

A tool for navigating your research career

*In this [cross-post](#), **Christina Boswell** introduces a newly developed tool to help researchers map the activities they are engaged with the aim of exposing where activity is clustered. The tool has been designed to help researchers be more strategic and selective in what they take on and supports reflection about career priorities and goals.*

When I started my academic research career in the early 2000s, it already felt like quite a pressurised environment. There was the perennial question of how much and where to publish; the challenge of winning research grants; and the increasing emphasis on wider engagement beyond academia. But these days, the research pressures on academics have become even more intense. The bar for publishing in leading journals feels a lot higher, and postdoctoral fellowships and grants in my area have become more competitive. Expectations around impact have expanded.

Added to all this are the various auditing requirements around research ethics, open access, due diligence, and research reporting systems – all important and necessary, but still adding to the to-do list. It's not surprising that academic staff feel overstretched – especially those combining their research with heavy teaching loads and administrative roles.

The Research Careers Tool

With these pressures in mind, at the University of Edinburgh Research and Enterprise Division we developed a simple tool to try to help researchers select and prioritise their activities. The tool is designed to help researchers focus on those activities that will further their research careers, and avoid becoming overstretched. Rather than expect people to do a bit of everything, the idea is to encourage researchers to focus on a subset of tasks. The package of activities might reflect where their specialisation and skills and interests lie, or what academic trajectory they would like to be on.

We mapped the range of research-related activities that academic researchers undertake in a grid, across three main dimensions: Research, Engagement and Leadership/Collegiality. Researchers can use the grid to fill in those activities they are currently engaged in, with a view to mapping their activity. This can help expose where activity is clustered, aiding reflection about career priorities and goals. Importantly, it can help researchers identify where they are stretched too thinly across activities. And it can also help identify if someone has the right balance of collegiality in their research role – especially important given we know these roles are often taken on by women and those with other protected characteristics, who are often under more pressure from caring responsibilities, and feel less able to say no.

EXPERIENCE:





CROSS-CUTTING VALUES

How does it work?

The tool can be used as an aid to reflection as part of a peer group; in conversation with a mentor/mentee; or as part of annual review. It is intended to support researchers in being more strategic in selecting those activities that will best further their career – without becoming overwhelmed by the wide range of things that you could potentially do as a researcher.

The tool sets out the wide range of activities that researchers might carry out across different aspects of research, engagement and leadership. The activities are positioned on an indicative spectrum from 'Starting' to 'Advanced' – though in some cases activities may not be obviously correlated to any particular career stage, or may be equally relevant across a full career (e.g. organising a workshop). It is also worth noting that the points along this spectrum are not aligned with academic grades or promotion criteria. They are simply there as aids to reflecting on career development more generally.

Using this grid, researchers can map those activities they are carrying out, across the three dimensions. Through this mapping process, the Tool aims to help staff in the following ways:

- **Prioritise Activities.** Help people map where their current activity/focus is, with a view to understanding current pressures and helping focus on a narrower set of tasks
- **Career Planning.** Reflect on what their future career goals are, and what type of 'package' of activities might best support these (for example, through identifying possible pathways based on career goals – becoming a research centre leader, leading collaborative projects, or engagement with industry)
- **Retrospective Assessment.** Provide a retrospective tool for researchers to understand and communicate how they have navigated their careers (for example, senior researchers could share their 'route' with earlier career colleagues)
- **Addressing Inequalities.** Help identify inequities in the burden of activities across colleagues, especially in relation to the extent of 'leadership and collegiality' activity being undertaken.

You can read more about the Tool and its application on our web-pages here, and download a copy of the Tool here.

Given the focus on selecting and prioritising activities, the Tool may have more limited purchase for post-graduate researchers, research assistants or post-doctoral research fellows with a clear set of allocated tasks. In both cases, there will be less scope for selecting which research activities to focus on. However, for both of these groups, the Tool may be useful for reflecting on future career plans.

Finally, we should stress that the Tool is not designed as a guide to academic grades or promotion. We included a very loose spectrum of career stage (from 'Starting' to 'Advanced'), but this is not relevant to many of the activities included, which may be equally relevant across career stages. Moreover, an early career researcher may be involved in activities under the 'Advanced' end of the graph, and conversely senior researchers may be involved in activities under the 'Starting' end. The tool is designed to map activity and, across some dimensions, explore what next steps might involve. But it is not intended to be aligned to, or support, grading or promotion.

This post originally appeared on the University of Edinburgh's Research Office Blog as [Introducing the Research Careers Tool](#), Interested readers can find out more about the tool and how it can be used [here](#).

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