



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Title

Vitae Researcher Development International Conference, Birmingham 11th-12th September 2017

Authors

Dr Xia Zhu & Dr Rachel Westwood

Contact

x.zhu@keele.ac.uk
r.f.westwood@keele.ac.uk

Vitae is a non-profit, international, self-sustaining programme, focusing on supporting researchers and institutions for research excellence, innovation and impact. In 2017, the Vitae Researcher Development International annual conference took place in Birmingham between 11th-12th September. The two-day conference introduced the future landscape and global context for developing researchers, where shifting the mind-set for the change is inevitable. The challenges of preparing researchers for the future are not just in academia but across society, as a large percentage of postgraduate researchers end up working outside of academia after their doctoral training. In particular, the STEM sector, has witnessed growth in non-academic positions together as well as short-term, non-tenure positions. Therefore, the expectations of both research supervisors and doctoral students needs to be managed, and developing researchers' transferrable skills are of central concern. At the same time, generational differences in research institutions needs to be acknowledged.

One core theme from this year's conference talked about this generational difference. 'Generation Z' are digital natives who are tech savvy multi-taskers used to social media and exhibit self-directed preferences. Whereas, many of the researchers in research

institutions are baby-boomers, and 'Generation X Y' whose values and perspectives on work and life are very different from 'Generation Z'. As 'Generation Z' enter higher education, how to address generational gaps and develop programmes to support the progression of this newly emerging generation of researchers needs to be explored.

Another growing concern is doctoral researchers' mental health and wellbeing which requires further attention and support. Many doctoral researchers are interested in pursuing development activities, however, a number of factors, such as time constraints, inappropriate or irrelevant provision, and costs or lack of funding have been found as barriers for their professional development, especially within arts and humanities.

The final of the Three Minute Thesis competition was held during the Vitae annual conference dinner. Six strong finalists presented on a range of topics from metal recovery to using plants rather than crude oil and Alzheimer's disease treatment. The winner, Thomas Fudge from Brunel University, gave an excellent talk entitled "Decentralised Sanitation for developing communities with energy and nutrient recovery." He kept the audience engaged and presented in an approachable style with facts that helped the audience relate to his research.

REFLECTIONS: WHAT ARE THE MUTUALISTIC BENEFITS OF UNIVERSITY-NATURE RESERVE COLLABORATIONS?

Videos of the six finalists, and all semi-finalists from participating institution are available on the Vitae website.

Vitae work internationally to help researchers realise their potential and enhance their personal and career development. They have over 45 years' experience and 183 member organisations (including Keele University). Their online resources and annual programme can be explored and used for the professional development of researchers (see vitae.ac.uk).

Dr Xia Zhu

Keele Management School

Dr Rachel Westwood

Learning and Professional Development Centre

Keele University