

# Transnational cooperation in enhancing researchers' wider employability: the TRANSPEER project

Transnational  
cooperation

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide an example of best practice towards enhancing employability in the cross-sectoral labour market for doctorate-holders. This was achieved through an Erasmus+ KA2 (Strategic Partnership) skills development project which created a training programme (TRANSPEER) involving a multi-disciplinary cohort of researchers at a range of career stages, drawn from universities in Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the UK.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Research support staff designed and delivered four transnational training events for the cohort, with the overarching theme of enhancing researcher employability. An initial skills awareness survey of the researcher cohort was undertaken prior to the start of the programme; this survey was repeated after each event. An additional aim of the project was the development of the consortium's research support staff through exposure to the facilitation techniques and methodologies of their international colleagues.

**Findings** – The findings indicate that transnational collaboration in researcher development enhances the learning environment for participating researchers and provides significant professional development opportunities for both researchers and researcher developers. The findings further suggest the benefits of

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mixing cohorts across career stages and engaging researchers with novel and interactive approaches on themes not typically addressed in academic competence development offerings.

**Originality/value** – Transversal skills development cooperation between universities – especially transnational cooperation – is rare. Even more so is the professional development of research support staff in a transnational context. This paper outlines the benefits of such collaborative activities.

**Keywords** Skills awareness, Researcher development, Wider employability, Transnational added-value

**Paper type** Case study

## Background

Researcher employability, both within and beyond the academy, is a significant issue in higher education internationally, and, together with the wider issue of graduate employability, has been of explicit concern at the governmental level for several decades [1]. National and transnational bodies have stressed the importance of education with societal relevance, and highlighted the value of skills development in enhancing graduates' potential for meaningful employment in a range of careers.

While holders of research degrees remain a minority within the international graduate population, the past two decades have seen a huge rise in numbers of doctoral graduates. The number of people graduating with a doctorate increased by 56% between 2000 and 2012 across OECD countries (OECD, 2014); and between 2014 and 2019 that number rose by a further 25% (OECD, 2021). Surveys of career expectations show that most doctoral graduates (some three-quarters) expect to pursue an academic career within universities (Haynes *et al.*, 2016). Yet academia simply does not have the capacity to provide posts for the vast majority of them (Royal Society, 2010).

### *Project aims*

Perceptions of academic “supply and demand” and the possibility of wider doctoral careers are not typically dealt with in competence development programmes at universities and addressing them was seen as an important element of the TRANSPEER project: to create an intervention around researchers' confidence, their thinking styles and their capacity for personal reflection and self-management. Funded through the Erasmus+ (KA2) Strategic Partnerships, at the project's core was a transnational training programme, designed and delivered by a consortium led by Karlstad University (KAU, Sweden) in conjunction with the Inland Norway University of Applied Science (INN, Norway), ITQB, New University of Lisbon (ITQB NOVA, Portugal), Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU, UK) and the Polytechnic Institute of Santarém (IPSantarém, Portugal).

This programme's design was underpinned by three fundamental ideas. Firstly, it was appreciated that, although issues around researcher employability and research careers are shared, to a varying extent, by most European countries, approaches to tackling these issues often differ between countries. The TRANSPEER programme sought to draw upon the particular strengths in research support which have developed in the different partner institutions and to blend them in a coherent and mutually reinforcing training programme.

Secondly, although postdoctoral early career researchers (ECRs) were TRANSPEER's main target group, efforts directed solely at that single career stage can have only a limited impact, and it became clear while developing the programme that a more holistic approach was required. The best approach would support current postdoctoral ECRs, while also encouraging doctoral students to consider what they could offer to potential future employers and equipping doctoral supervisors with some of the knowledge needed to advise

them effectively. Consequently, the researcher cohort for the programme was drawn, in equal parts, from postdoctoral ECRs (self-identifying as such), doctoral students and doctoral supervisors. In this way, it was hoped not only to help postdoctoral ECRs realise their potential directly but also to provide doctoral students with advice on how to diversify their career options at an early stage, as well as to be more competitive within the academic arena. A frequently stated problem for many, if not most, supervisors is that they do not feel qualified to advise their students on anything other than the requirements for an academic career. This is a serious shortcoming when the vast majority of their students will have no long-term future within the academy. While doctoral supervisors cannot be career advisors in the sense that this is usually understood in a university context, collaboration with this group is a necessary starting point for efforts to make doctoral students aware of the potential career options open to them, as well as the actions which they need to take to realise those potential options.

Thirdly, TRANSPEER sought to tackle an under-addressed “meta issue” around competence development: the professionalisation of researcher developers – the support staff providing career-related advice and transversal skills training to researchers – and the opportunities available for their own professional development, particularly through international collaboration. Although the primary aim of TRANSPEER was to produce a programme which could enhance the employability of researchers, an important secondary aim was to provide a good practice example of potential development opportunities for researcher developers themselves. This was achieved through the support staff involved in the project being exposed to the techniques and focus areas of their international colleagues at management meetings and workshops, and by the networking opportunities presented by a three-year cooperation between five universities across four countries.

### *Project outline*

Commencing in September 2017 and lasting for 40 months [2], TRANSPEER consisted of three phases. The first phase (nine months) covered a review of relevant existing resources, both within and beyond the partner institutions, together with the design of the training events themselves, and the development of a robust evaluation tool for the training programme. The second phase (18 months) involved the delivery of four three-day training events, one hosted in each partner country with the participation of the full, 36-strong international researcher cohort. The third, and final, phase (13 months) was occupied with preparations for post-project dissemination, and particularly the development of the project’s output materials [3].

### *Training programme*

The project team developed four training events which drew on local strengths, but which also formed a coherent and mutually reinforcing package. In their final form, the broad themes of these events were:

- *INN (Norway): The Career Landscape.* Career opportunities and pathways for researchers; partnership working in the public and private sectors; research communication.
- *LJMU (UK): Personal and Professional Impact.* Self-reflection and personal management/effectiveness; wider societal research impact.
- *IPSantarém/ITQB NOVA (Portugal): Widening your Influence and Reaching Others.* Developing and maintaining networks; mentoring and coaching; creating impact through research and funding policy; career planning.

- *KAU (Sweden): Influence and Innovation.* Value creation and innovation; utilisation pathways and instruments; NABC/VCF-model pitching; workplace conflict management and research leadership.

The predominant training methodologies used were ones which required participants to interact and solve problems rather than the traditional “chalk and talk” presentation approach. Overall, the programme as delivered had a balance of approximately two-thirds interactive sessions to one-third presentations, but the cohort survey results suggest that even that balance could be altered in favour of more interactive content.

Peer-to-peer contact among the participating researchers was a vital element of the programme, and every effort was made to attract a diverse cohort. The 36 researchers were drawn from the five partner universities across the three career stages detailed above. The recruitment process was undertaken through an open call at each of the partner institutions. As far as possible, the cohort recruitment strategy sought to achieve a blend of research areas, to facilitate the exchange of ideas about research careers across traditional disciplinary boundaries. The areas represented by researchers in the selected starting cohort were Humanities and Social Sciences (15), Life Sciences (14), Information Science and Engineering (2), Physics (3) and Mathematics (2). The gender breakdown for the cohort was 24 women and 12 men.

## Conclusions

It is too soon to draw any concrete conclusions about the programme’s impact on the careers of participating researchers; this will be the subject of a longitudinal follow-up study by the partner universities. However, some significant observations can be made based on the iterative survey on confidence in the areas covered by the training, carried out over an 18-month period, before each event and immediately after the end of the programme. Respondents were asked to rate their confidence in nine areas, on a six-point Likert scale (“not at all confident” through to “highly confident”). Those areas were:

- the ability to progress professionally;
- preparedness for a range of careers;
- awareness of their own strengths and development needs;
- the ability to manage time and resources effectively;
- team-working skills;
- networking and communication skills;
- understanding of “wider societal impact”;
- ability to plan for wider impact in research projects; and
- confidence in their own professional skills, knowledge and abilities.

The percentage of females answering the surveys was higher than the males (ranging from 67% to 78%), reflecting to an extent the gender distribution within the cohort. There were no significant differences in the answers between men and woman across all surveys, except in the first survey, where men reported higher confidence in their own professional skills, knowledge and abilities; and in the third survey, where woman reported higher confidence in understanding “wider impact”. No significant differences were found across age groups. When categorised by career stage (doctoral student, postdoctoral ECR or supervisor), significant differences were found in some of the surveys. The most striking of these

differences, around confidence in the ability to progress professionally, reinforces existing work on the doctoral and early career stages. The cohort's doctoral students, across disciplines and institutions, rated their confidence highest in the survey immediately before the first training event, and that confidence declined gradually across the course of the programme. This can perhaps be ascribed to their being exposed to challenging aspects of the academic working environment which they had not previously considered, both through the training content and interaction with cohort members at different career stages. Their high initial confidence chimes strongly with Vitae's work on doctoral student expectations, referenced above, and managing expectations about post-PhD careers in a more structured way clearly must become a priority for universities. A further, general, observation which can be made is the cohort-wide increase in confidence across the survey areas as a whole over the course of programme, which can be taken as a measure of its overall success.

More broadly, conclusions can also be drawn about good practice within universities' competence development offerings. The aspect of the programme most frequently, and positively, cited by participating researchers was its mixing of the cohort across career stages. Cross-disciplinary groups are relatively common in a training setting, given that much of the competence development portfolio is not discipline-specific; but it is rare for a transversal skills programme to have senior professors learning as peers with doctoral students, often from a wholly different discipline and country. The way in which this broke down traditional academic barriers and enabled the sharing of previously unconsidered or underappreciated viewpoints was commented on favourably by researchers from each of the participating universities. This approach hugely increased the potential for role-modelling and confidence-building, both for the doctoral students, who could interact with the supervisors outside a supervisory relationship; and for the supervisors, who could observe the perspective of doctoral students, but without the responsibility of supervision.

Finally, some observations can be made on the value of this type of international collaboration for researcher developers. Processes and practices within universities can easily become an accretion of "institutional knowledge", of doing things in a certain way because they have always been done that way. This is a more serious issue for support staff than it is for researchers, who are expected, as a core function, to interact with external peers to stay abreast of developments in their research field. Historically, support staff have had fewer opportunities to connect with their peers in this way, but the financial instruments to make this possible – such as the Erasmus+ KA2 action which funded TRANSPEER – do exist. The opportunity this project provided for peer-to-peer contact and the accompanying exchange of knowledge was a key benefit for TRANSPEER's support staff, whether in the form of novel approaches to familiar challenges or through wholly new focus areas for researcher development. This has sparked further collaborations beyond the scope of the project, with support staff helping their TRANSPEER colleagues to adapt the project's training content and methodologies for in-house training programmes.

As has been indicated above, the consortium's researcher developers were drawn not only from four different countries but also from a range of professional backgrounds and with varied remits in their roles. Each came to the project with a particular set of assumptions about how such a training programme should be designed and delivered, and these assumptions were challenged by exposure to colleagues with very different ideas. Perhaps the most positive aspects of the final training programme are that it bears little resemblance to what any single partner

proposed at the start of the process, and also that it offers a deeper, richer and more comprehensive development experience for researchers than any single university would have been able to provide alone.

## Notes

1. In this context, the term ‘graduate employability’ is used to mean the employability of undergraduate and taught master’s degree-holders as well as holders of research degrees. ‘researcher employability’ refers to the employability of holders of research degrees.
2. The project was extended beyond the standard 36-month maximum for strategic partnerships owing to disruption caused by the covid-19 pandemic.
3. The project’s outputs, including training programme materials and a MOOC, may be found at, available at: <https://transpeerdevelopment.org/>

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