma spent 8 years at the University of Nottingham within the advanced manufacturing research group. Her first role was as a research fellow on a joint industry project. She then moved into research enabler roles supporting a wide range of functions within the research group, including: programme management, financial management, quality (including the adoption of Prince2 methodologies and management of ISO9001 quality), stakeholder management, resource allocation and the management of multiple projects with various funders and collaborators.

Emma left the University in 2016 to become Chief Operating Officer at the Energy Research Accelerator, a strategic collaboration of universities and industry. The ERA comprised a £60m capital investment and £120m of co-investment from stakeholders. In 2021 Emma joined the National Nuclear Laboratory where she is currently Director of Strategy and Insight.

3.3 The training and development needs of research enablers and their portfolios

Research enablers felt that they had been given access to appropriate training, although induction appears to be a relatively weaker point in the training and development journey.

Over half of survey respondents agreed that their contribution had been recognised well by the close working colleagues and that they have been given access to relevant training opportunities. Comments from the interviews suggested that research enablers needed to be proactive about identifying and pursuing the training opportunities which were relevant to them.

Induction seems to be a relatively weaker point for survey respondents, with over half of respondents *disagreeing* with the statement "When I started my first research enabler role, I had an effective induction". This may be a feature of the locally-employed nature

of research enabler roles, set against the breadth of internal and external interfaces needed to do that role effectively. These may not always be apparent to project PIs.

When it comes to training, interviewees commented that while training directly related to the job was often available, general career development was not, as there was no grant funding for it and as grant-funded employees they were not supposed to access institutional funding.

"From my experience, research enabler roles can develop very quickly into something very different to what was advertised, once it is apparent what each team member brings to the table and where the gaps are. The research enabler tends to adjust with agility to these needs and the evolving direction of the project …The need for such an agile and adaptive way of working and the required characteristics and experience/educational background seems, however, largely un-reflected and not understood by the research office. "

Key skills identified for research enablers included co-ordination and management.

High requirement skills identified by respondents to the survey included:

- Co-ordination (97% indicating this as high requirement skill)
- Communication and engagement (88% high requirement)
- Project management (85% high requirement)
- People management (75% high requirement)

However, only 27% of survey respondents felt that "Research skills and understanding" were high requirement skills for carrying out their research enabling roles efficiently and effectively. This offers a contrast to the LinkedIn analysis, in which 57% of the sample had a PhD as their highest qualification. Whilst research enabler roles are attractive to PhD holders, it was also identified that a doctoral level qualification is not necessary to deliver the job successfully.

"I know a lot of centre managers who don't have a PhD and they're doing a stellar job"

Free text survey responses enabled people to expand further on the skills required for their roles, in particular focusing on:

- **Interpersonal skills**: getting on with people, diplomacy, influencing, team working
- **Independence**: self-motivation, working independently, being proactive
- **Engaging externally**: "Patient and public involvement", "working across different cultures"
- **A varied skill set**: multitasking, creativity, perseverance, writing, learning new areas quickly
- **Strategic thinking**

Broader comments on skill requirements included **noting the value of soft skills** "significantly underestimated in these roles", as well as divided opinions about **the value of subject knowledge**. For some, this was "almost entirely redundant to be successful in these roles", for another respondent "I have found my scientific background invaluable in my role" and for someone else "the most important skill has been the ability to quickly understand the subject area".

"You're multi-skilled taking on marketing, finance, comms roles etc when required saving the project/wider university "

"I wouldn't say it's necessary because you know you could just manage the projects from a purely project management background. But I think it certainly makes the job more interesting for me."

Skills which people brought with them into their first research enabling role particularly focused on project management.

Survey responses indicated that project management was the set of skills which research enablers most frequently brought into their first role in this field (Figure 8). Stakeholder and communication skills were also highly cited in the responses, along with understanding research funding and management, sector-specific knowledge and specialist skills, such as evaluation, data handling and development of standard operating procedures.

Figure 8.

Grouping of the important skills and experience brought into research enablers roles as reported by survey participants.

Training that supports longer term career progression and value to the employing institution

The localised management and recruitment of research enablers means aspects of support for training and development are not well provided. This may also affect induction which was perceived to be less well supported than other areas of training. See also Appendix Figure A7.

By "localised" we mean that they are typically recruited to a project, within a group or departmental environment. This means access to some of the institutional contexts for research may not be as visible, accessible or feature in development opportunities.

"There is a lack of support in place: I'm line managed by an academic (my DTP Director), who isn't equipped to support me with CPD or any issues not directly related to the DTP."

This suggests a need for an institutional level perspective on training and development for these staff, recognising the likelihood of their progression to other roles within that institution, considering their longer-term contribution and (importantly) progression.

By virtue of their continued employment within their institutions and likely contribution to a series of projects (albeit most often via a series of fixed-term contracts), the evidence from this research indicates that research enablers are a specialist staff group in whom investment in training and development will deliver benefits for the wider institution in terms of capability, capacity and reducing recruitment risks.

Research Enabler profiles

Nick Bennett has been working in research enabler roles for more than 10 years, managing several large research grants and facilitating business engagement activities.

| Nick Bennett

Building business partnerships for research | He has a PhD in Chemistry and used to work in drug discovery in the pharmaceutical industry.

Nick currently works as a Senior Project Manager in the Business Partnership Unit of the School of Chemistry where he does everything from grant writing support, negotiating research collaboration contracts, identifying and helping to protect novel IP, business engagement, knowledge transfer, budget and any other project management activities to deliver projects successfully. While project management is the core focus of his work, he is occasionally also contributing to the science of projects.

Apart from all the project management support, Nick also recognises the significant impact his and other equivalent roles have in creating a more positive research culture by developing and implementing best practice across the institution and creating horizontal links where skills and knowledge can be transferred. Being an integral part of the project team and based locally, means he is approachable and can address challenges quickly which helps building trust.

"My role allows me to be involved in major research projects from their conception through to delivery. I work closely with both post-doctoral researchers, the PI/CIs and industry collaborators helping bridge any gaps between partners and ensuring a positive and inclusive project environment that enables successful delivery of world leading science." |

| **Research Enabler profiles**

Sharon Henson

Facilitating postdoctoral development | Sharon Henson manages the Centre for Postdoctoral Development in Infrastructure, Cities and Energy. She manages a team of 7 and thinks that research enabler roles are essential for larger scale projects, freeing up academic time and managing project costs and communications. The role also involves strategy and long-term planning, working with other senior members of the C-DICE leadership team.

Research enablers can help to sustain ongoing relationships with industry partners providing new opportunities for collaboration through research networks built up in previous projects.

Sharon enjoys a high degree of autonomy in her role, with varied and interesting work – something different every day.

"You need to have an understanding of the subject area you work in; to work with people in your team; to think about strategic and long-term planning and to do the finance part of the research. I've also been out and given talks and presentations at conferences about the research, so you definitely need communication skills, too." |

4. Opportunities and risks for stakeholders

About this section

The previous sections have illustrated the importance of research enabling roles as an integral part of project-based delivery of large externally funded research endeavours. Here, there report explores risks and opportunities for funders, institutions in receipt of funding and those that work in research enabling positions.

Key messages

Risks:

- The absence of well-defined and accepted role profiles makes growing and recruiting into these roles difficult. It also hinders transitions from one post into the next.
- The management of research enablers as a critical and expert (difficult to replace) resource leads to project vulnerabilities and poor institutional learning.
- Dependencies on individuals create significant risks for organisations and funders.
- Research enablers are often poorly supported in their career development creating job insecurity and dead-end roles for them.

Opportunities:

- Increased visibility of research enabling roles and their contributions will aid a better integration within institutions. This can be actively supported by funders.
- More clearly defining role profiles across the sector will enable better sharing of best practice and networking. It will support recruitment as well as employability of individuals.
- Consider how UKRI and institutional research offices could work together to address the funding gap between major projects. In particular, how could the benefits of research enablers be delivered into awarded projects in the pre-start phases, which currently sit outside the window of eligible cost.

4.1 Risks

Projects have a high dependency on individuals, with in built risks because of the extensive use of fixed-term contracts.

A key risk for funders and institutions lays in the fact that the **success of large-scale investments is often dependent on individuals**, i.e. the lead-PI and the programme / centre manager and their relationship. Considering that UKRI's annual budget stands at about £8bn and that research enablers play a crucial role in delivering their externally funded portfolio, it would seem fundamental to embed these roles better within the project and their institutions. For research enabler roles, in turn, this is a systematic risk anchored in the way these roles are largely supported by specific grants on a fixed-term basis. This is a question for funders and employing institutions, and is set against the context of increasing complexity, ambition and scale in many large-scale funded projects / programmes.

This is exacerbated by a need for individual post-holders to seek follow-on employment before their current project has come to an end, thereby **potentially leaving the project in a crucial phase**. Finding a qualified replacement at short notice for a short period of

time often proves challenging if not impossible. There is a need to consider options for mitigating and minimising this risk.

(A key issue is) "the lack of professional services management understanding around the specific nature of research enabler roles, their variety and long-term relationship-building key elements within research."

"I think there are often questions around where should some of these roles be based? Could they move across different departments? Or are they launched in a department? How disciplinary? How much does the discipline matter?"

An opportunity for funders to do more to contribute to best practice and enable sustainability

Participants indicate that funders currently do little to contribute to **a body of best practice** leaving funding receiving institutions to (re-)create these roles for each individual project and absorb the risks that come with employing staff on fixed-term contracts.

The prevailing perception is still that administration takes money away from research and that such costs therefore should be minimised in the project design stages.

"When projects are being developed and costed it's assumed that admin is an unnecessary overhead. But for research, you have <u>necessary</u> overheads – why would you not then have a specialist research manager, who can just get on with it for you?"

Funders need to own a narrative that is equally mindful of value for money as it is of the huge complexity and fragility of multimillion large-scale multi-partner projects and actively encourage appropriate infrastructure to ensure successful delivery. Options include:

- clarifying funder expectations for project management resource on major awards, linked to the nature and complexity of awards (and good practice observed on past awards);
- evaluate and indicate the level of resource commonly costed to major programmes and the nature of this; and
- recognise the value and contribution of research enablers in their profiling of research teams.

In addition to the above, but more challenging to accomplish in practice is how funders can work with awardee institutions to better enable situations where research enablers are in place for the commencement of those projects or programmes which most benefit from this resource. This may be question of flexibility over starting arrangements, funding profiles and expectations – to enhance project inception and start-up. For example, being project funded limits the ability of experienced research enablers to contribute to a new (as yet not contracted) project – even if the same funder is involved. And universities might lack budgets to bridge employment from central funds.

"The benefits that research enabler roles bring to the university is the successful implementation of processes, because research enabler roles mean they know how to set out a schedule for the delivery of those projects"

Towards recognition of research enablers as an important institutional capability: addressing the high utilisation of fixed-term contracts and

A core issue for the development of institutional capability and improved development of research enablers is the high proportion of fixed term contracts and occurrence of consecutive contracts on a fixed-term basis. 34% of survey respondents cited 3 or more fixed-term contracts in research enabler roles (see also Appendix B, figure A2). Alongside this are associated issues in that fixed-term staff are not seen as priority for long-term development needs.

improving development landscapes.	This is contrasted with the survey evidence (see also Appendix B, figure A1) that over 50% of the survey respondents had been working as research enablers for six or more years (and 24% had over 10 years of experience). Other evidence reinforces the conclusion that these roles generate long-term and highly skilled university employees – who can work across disciplines. There is some evidence of change whereby institutions take steps to improve the coherence of management for this group of staff, recognising these issues and the benefits of that this capability brings.
	The local employment and project-funded nature of this staff group makes it hard for employing organisations to apply a more coordinated and managed approach. Fear of redundancy entitlements for roles outside the core establishment of the institution's staffing plan hinder moves to underwrite or pool positions that would increase continuity both for the institution and individuals.
	"There are questions around where these roles should be based? Could they move across different departments? Or are they based in a department? How much does the discipline matter?"
Fixed-term contracts hinder project continuity and institutional learning	Fixed-term contracts in turn mean that projects are at risk of not having secured, or of losing, key capabilities particularly at the crucial start-up and closure phase. At the same time this impacts on institutional learning and hinders any lessons learned that could feed into future applications.
Roles are not embedded within institution leading to poor oversight and integration	Recruiting into these roles on a project-basis limits the extent to which they are viewed as a group, and so we observed very limited **local advocacy within institutions** that could lead on the formation of hubs, as we see at some institutions. The **oversight of these roles therefore remains fragmented** with too much dependence on individual relationships between lead PI and post holders and too little integration into the wider institutional processes.
	Recruitment in itself is a key risk, as interviews with academic beneficiaries have confirmed, reporting of the challenges finding qualified research enablers willing to take up roles. The evidence suggests research enablers are mostly successful in securing sustained employment at their institution – across contracts and projects – and this is important in recognising the long-term value and benefits of change.
	The absence of management at a group level impacts on limited staff development for post holders. Lastly, by not formalising research enabling roles, institutions lose out on institutional learning, breaking the research lifecycle where learning from project delivery should inform future bids.
	"Learning from experience of what does work, what doesn't work, how to set projects up, how to organize things like strategic advisory boards, how to report to the funders, how to close the projects down, how to protect the intellectual property, how to negotiate the research contracts and just providing a coordination of all those things. Which then can be written into the next big grant like we know how to do this and we will do this, this and this because we know it works and therefore help secure those next future grants because we've got mechanisms for running them. We've got a track record of delivering them."
Individual research enablers carry the largest risks	As things currently stand, the evidence suggests that individual research enablers accept significant risks in taking on roles which involve fixed-term contracts and project-funded

roles. These risks would be mitigated through wider recognition of their contribution and improved internal management of this group of staff.

"I have worked in research enabler roles for the NHS and for a medical charity. In those sectors, research enabler roles were better recognised, defined and respected. Within a university structure, research enabler roles are much less visible or respected. "

At the same time, this research has established their crucial role in delivering individual projects, and the value of this capability to the wider institution and research environment. Consequently, their well-being must be at the heart of any initiative, mitigating the risks outlined in this section.

From the survey responses, the biggest challenges for research enablers themselves are to do with contracts – a high level of **fixed-term contracts** (67% amongst survey respondents) mean limited job security as well as potential lack of continuity within project delivery.

These issues should also be seen in the context of the wider survey responses that illustrates the perceptions and experiences of individual research enablers, which note a **lack of opportunities for progression** and a **a lack of recognition** of the expertise and contribution made by research enablers. **Workload and conditions** are also challenging both in terms of "*impossibly high workload*" and the emotional challenges of "*isolation and inability to connect with other research enablers*". **Navigating institutional interfaces, systems, processes and priorities** is also challenging, particularly for initiatives or projects based in HEIs but at one remove from the central structures of the institution.

4.2 Opportunities for improvement

Opportunities for improvement map closely to key risks and issues.

The survey and interviews explored "opportunities for improvement" in the environment for research enablers. These opportunities for improvement mapped closely to the issues and risks already discussed and are summarised in the following sections.

Funders and institutions: recognising the value of research enablers in project development, design and implementation.

There is undoubtably a gap in knowledge around the role and contribution of research enablers in terms of benefits to institutions and to the funders themselves. A valuable contribution to addressing this can be made through funders and institutions recognising and articulating the evidence around benefits of these roles in support of major funding bids. This is discussed further below in terms of the specific in the bidding stages of major calls.

Longer term contracts would help to address some of the most frequently expressed issues relating to fixed-term contracts.

The most frequently suggested recommendation for improvement was to move to **longer term contracts**, whether permanent, or at least longer-term minimum length contracts.

Respondents also suggested creating a **pool system for research enablers**, with some evidence of this approach being adopted in some universities. Others indicated that such pools might be workable across institutions, recognising the practical challenges to this

Improving job continuity for research enablers, would also mitigate some of the institutional and funders' risk around potential single points of failure jeopardising large-scale research investments.

*"And maybe if you were to think about it really radically, **really** radically, maybe these are permanent roles with UKRI and UKRI - a resource provided by UKRI to your project"*

Career pathways, networks and opening up leadership roles to research enablers would all help to provide opportunities for progression.

A number of opportunities to improve progression were identified. These included **creating a career pathway** for research enablers – the TALENT programme for technicians was mentioned as an exemplar of an effective approach to this type of challenge. It was suggested that **leadership roles** which might conventionally be seen as aimed at academic leaders (Directors of Research within universities, for example) could be opened up to research enablers. **Internal (institutional) and external networks** could be strengthened, and more dissemination of information about **example successful career pathways** could be helpful. **Enhancing visibility** of research enabling roles could also help to establish them as roles to aspire to.

Terminology and definitions of these roles can help to improve recognition

Surveys and interviews highlighted some of the issues and complexities with definitions of research enabling roles, and with the term PRISM, with some preferences expressed for "research enabler" instead of the acronym. Clear terminology and communication of the remit of these roles would help to increase visibility and stress the importance of these roles.

There is an opportunity for funders to articulate their expectations for the inclusion of resources to address functions typically supported by research enablers at the design stage of calls.

There were also suggestions about opportunities for improvements in terms of funder roles – perhaps through having **research enablers as Co-Is or PIs** on applications and by setting clear expectations or requirements about the **full costing of these roles** and **acknowledgement** of them in applications and reports. This would recognise the porosity of academic and administrative roles, identified as the 'third space professional' in earlier academic work by Whitchurch (see p. 9.), and allow transition between such roles as is common practice in many Asian countries.

The recent EPSRC pre-announcement call for Doctoral Training Centres[6] addresses this suggestion which was advocated for by the PRISM network. This shows the importance of funder-led communications and implementing change at the call design stage. These changes can also contribute to a more general shift towards **greater emphasis on team science**, both to external (funder) audiences and within and across HEIs and research institutes.

Training – especially at induction – as well as standardisation of recruitment information can help to address issues with workload and conditions.

There is clearly space for a **structured approach to induction**, particularly for research enablers entering their first role. This could apply both within the sector and could be modelled for institution-specific application. Issues with **role descriptions and job profiles** could be addressed by **standardisation** of core activity descriptions and by ensuring that current research enablers are actively involved in developing descriptions for specific roles. Research enablers should also be **fully embedded** within the organisational structure.

Retaining and re-using the skills of research enablers, streamlining

HEIs should seek to **retain and re-use** the skills of research enablers within the organisation, recognising the value of their perspective and experience in making improvements and a broader contribution beyond an individual project or initiative.

access to institutional systems and reducing barriers also provide areas for improvement.	**Barriers to access to institutional systems** relevant to research enabling roles should be **reduced and removed** wherever possible. Research offices should take a **realistic and consistent approach to costing** research enabling activities, and should plan for research enabler posts to begin and end with a sufficient margin of time before and after the project / initiative to permit fully engaged research enabler cover **throughout the whole project life-cycle**.
Increasing administrative support, **tailoring HR processes to research enabling roles**, and improving succession planning can all help to reduce inefficiencies caused by a lack of continuity between projects.	Opportunities were identified to **increase administrative support** to research enablers. Across institutions or within wider networks, sharing best practice, reducing duplication of effort and providing guidance documentation would also help to **reduce inefficiencies caused by a lack of continuity between projects**, which mean that processes often need to be created afresh for each new project. It was noted that standard institutional HR procedures may not be appropriate for research enablers, or **could be managed more sensitively or flexibly** – for example, standard HEI redundancy processes, and timing of redeployment information can impact negatively on research enablers on fixed-term contracts. **Improved succession planning** could assist in providing continuity of support to projects and to ongoing project and initiative pipelines. The value of ensuring that research enablers are well-informed and empowered to **take steps to foreground EDI** considerations within project and initiative planning and delivery were also emphasised as ways to ensure inclusion and representation within project delivery, teams and activities.
Funders play an important role in realising these opportunities	Many of these suggestions made require action on the funder side to change their approach to funding and policy. The conclusions and recommendations section is exploring potential actions in more detail.
Research Enabler profiles Claudia Matz Managing doctoral training centres	Claudia Matz is the manager of two EPSRC-funded Centres for Doctoral Training. She was involved in the instigation of the Nottingham Manager Network, which has helped her and her colleagues to share best practice. Claudia has been at the University of Nottingham for twelve years. She holds a PhD in biological sciences and worked for many years for biological services company before starting at the university. She observes, how essential it is to have good project managers for large programme grants and centres because the lead academics have multiple other roles. As programme manager, she has a strategic perspective on the delivery of the project. She sees her role as a bridge between academic and administrative departments as well as important external stakeholders, such as industry partners and not at last, funders. She also acknowledges the importance of pastoral care in her role being the first point of contact for students and somebody they can build a relationship with and trust.
Research Enabler profiles Sophie Dale-Black	When Horizon was funded in 2009, the £13m funds from EPSRC and £16m from partners represented the largest ever research award to the University. Set up as a multidisciplinary centre of excellence for Digital Economy research, Horizon planned to work in collaboration with leading academic, commercial, public and third sector partners across a broad spectrum of subjects to deliver impact to shape the digital

Research enablers at the heart of major project funding	economy of tomorrow. Subsequently a Horizon Centre for Doctoral Training was also secured and added to the scale of the programme. Alongside additional leveraged funds from public and private sources, the annual budget grew from £2.4m to £5m in a three-year period.
	Dr Sophie Dale-Black, having support the bidding process, played a key role in implementing and managing Horizon as Director of Operations. This had scale and complexity, for example the Collaborative Research Programme sought to fund projects across nine departments and four faculties of the University of Nottingham. Being there at the outset Sophie estimates to have reduced the implementation phase by 3-6 months, with benefits to the funder in terms of meeting spending profiles. Financial management, pastoral advice to PGR students and early career researchers and the development of process supporting financial management and impact capture were all part of the role.
	Prior to Horizon, Sophie had worked as Programme Manager for Interdisciplinary Projects at the University of Nottingham, as a post-doctoral researcher and also had experience of working in industry.
	Her subsequent career has included senior roles at Innovate UK, Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), and voluntary roles at the University of Leicester as a Trustee, Vice Chair of Council and member of University Court. Sophie is now Director for the Midlands and the North of England area of the UK Network in the British Business Bank, supporting smaller businesses to access finance to develop and grow.
	"My role meant that Horizon's leading academics could focus on the management and direction of the research. They were always involved in important issues and decisions, but day to day management, creating processes, fixing the problems and pastoral support to the wider team of researchers was dealt with."

Research Consulting

Research Consulting Limited is a Company Registered in England and Wales, Reg No. 8376797   37
www.research-consulting.com

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Research enablers are an **integral and crucial** part of the research ecosystem.

This research supports the view that research enablers are an integral and crucial part of the research ecosystem, co-leading the delivery of large strategic investments in the form of externally funded centres and research collaborations.

The benefits of research enabling roles are experienced by a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, collaborating partners, funders, and the wider organisation in which the research enabler is based. In particular, the responses from participants indicate strong benefits and contributions to three key groups:

- **Academics and research teams**, by providing complementary resource and expertise that delivers benefits in terms of the dedicated time and focus of their work, supporting a positive-research environment. Academic participants cited the value of these roles in enabling academic time to be focused on areas where it was most needed, reducing the opportunity cost of time spent on other areas. Project management, collaborator co-ordination and financial management are highly frequency tasks. Provision of pastoral support to doctoral and early career researchers was also commonly cited.
- For **employing institutions** research enablers work across a wide range of internal interfaces, supporting compliant project delivery, reporting, co-ordination and addressing delivery risks. Research enablers also report high levels of activity for external communication, reporting and co-ordination, particularly with funders, collaborators and industrial partners.
- For **sponsors / funders** where research enablers are a significant asset in reducing delivery risk, supporting effective and timely implementation and co-designing applications for follow-on funding. They are also often key points of contact for funders during delivery, supporting effective project delivery and management (in particular regarding expenditure) that delivers direct benefits to the sponsor (slow to spend projects, or year 1 underspends are a consistent issue for research funders).

A summary of issues and key points: **recognition** of research enabler roles and the benefits; **risks** for employers and funders.

Building on the previous four sections, this section summarises findings and presents conclusions from the different research strands. These are grouped into two areas: recognition and risks.

Recognition of research enabler roles and the benefits

Greater recognition and understanding of the role of research enablers is a pathway to addressing the risks associated with an important, highly experienced, but (contractually precarious) staff group.

- The contribution of research enablers to project delivery is strong but under-recognised outside the immediate team.
- Research enabler roles should be recognised as a **critical and integral part** of a successful delivery team for large, externally funded, collaborative projects.
- There is some evidence that the **aggregate capability** that research enablers bring as a group to the wider university may be increasingly important, for example in an institution's ability to realise success with major, short notice opportunities.

- Research culture and environment: academics feel particular benefit from effective research enabler support, however, most research environments have not integrated research enablers well.

Risks and issues for key stakeholders, including employers and funders

The report identifies the benefits of research enablers to a range of stakeholders and the wider research environment. These benefits are not fully optimised at present and are an opportunity for interventions that further support a positive research environment. The circumstances of research enabler roles also present risks to the benefits that are evident.

- In most cases **research enablers are a single point of failure within research projects and programmes**. Currently research enablers are typically not part of larger teams than can mitigate this risk. Limited institutional co-ordination and coherence places additional risk on the research project for the academic leads, the university and funder should the research enable not continue in role.
- There is **very limited sector-wide understanding on job descriptions, role profiles or appropriate grades** for these roles. Internal variability and inconsistency is evident, and suggests a lack of wider understanding on the nature and requirements for these roles. The recruitment of these roles compounds this and adds to the difficulty of identifying this group of staff.
- **Pathways need to be established to better integrate these roles into the wider institutional landscape** for research support and delivery. Given the career pathway many research enablers follow, further consideration should be given to how transitioning from academic to administrative roles or how blended research/admin roles can be better supported.
- Appreciation of the skills and expertise required by some research enablers is evident beyond academia, and **risks the loss of talent from the sector as individuals seek career progression**. We have observed that **some research enabler roles require a complexity of skills and experience equivalent to that of a chief operating officer of a small business** and as such are highly transferable to other sectors.

Large-scale, externally funded programmatic activities **equally demand academic and administrative** expertise.	Research enabler roles need to be recognised as indispensable and integral part of successful project delivery of large, externally funded, collaborative projects.
	The evidence from research enablers and academics who had worked closely with research enablers is clear that there are significant benefits for major programmes and projects where an academic / administrative "management team" is in place early in the design or implementation phases.
	The analogy of research enablers as a 'small business chief operating officer' is a useful concept: start-ups companies and SMEs not only require scientific or technical expertise but also in-depth management and administrative skills to establish successful enterprises.
	When it comes to externally funded programme grants (often with equivalent budgets), participants indicated that in designing new programmes, **lead academics may still underestimate the need and experience of management resource for these awards**.
Benefits of research enablers are felt particularly clearly by academics and	Research enablers provide support for research that commonly moves into **leadership of critical elements in successful project development, delivery and communication**. The

Research Consulting

researchers, but also help to improve the wider research culture and environment.

contribution of research enablers to project or initiative delivery is strong but under-recognised beyond the immediate team.

Academics (investigators, collaborators etc) involved in major programmes particularly benefit from effective research enabler support, but wider **benefits to research culture and environment** are equally apparent.

For funders, **research enablers provide reliable single-point-of-contact partners for ensuring the delivery of major programmes, facilitating a rapid start, robust planning and design, effective delivery, sound financial management and planning** and accurate and timely reporting. For external collaborators, industry and other universities, research enablers bring resources supporting effective coordination and communication. Where major projects call for devolved or sub-allocations of funding, research enablers are instrumental in creating and maintaining processes for this.

The capability and capacity that research enablers bring as a group to the wider university is increasingly important in contributing to success with major opportunities that emerge with very tight timescales for development (and sometimes delivery). This also includes invaluable experience feeding into the design of new bids.

"Feedback from academics in my team is that they cannot deliver projects without their research enabler, it is that simple. As these roles have developed, awards have also developed in complexity and require skills that are often not possessed by academics."

Challenges facing these roles include the responsibilities and skillset required, a lack of shared understandings of core aspects of these roles, as well as less well-developed mechanisms for sharing best practice and institutional learning.

The importance of these roles, and associated challenges experienced by current research enablers should not be underestimated.

There is currently no sector-wide understanding or consensus on suitable job descriptions, role profiles or grades, and even within individual institutions, internal variability and inconsistency is evident. Consequently, there is no sector-wide understanding of the importance of these roles, no clear career path for research enablers, and transition from one role to another can be difficult, as budgets for these roles can be severely restricted. The employment contexts for research enablers also make progression difficult, and analogies with other "university manager" roles are not perceived to recognise the complexity and context of research enabler roles.

There are currently gaps and opportunities for improvement in relation to assimilation and dissemination of good practice and operational processes. Career pathways need to be established to better integrate these roles into the wider institutional landscape for research and enable career progression of individuals.

More needs to be done to offer appropriate training, especially in the form of structured inductions, and to address potential barriers within institutions at internal interfaces between research enablers and core institutional systems and professional services.

The report identifies how many research enablers are drawn from active researcher roles, and that some continue with a substantive research activity alongside their research enabler role. This raises some questions and possible opportunity for further consideration on how research enablers roles might operate successfully and more dynamically across research and administration staff groups.

5.2 Recommendations

Summary of recommendations and areas for further review and progress

The report identifies recommendations to address the issues discussed in preceding sections. These are grouped into **four areas**:

- establishing a recognised professional identity for research enablers;
- improving the management of research enablers within institutions;
- a leading role for research funders; and
- enhancing training and development for research enablers

These actions are critical in supporting the progression of discussions and actions to support change at institutional levels.

Recommendation:

Establishing and implementing a recognised professional identity for research enablers

- Universities should identify the cohort of research enablers active on programmes, projects and initiatives within the organisation, building on the evidence in this report to understand local value, issues and ways forward.
- Improve the visibility and recognition of these roles, drawing on successful approaches adopted for other staff groups (e.g. technical staff), developing and disseminating an improved role profile and understanding of the role strengthening the professional identity of research enablers. This will also aid consistency across the sector.
- Establish institutional and regional peer networks of research enablers to support well-being, sharing of best practice and to help establish their professional identity.
- Enhance engagement of research enablers with national professional networks: PRISM, ARMA and PraxisAuril and consider forming special interest groups (SIGs) within these networks.

Recommendation:

Improving the management of research enables within institutions

- Consider the approaches to the development of more formal structures for the institutional management and deployment of research enabler skills.
- Use the evidence of the pathways into research enabler roles to allow further discussion and exploration of the link between research roles, administrative roles and research enabler roles. In particular considering the porosity and dynamics of movement between these roles and associated opportunities.
- Mitigate risks to universities by identifying mechanisms to improve the continuity of knowledge and experience of research enablers, informed by greater understanding of the role(s) and benefits.
- Maximise the benefits of research enabler roles to the wider research environment and communicate / disseminate them so research enabler roles are used effectively when required and are resourced properly into projects.

Recommendation:

A leading role for research funders

- Research funders should demonstrate their appreciation of the value and benefits of these roles through explicit inclusion in funding calls, enabling inclusion of research enablers as Co-I's when appropriate or featuring research enabler contributions in initiatives such as the 101 roles in research.[7]
- Funders should establish mechanisms to ensure that projects are well resourced, not only from start to finish but also in the design and start-up phase as well as

---

[7] https://www.ukri.org/news-and-events/101-jobs-that-change-the-world/

immediately after project closure. This should enable institutions to plan for these roles more strategically and move to longer-term, ideally permanent, contracts.

- Better guidance to stipulate the necessity for senior research enabler roles working in tandem with PIs on large project-based awards. Where necessary, further administrative support should be costed in.

Recommendation:

Enhancing training and development for research enablers

- Ensure appropriate training is available to enable research enablers to deliver their roles effectively, including support for coaching or mentoring and internal connections to relevant professional services.
- Ensure all research enablers receive an effective induction that extends to the various university functions that they will interact with not just the academic group in which they will be based.

5.3 Further discussion of the recommendations

Developing an improved role profile and understanding of the role: **professional identity**

Research enablers are an integral part of successful project delivery but as a group lack a clear voice and recognition within institutional structures. This is changing in some cases, where the value of the capability research enablers bring is more clearly understood. **Research enabler roles need to be recognised as highly skilled and integral roles supporting the successful delivery of large, externally funded projects**.

Pathways need to be established to integrate these roles into the wider institutional context, providing continuity for research enablers and for the organisations in which they are based. This approach would also further improve the delivery of major programmes for funders, by ensuring a rapid start, robust design, and effective delivery. Full **acknowledgement should be given to** these roles and to their broader **benefits to research culture and to the research environment**. This includes facilitating the assimilation and dissemination of good practice and operational processes between research enablers, across different projects or initiatives and within the wider institution.

A leading role for **research funders**

Funders have a crucial role to play in supporting research enablers and are a key beneficiary of their work, in particular UKRI, as their significant funding of large projects or programmes means they support, and benefit from, a large number of research enablers nationally. UKRI has a role in supporting and encouraging the development of supporting networks[8] and in celebrating the role as part of the team delivering research.

It is also likely that UKRI, via project financial returns, has additional evidence on the role of research enablers in supporting major research investment and special investments (like networks) which may further support good practice and shared understanding.

---

[8] As the British Academy has demonstrated with their Early Career Researcher Network (ECRN), launched only last year and with already more than 1,800 sign-ups, funders are in a powerful position to enable networking and best practice exchange, thereby increasing visibility and access for participants and setting the tone of the debate. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/early-career-researcher-network-pilot-programme-extended-after-successful-launch/

Funders have a lead role in supporting changes to the perception and conditions of research enabler roles. Through their funding and guidance, funders have a significant influence on the perception and conditions of research enabler roles. Call design and guidance should reflect the importance of research enablers having a major role in delivering funders' significant research investments and managing related impact and risks. Actions may include:

- Within calls for proposals, an emphasis on appropriately resourcing of project management and administration of large-scale awards by qualified experts to ensure inclusion when appropriate.
- Recognition of research enablers as Co-Is, where appropriate, to acknowledge the increased porosity of academic and administrative roles.
- Consider what flexibility in funding terms linked to realising strong project management / delivery, could better enable deployment of resources to support start-up and closure on large and complex projects.

Funders should lead on developing job identifiers

Funders should work with the sector **towards a library of job identifiers to ensure equality of roles** across the sector. Understanding is needed that large-scale projects often require more than just one research enabling role, often at different grades, skills focus and percentage of time. Here pooling across projects will be particularly important so that part-time allocations can be made.

Enhance engagement with national professional networks: PRISM, ARMA and PraxisAuril

The emergence of the PRISM Network is a positive development. We recommend **increased engagement with existing professional networks**, where there are institutional memberships and existing capacity for delivering training, such as ARMA for example. A critical mass of research enablers within ARMA could form a 'special interest group' (SIG), focussing on particular issues for these roles.

Ensure internal and regional collaboration peer networks are strong

The nature of employment for research enablers places greater importance for individuals on being able to access supporting networks and training / development opportunities.

This includes facilitated internal networks, to other research enablers and key internal stakeholders (for example the research office) and external networks.

Given the relatively low numbers of research enablers within individual universities, regional collaborations such as Midlands Innovation have a potential role in facilitating networking, training and sharing of best practice including showcasing events that would increase visibility.

Embedding research enabler roles within the institution, towards an institutional capability and capacity.

Institutions need to explore both **formal and informal ways to better embed research enabler roles within the organisation**. At an informal level, creating networks to share best practice, as some institutions or their research enablers have done, will be a starting point.

There is a case to recommend the development of more formal structures for the institutional management and deployment of research enabler skills. These may be required to address improved induction, integration into processes, line-management, support for career development and institutional learning.

At least one institution has already created designated project management teams pooling resources from large programme grants and underwritten by the institution.

Others have chosen a similar approach but integrated these roles into their post award function. What is important to bear in mind, is the need for investment into these roles with clear role descriptors and career pathways.

An institutional management approach is expected to confer benefits in terms of:

- Retaining research enabler skills and capability, establishing career progression;
- Establishing the right induction, training and development support;
- Provide flexibility in resourcing, avoid single point failures and supporting part-time working; and
- Creating greater opportunity to deploy research enabler skills across the project lifecycle: from design to closure and the incorporation of lessons learned into future practice.

As part of developing more sustainable approaches to research an improved capability for research enablers, dialogue between universities and funders, including Research England, is recommended. This should explore the barriers, funding and flexibilities which may support progression.

Improve induction and training for research enablers

Quick wins may be accomplished in terms of improvements to induction and training for research enabling roles. This report, and the complementary work by the PRISM Network indicates areas of importance for research enabler roles, and by extension training and development. This should also consider career development into other senior roles. A working group of research enablers should identify a core set of competencies and training requirements for research enablers.

Improve the **continuity** of knowledge and experience

It is clear from the review evidence that research enablers are adept at securing continued employment despite the challenges of the project and fixed-term nature of employment contracts. Nevertheless, we recommend that institutions examine how greater security can be brought to bear on research enabler roles and employment conditions, being particularly mindful of the benefits of doing so for institutional capacity and resources at the start and end of projects. The risks and challenges associated with recruitment are also an important driver – research enablers are skilled in multiple areas and difficult to replace.

Realise the benefits earlier: at the start of projects and in designing new ones

The value of research enablers at the start of projects, and in the design of new projects emerged consistently through this review. This is an area where the context for research enabler roles actively works against this: because of the project funding for roles and because of the fixed-term nature of many contracts.

Where individuals contributed to project design and early implementation, this is observed to occur through the research enabler having internal connections that actively facilitated this. In some cases, the alignment between business development roles and research enabler roles made this possible.

Research offices at institutions can play an important role when it comes to ensuring that research enabler roles are well designed and costed into future projects. As the institutional lead on supporting the pre and post award activities, these offices should hold first-hand experience how to embed these roles better within institutions. They will need better institutional support to make a case for underwriting research enabler roles

in the same way that central research support is recognised as integral costs of managing an externally funded award portfolio.

Maximise the benefits of research enabler roles to the wider research environment

Research enablers are a group whose skills and experience directly support academics in focusing on the research aspects of delivery. Research enablers also reported many role requirements linked to pastoral support for PGR students, researchers and in some cases academics. This includes dealing with issues and interventions supporting EDI.

Against a background of complexity, competing priorities and time constraints, the evidence from research enablers suggests a substantive contribution to their local research environment. We recommend further exploration of this aspect, including consideration of how research enabler roles might confer benefits in groups or circumstances outside of major projects. For example, where there exist portfolios of smaller grants and contracts.

Realise organisational improvements informed by research enablers and their experiences

Research enablers have a unique viewpoint and role – they interface with many of the key internal research support functions, they see how these interface with the funder and they build working knowledge of 'what works'. They integrate these to ensure delivery of the project or programme.

However, the nature of their roles, and position within the organisation risks losing an opportunity for organisational improvement building on this experience and expertise. We recommend investigating how the collective experience of research enablers can support the identification and improvement of internal processes and support for research.

Appendix A. Methodology

Methodological approach

67 responses to an online survey for current and past researcher enablers.

The online survey was sent to the known research enabler contact emails (via the PRISM Network) and was also promoted openly via social media and via Midlands Innovation. The survey was designed to capture evidence from current research enablers and individuals who had previously been employed in these roles.

The survey was live from 7 July to 13 August 2022, running in parallel to the interviews. The survey was completed by 67 research enablers, of which 62 were in currently in PRISM roles. The survey questions are listed in Appendix C.

14 semi-structured interviews with research enablers and stakeholders

14 one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with research enablers and other stakeholders predominantly (but not exclusively) at Midlands Innovation institutions. Other stakeholders included academics with experience of research enablers. These interviews took place between 27 July and 6 September 2022.

Career trajectory analysis for 28 selected career profiles.

Analysis was conducted of the public LinkedIn profiles of 28 representative research enablers, using a thematic coding approach to identify trends and features in the career pathways of these research enablers.

This approach shed greater depth of information on the mix of skills and experiences that lead into research enabler roles, and where we are able to identify individuals who have held such roles in the past, evidence on career progression (e.g. what types of role do research enablers progress to). This information is not easily accessed otherwise.

Focus group to discuss and shape emerging findings and recommendations

A focus group involving eight participants considered the emerging findings and recommendations. It provided an opportunity to share the emerging findings from the work and to discuss these with a view to shaping the final report and recommendations. Participants included representatives from the PRISM Network, current and past research enablers and the project steering group.

Overview of the participants

Interview participants were identified from a longlist of contributors suggested by the Steering Group, the project team, or from web-based searches. **30** people were shortlisted and invited to participate in an interview. Shortlisting decisions attempted to cover a range of Midlands Innovation institutions, a mixture of role types, and a spread of project or initiative characteristics. From the **30** people invited to interview, **14** interviews were completed. The characteristics of the **14** interviewees were as follows:

- **10** women, **4** men;
- **5** current research enablers (job titles including Project Manager, Business Manager, Centre Manager); **5** former research enablers; **3** academic beneficiaries; **1** member of research office staff;
- **13** currently in a higher education setting; **1** in a commercial organisation;

- Institutions represented included Keele, Aston, Loughborough, Leicester, Nottingham, with the University of Nottingham being slightly over-represented, relative to other institutions.

The **28** people in the **LinkedIn analysis sample** were identified from the same longlist as the interview cohort. Their characteristics included:

- **17** women, **11** men;
- **2** people who were also interviewed;
- **24** with current or previous employment in Midlands Innovation institutions; **4** without employment connections to MI HEIs

8 people participated in the **focus group**. They were identified from the same longlist and included:

- **4** women, **4** men;
- **7** people from Midlands Innovation institutions, **1** from a non-MI institution.
- **1** person who had been interviewed;
- **5** people included in the LinkedIn sample

The **survey responses** came from a self-selecting sample of people who followed the link from the PRISM Network email promoting it or who were forwarded the survey link by a colleague, or saw the survey promoted on social media (Twitter, LinkedIn).

Table A1 Focus Group participants

Name	Institution	Role
Helen Turner	Steering Group, Midlands Innovation	Steering Group
Debra Fearnshaw	Steering Group, Nottingham	Steering Group
Fleur Hughes	York	Network Manager
Donna Palmer	Nottingham	DTP Programmes Manager
Eliot Marsten	Birmingham	Ex Research Enabler, now Head of Strategic Projects & Partnerships
Will Blackshaw	Loughborough	Communications Manager
Peter Noy	Nottingham	Associate Director of Research
Harry Moriarty	Nottingham	Research Culture Project Manager

Appendix B. Additional results from the survey

This Appendix provides further information from the survey. The survey was targeted and promoted to current and past research enablers. It was circulated via the PRISM Network, social media and direct connections.

A total of **67 complete responses** were received, providing a mix of qualitative and quantitative data against the survey questions (see Appendix C). Of these, 62 were from individuals currently in a research enabler role and 5 were from past research enablers.

Participants described the **employment terms** of their current or most recent role, in summary:

Table A2	Number of responses	% of responses
Permanent - full time	20	30%
Permanent - part time	2	3%
Fixed term - full time	28	42%
Fixed-term part time	17	25%
Total	67	100%
Are/were in fixed-term roles	*45*	*67%*
Are/were part time	*19*	*28%*

Participants were asked about the **subject or discipline area(s)** their work supported (multiple responses were allowed):

Table A3	# responses	% of individuals
Mixed or multidisciplinary projects	41	61%
Medicine, health and life sciences	35	52%
Physical science	30	45%
Engineering	36	54%
Social sciences	23	34%
Arts and humanities	11	16%
Total number of individuals = 67		

The **employment experiences** of the participants were explored in term of their overall length of service in research enabler roles and their longest employment contract.

Figure A1.

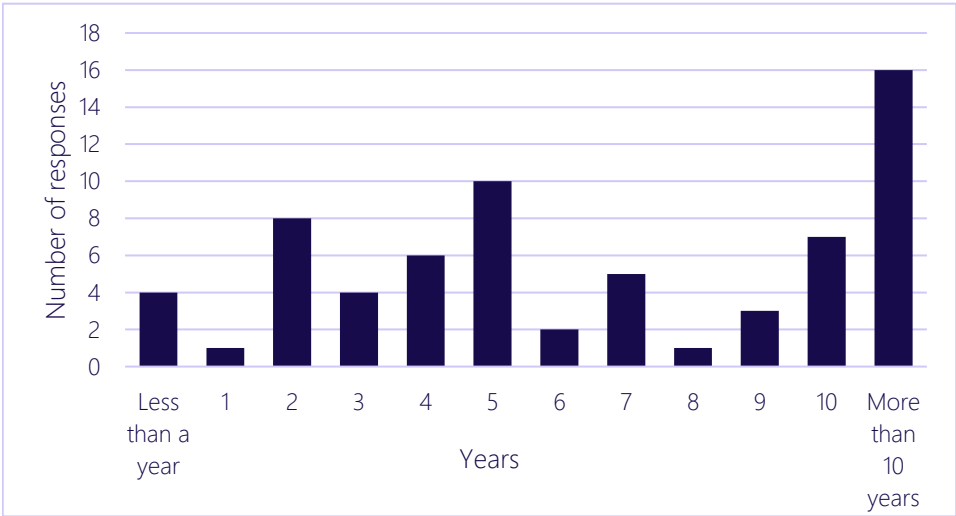The number of years participants had worked in research enabler roles

Figure A2.

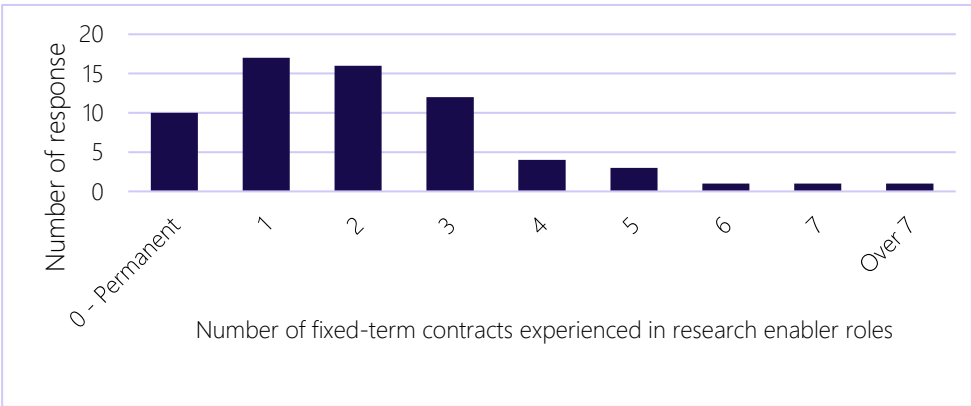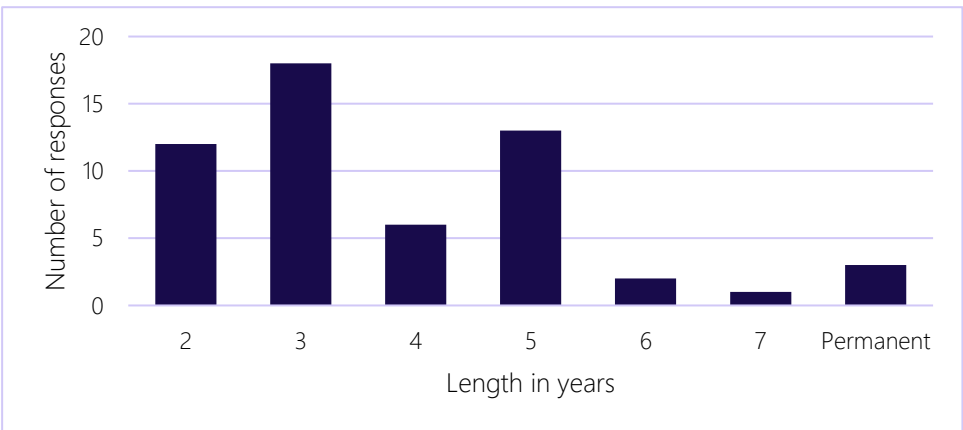The number of fixed-term contracts reported by participants in research enabler roles.

Figure A3.

What has been the length of your longest research enabler contract?

What were the important skills are **brought into** research enabler roles from prior experiences and roles? Participants responded with free text responses. These were grouped into the themes indicated in figure A4.

Research enablers: their value, contribution and role

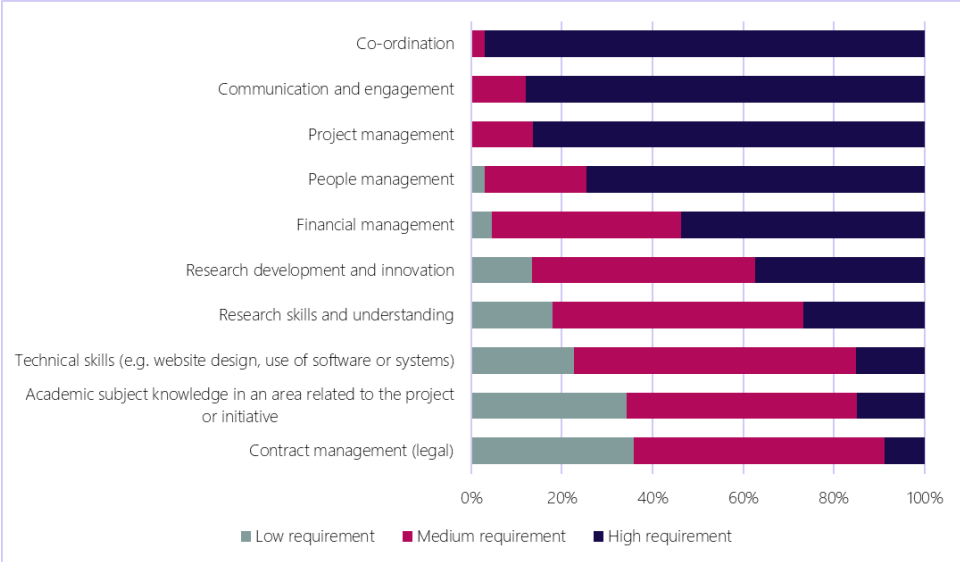Contributing to a positive research environment

Figure A4.

The important skills research enablers report bringing into research enabler roles from prior experiences and roles
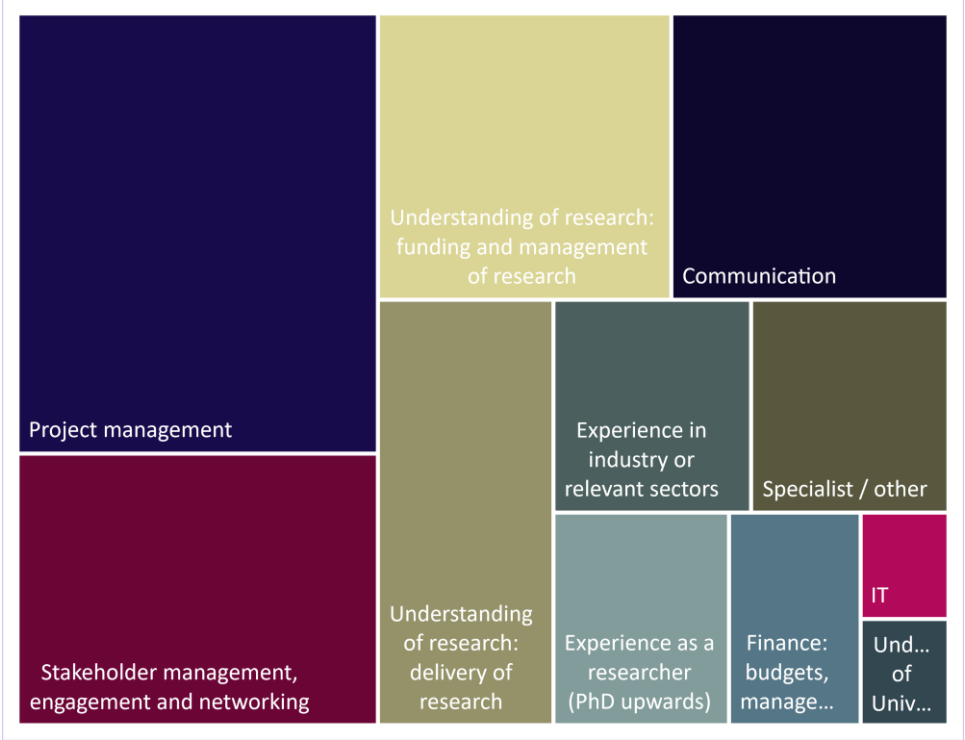
How are certain skills are viewed by research enablers in terms of the requirement for that skill in their role. Participants rated a predetermined list as low, medium or high requirement. Figure A5. Co-ordination, communication, engagement and people management (often without formal line management) emerge as high requirement skills, alongside project management.

Figure A5.

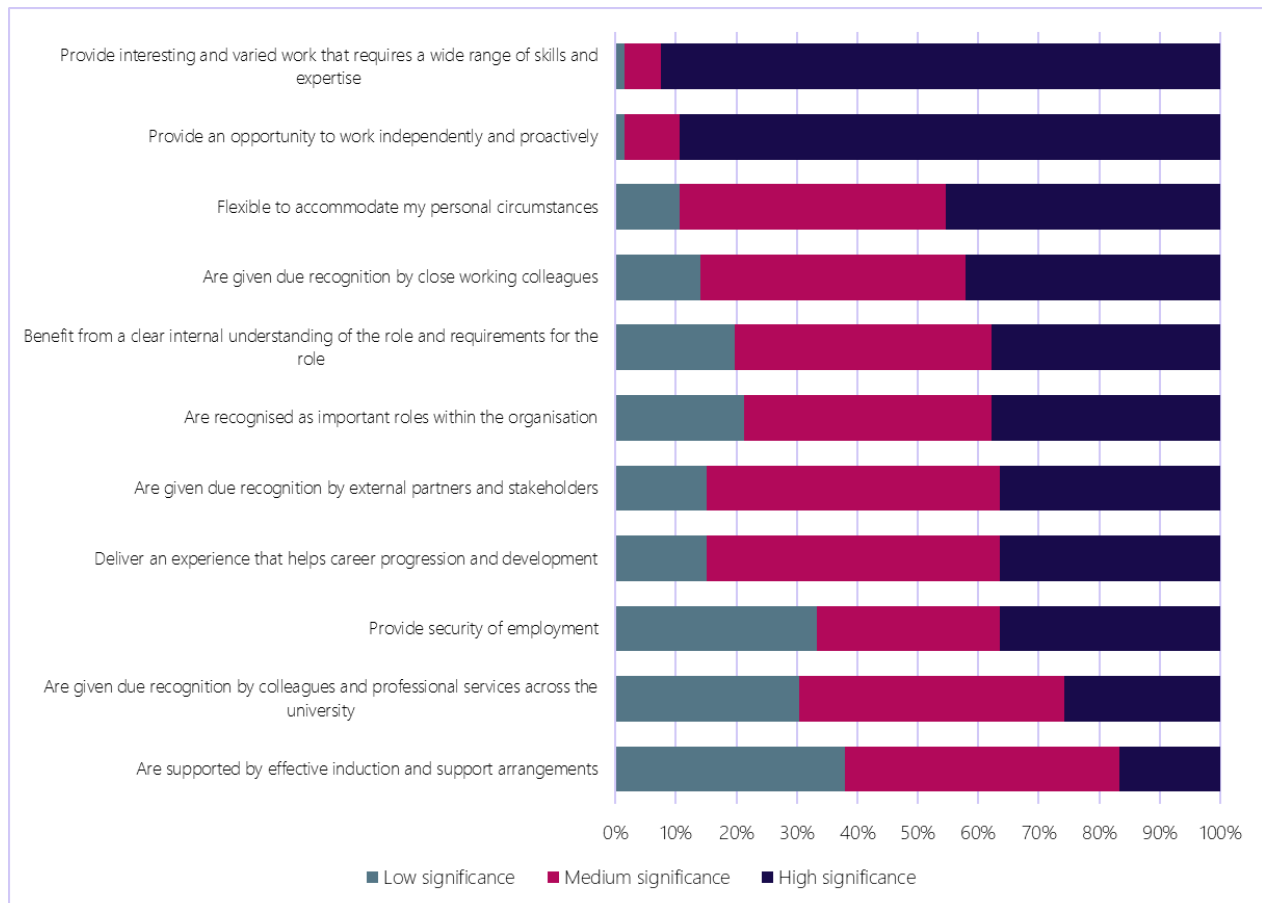The level of requirement in research enabler roles for certain skills and expertise.

The perceived characteristics of research enabler roles.

Figure A6.

Based on your experience to what extent do you think the following characteristics have significance for research enabler roles?

The survey sought views on the training and development landscape for research enablers. Figure A7 summarises the responses to set questions on "Thinking about your experience of training and development in your current or most recent PRISM role, please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements".

Figure A7.

Perspectives on training
and development
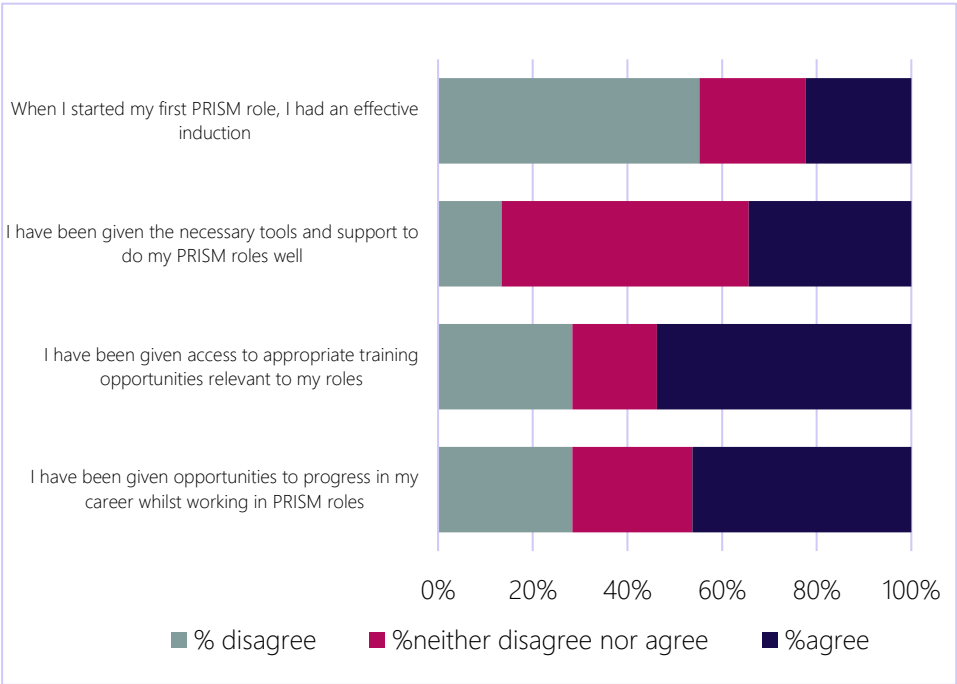
The survey sought to generate understanding on how research enablers were supported by various networks in terms of peer-to-peer engagement, good practice and development. The relative importance of a number of known networks was sought, alongside an opportunity to identify others.

Figure A8 indicates the relative priority of the stated networks. Other referenced by individuals as being important included: ARMS (the Australasian equivalent to ARMA), NHS R&D Forum, regional university groupings (e.g. N8), the UK Trial Manager Network and UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE).

Figure A8.

The relative importance of
a defined list of network
organisations
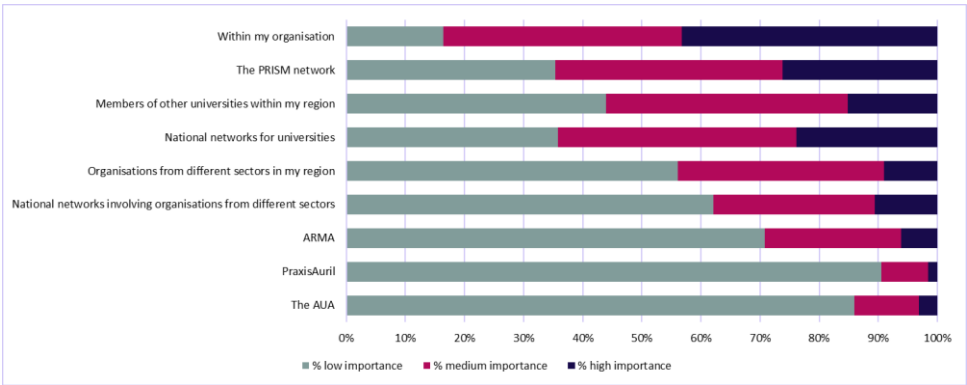
Appendix C. Survey questions

1. Please tick the box below to indicate that you have read the information above and are willing to participate in this survey.*

2. Are you currently working in a PRISM role?

3. If you are not currently in a PRISM role, what factors caused you to leave your previous PRISM role?
   [Scale: low significance, medium significance, high significance]

   i. The project, initiative or contract ended
   ii. A desire for a different type of role within the university environment
   iii. A desire for a role outside the university environment
   iv. Issues with the working conditions and experience as a PRISM
   v. Inability to find another PRISM contract

4. If you are no longer in a PRISM role, what is your current job title?

5. Please provide the job title of your current or most recent PRISM role:

6. In your current (or most recent) PRISM role, what option best describes your contract type?
   i. Permanent - full time
   ii. Permanent - part time
   iii. Fixed term - full time
   iv. Fixed-term part time

7. How would you describe your role and organisation BEFORE you took on your first role as a PRISM?

8. What subject or discipline area(s) has your work as a PRISM supported? Tick all those that apply.
   i. Mixed or multidisciplinary projects
   ii. Physical science
   iii. Medicine, health and life sciences
   iv. Engineering
   v. Arts and humanities
   vi. Social sciences
   vii. Other - please specify

9. How many years have you worked in PRISM roles?
   Less than a year – more than 10 years

10. How many PRISM fixed-term contracts have you had? (Please select 0 if you have always had permanent roles.)
   0 (always had permanent roles) – 11 or more

11. What has been the length of your longest PRISM contract?

12. How many different projects or initiatives have you worked on in roles that are consistent with being a PRISM?

Research Consulting

13. Please RANK the internal "interfaces" you have encountered in your current or most recent PRISM role – who are you working with on a regular basis? Please rank the internal interfaces in relation to importance with the most important interface at the top, least important at the end (please leave out any which you do not engage with).
    i.   Academics
    ii.   Finance
    iii.   HR
    iv.   Knowledge exchange / tech transfer offices
    v.   Legal department
    vi.   Marketing and communications
    vii.   Outreach / public engagement teams
    viii.   Procurement
    ix.   Researchers (eg post-doc, research Fellows)
    x.   Research office
    xi.   Students (PGT, PGR)

14. Please RANK the external "interfaces" you have encountered in your current or most recent PRISM role – who are you working with on a regular basis? Please rank the external interfaces in relation to importance with the most important interface at the top, least important at the end (please leave out any which you do not engage with).
    i.   Project funders
    ii.   Industry partners
    iii.   Civil society partners (local government, community organisations)
    iv.   NHS organisations
    v.   Other HEIs or research institutes
    vi.   Charities and third sector organisations
    vii.   Cultural organisations
    viii.   Members of the public
    ix.   Central government / government departments

15. What were the important skills or experience that you brought into your first PRISM role?

16. In your opinion, how did your previous experience of working in a PRISM role assist your progression into your current role?

17. Based on your experience to what extent do you think the following characteristics have significance for PRISM roles?
    [Scale: low significance, medium significance, high significance]

    i.   Provide interesting and varied work that requires a wide range of skills and expertise
    ii.   Deliver an experience that helps career progression and development
    iii.   Are given due recognition by close working colleagues
    iv.   Are given due recognition by colleagues and professional services across the university
    v.   Are given due recognition by external partners and stakeholders
    vi.   Are supported by effective induction and support arrangements
    vii.   Benefit from a clear internal understanding of the role and requirements for the role
    viii.   Are recognised as important roles within the organisation
    ix.   Flexible to accommodate my personal circumstances
    x.   Provide security of employment
    xi.   Provide an opportunity to work independently and proactively

18. We're keen to understand what you think are the benefits of PRISM roles. Please indicate how significant you think the benefits indicated below are.
    [Scale: low significance, medium significance, high significance]

    i.   To the academic project leaders - the Principal Investigator and their team
    ii.   To the project sponsor or funder
    iii.   To the organisation (e.g. university) employing the PRISM
    iv.   To the wider group of collaborating partners involved in the project
    v.   To a wider group of internal stakeholders: students, technical staff, other professional services.
    vi.   To a wider group of external stakeholders (e.g. the public, interested parties, media)

19. Can you give up to three examples of the benefits indicated in the previous question?

20. Thinking about the project or initiative lifecycle, at what stages are the benefits of PRISMs felt most strongly? Indicate the level of benefit provided by PRISMs in each of the phases listed below.
[Scale: low benefit, medium benefit, high benefit]

    i.   Design, proposal building and development phase
    ii.   During the start-up phase of a new project or initiative
    iii.   During the delivery phase
    iv.   During the project or initiative completion phase
    v.   In supporting the transition of good practice / lessons learnt into new project

21. Thinking about your experience of your current or most recent role as a PRISM, please can you give one example of a benefit of the role at a specific point in the project or initiative lifecyle?

22. What motivates / motivated you in your current or most recent PRISM role? Please indicate how significant you think the factors listed below are.
[Scale: low significance, medium significance, high significance]

    i.   Working at the interface of academia and administration
    ii.   Seeing high value projects or initiatives through to completion
    iii.   Variety of tasks and responsibilities
    iv.   Interacting with internal stakeholders
    v.   Interacting with external stakeholders
    vi.   Professional development opportunities
   vii.   Working independently or proactively

23. What skills are required for you to do a PRISM role efficiently and effectively?
[Scale: low requirement, medium requirement, high requirement]

    i.   Academic subject knowledge in an area related to the project or initiative
    ii.   Communication and engagement
    iii.   Contract management (legal)
    iv.   Co-ordination
    v.   Financial management
    vi.   People management
   vii.   Project management
   viii. Research development and innovation
    ix.   Research skills and understanding
    x.   Technical skills (e.g. website design, use of software or systems)

24. Thinking about your experience of training and development in your current or most recent PRISM role, please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements.
[Scale: disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree]

    i.   When I started my first PRISM role, I had an effective induction
    ii.   My contribution as a PRISM has been recognised well
    iii.   I have been given opportunities to progress in my career whilst working in PRISM roles
    iv.   I have been given access to appropriate training opportunities relevant to my roles
    v.   I have been given the necessary tools and support to do my PRISM roles well

25. **To help us understand how you engage with any formal or informal networks, please indicate how important engagement with the networks indicated below are to you.**
[Scale: low importance, medium importance, high importance]

    i.   Peer support networks within my organisation
    ii.   Peer support networks involving members of other universities within my region
    iii.   Peer support networks involving organisations from different sectors in my region
    iv.   National peer support networks for universities
    v.   National peer support networks involving organisations from different sectors
    vi.   ARMA
    vii.   PraxisAuril
    viii.   The PRISM network
    ix.   The AUA

26. What would you say are the top three issues experienced by those working as PRISMs in universities? Please type a brief sentence in the text box below for up to three issues.

27. What would you suggest are the top three 'opportunities for improvement' in terms of the environment for PRISMs and the benefits of their work? Please type a brief sentence in the text box below for up to three suggestions.

Research enablers: their value, contribution and role
Contributing to a positive research environment

Research
Consulting

The Ingenuity Centre, University of Nottingham Innovation Park, Nottingham, NG7 2TU, UK

www.research-consulting.com