

Minutes from the ECR Liaison Forum (Online - Combined Campuses)

Thursday 26 November 2020 via MS Teams

10.30 am – 12.30 pm

Attendees:

- Cate Bennett, Doctoral College (ECR Programme Manager)
- Dr George De Ath, ECR (CEMPS, Computer Science) Exeter
- Dr Helen Eyles, ECR (CLES, Biosciences) Exeter
- Dr Carmen Falagan Rodriguez, ECR (CEMPS, CSM), Cornwall
- Dr Jo Garrett, ECR (on behalf of Dr Jacqui Eales and Dr Sarah Bell, College of Med & Health) Cornwall
- Dr Yolanda Hill, ECR (CEMPS, Maths) Exeter
- Charlotte Juggins, Doctoral College (RDRC PGR & ECR Experience Officer)
- Dr Adeline Loh, ECR (CEMPS, Renewables) Cornwall
- Dr Tanimola Martins, ECR (College of Med & Health) Exeter
- Prof Andrew McRae (Dean of the DC)
- Dr Okechukwu Okorie, ECR (UEBS) Exeter
- Fiona Pac-Soo (Assistant Director Research Environment and Doctoral College)
- Deepak Kumar Panda (CEMPS, Maths) Cornwall
- Ionut Moise, ECR (Humanities) Exeter
- Dr Charlotte Murphy, Assistant Director for Research Services
- Dr Erik Postma (CLES, Biosciences) Cornwall
- Dr Alejandro Roman Gonzalez, ECR (CLES, Geography) Cornwall
- Dr M D Sharma, ECR (CLES, Biosciences) Cornwall
- Dr Tristan Snowsill ECR (College of Med & Health) Exeter
- Dr Sarah Walker ECR (College of Med & Health) Exeter
- Juliet White, Doctoral College (RDRC - Administrator) – Secretary to the meeting
- Dr Chris Wood - Doctoral College (Head of RD&RC) - Chair
- Dr Chris Yeomans, ECR (CEMPS, CSM) Cornwall

Apologies:

Dr Sarah Bell, Dr Neeltje Boogert, Dr Colleen Deane, Dr Jonathan Doney, Kate Foster (Careers Coach), Dr Ben Gardner, Dr Anna Harper, Dr Edward Mackay, Dr Aimee Murray, Dr David Ross, Dr Jamie Stevens, Dr Maria Tejerina-Arreal, Dr Clemens Ullman, Dr Rebecca Wheeler, Drs Astrid Wissenburg.

1 Welcome & Introductions

Dr Wood welcomed everyone to the ECR LF combining both Exeter and Cornwall campuses and encouraged attendees to use the chat box appropriately and contextually. He explained that Dr Eyles, Dr Gardner, Dr Sharma and Dr Ullman were reps for the ECR cohort at RIEG (Research & Impact Executive Group) with Dr Hill and Dr Wilkinson sitting on the Concordat Steering Group.

Dr Wood reported the sad news of the loss of Dr JJ Valletta, a former ECR colleague who went on to secure a post at St Andrews University and who sadly passed away a few weeks ago. A memorial fund is available for donations and a crowdfunder page to repatriate JJ has been very successful. Dr Carmen Falagan Rodriguez said some kind words, extending support, if required. JJ was instrumental in founding the stats support sessions in Penryn as well as developing the ECRN in Cornwall.

2 Introduction from ECR Reps

Dr Eyles introduced herself and Dr Sharma (later in the meeting) introduced himself.

3 Networking 'in our own words' and updates from the ECRNs.

Biosciences (Streatham) - Dr Eyles reported that there had been a period of relatively low activity with difficulties in planning events at the moment with people's attention elsewhere due to COVID. The Teams channel had worked well initially but tailed off.

Cornwall Knowledge Spa - Dr Garrett reported that networking activities involved informal virtual catch-ups once a month with discussions around teaching (Aspire) courses available. They have experimented having events on different week days. The next get together will be focused around a Christmas theme.

Engineering (Penryn and CSM) - Dr Falagan Rodriguez reported that there had been no meetings since the last Liaison Forum but planning on a December meeting reporting on any updates. There are plans to organise a funding workshop next year and have set up a conversation in Teams.

Environment & Sustainability Institute (ESI) (Penryn) - Dr Falagan Rodriguez reported that Dr Katie Shanks had been really active organising events such as monthly meetings around different topics. The last one was a welcome event to new PhDs.

Institute of Health Research (IHR) - Dr Snowsill reported that the Network had continued to have monthly virtual drop-in sessions which has resulted in getting more people engaged. The most recent meeting on funding was well attended.

Dr Wood encouraged those present to use the chat box or contact us directly with ideas for getting together informally online before Christmas.

Dr Wood introduced Cate Bennett, the new ECR Programme Manager (Research Staff), previously from the SEAS employability team, who has a strong background in training/careers for researchers. He encouraged people to make contact with Cate with any ideas for future training. He will be working closely with Cate to extend the ECR training and development programme as well as the RS/IIB programme. Cate Bennett introduced herself, giving a brief summary of her background and is very much looking forward to working with ECRs.

Dr Walker highlighted that she had just started the online LTHE (Learning & Teaching in Higher Education) and encouraged others to do it, if time allows. She described it as well designed and accessible and to make Networks aware of this. Dr Wood asked for people to make contact with him if there are similar platforms that we can make other ECRs aware of that may be useful in future.

4 Research Restart Update/Questions

Dr Charlotte Murphy, Assistant Director for Research Services, joined the meeting to explain the rationale behind some of the decision-making around project 'Research Restart' (supported by Prof Neil Gow) and to take questions.

She explained that March 2020 saw a full lock-down whereby all Research (except 'essential') had to stop. Essential Research is defined as anything that would entail possible loss of research samples as well as obligations around animal welfare as well as Covid-19 research itself. June saw the start of a return to labs and the University had to adapt quickly to meet Government rule changes; having to separate off-site activities (fieldwork, etc) as well as onsite activity with guidance around support and keeping people safe and developed guidance around prioritising research so that people could focus on their ECR/PGR communities. Colleges created sensible booking systems which were managed locally. The Research Restart panel, chaired by Prof Neil Gow, collated plans, listened, made adjustments and approved new ways of working in accordance with Government Guidelines at that time. For offsite activity, people can submit an outline of their research activity to be undertaken incorporating any Covid-19 mitigations. This process is still in place

with approval given on a regular basis. Directors of College Operations, on a weekly basis, have an opportunity to submit to the Research Restart panel any changes to their plans.

Colleges have been invited to put forward plans for essential research (see above for definition) to be supported during the University closure period. Colleges have been asked to think about what essential activity needs to continue and what support would be needed (ie, out of hours requirements/cleaning needs, etc).

Questions for Dr Charlotte Murphy:

Dr Yeomans asked about those doing research (not in labs). He questioned the decision-making around hot desking for PhD's and postdocs with, in his opinion, the booking system in place going against what is advised on the Government HSE website and felt that the University should, where workspaces needed to be shared, try to keep the same people using their same desks to reduce the risk of infection and asked why these rooms are not locked to those previously working in those spaces? As it stands, potentially, through the booking system he could be placed in a different room with people he would not normally interact with thereby increasing the amount of potential transmission. Dr Murphy replied that HSE guidance has been aligned however she could not comment on individual spaces that these are locally managed via individual Colleges and that the person managing that particular space should be contacted.

Dr Walker reported that she had been offered a 'shared' room (not normal office) to record lessons, and asked how soon before we can go into the offices without prior arrangement? She feels unsafe at the prospect of sharing an office with members of staff working with students however to go into her normal office feels relatively safe. Dr Murphy advised that she put a case forward to the appropriate DCO.

Dr Falagan Rodriguez asked who she should make contact with regarding changes that need making in Labs (some people bring in food and personal belongings but not sure where this can be stored - in particularly DDM/ICB labs). Dr Murphy explained that Technical Services/Lab Managers know spaces and can work with Technical Services Business Partners and offered to direct Carmen to the appropriate person.

Dr Wood thanked Dr Murphy for attending to explain the situation and to take questions.

There followed a comfort break.

5 **Reporting back/thoughts from the November PGR/ECR RIEG meeting**

Dr Wood summarised three questions raised at Research & Impact Executive Group (RIEG) and explained that topics need to be encapsulated in a brief paper and focussed on what RIEG can address and not topics that are locally based. Points need to be brief as there is only a small amount of time for discussion. Those items not covered at RIEG have been answered in full by Drs Astrid Wissenberg and Prof Neil Gow.

Q1 – in the context of concerns reported at LF's around the consistency of communications and decision-making in relation to Covid and return to work planning, how input and feedback from ECRs can be effectively embedded at the discipline, college and University level.

Feedback from RIEG – local issues need to be resolved locally however the responsible PI should be used, or the college DCOs. Neil Gow agreed that campus working needs addressing within local decision-making and assured ECRs that the Research Restart panel is looking at 'change requests' and that ECR needs are treated on an equal basis in its assessments for all areas. For fieldwork ECRs can raise fieldwork requests as any other members of staff however ECRs do not have a channel for their voice in these discussions.

Action: A clear escalation route is needed within colleges about Research Restart decisions and Claire Wydell is taking this up with the Directors of College Operations.

Q2 – What is the longer term strategy for access to research equipment in light of the impact of capacity and ongoing Covid-19 restrictions and also linked to that, what are the provisions for managing, monitoring and reviewing lone working arrangements?

There was not an opportunity to discuss this at the RIEG meeting however senior managers have responded as follows: “Pre-COVID access arrangements were via out of office protocols but only for low-risk work where individuals were trained. This has been maintained where possible during Covid, but with additional mitigations and management to ensure that bookings and tracking are in place as well as individuals being kept safe (eg the use of safe zone). These additional mitigations include the use of a responsive PI, on site during core hours and virtually out of hours. These out of hours permissions have been put in place in recognition of the additional capacity required for particular facilities and additional pressures on maintaining samples and experimental procedures. It is anticipated that these measures will be reviewed as the Covid-19 national advice changes and appropriate mitigations made appropriately. This includes a full review when the Covid-19 is no longer a concern integrating best practice activities into the new normal.”

Q3 – What are the implications and opportunities for ECRs in the ‘refocusing our resources’ initiative? How can ECRs engage and how could this link to enhanced education and teaching roles for ECRs? An update was provided on the refocussing resources during the meeting however insufficient time to discuss in detail. It has been suggested that a ‘deep dive’ session with Doctoral College/HR may be a suitable next step to having a more focussed discussion at the next RIEG meeting to articulate what ECRs would think in terms of what support they need with their development.

Feedback from RIEG – in July refocussing was set up (and communicated via the DVC Research regular email) for research staff to express interest if they had time to take on additional work due to their own projects being restricted; and for PIs to register where they needed someone to help on their project. Whilst we did get one or two applications from PIs we got no applications from research staff. The option is still there but we don’t foresee any further requests coming through now. We have an ongoing focus on staff on Fixed Term contracts and supporting with making these open ended contracts, linked to time limited funding, where possible and reasonable. We are currently reviewing our redeployment processes to support any staff that may be in redeployment due to an end in funding.

RIEG also discussed aspects of this in terms of the room for training and development within grants, and agreed we needed to ensure PIs and internal peer reviewers are aware of the possibilities here. Research Services will work with the Doctoral College on appropriate communications.

Dr Wood asked for any comments.

Dr Yeomans stated that at the last ECR LF he brought up the hot desking issues. He has found the topic circular; being asked to fix locally however local concerns are not being listened to.

Dr Eyles reported that, from a Bioscientist/lab based viewpoint, that she was hearing a lot of frustrations from people who have raised issues locally with their lab managers who empathise however they feel unable to be able to help because of rules set at a higher level.

Dr Wood suggested a meeting be convened between the ECR Reps and Andrew Prof McRae/Fiona Pac-Soo/Drs Astrid Wissenberg to feedback on the issues raised.

Dr Falagan Rodriguez raised an issue around the local communications system (eg, working in labs/offices and not knowing who to ask if something needs changing in the lab/Christmas access to lab, etc) and suggested a need for better communication in general. She feels that there should be an ECR representation on the Research Restart panel (ie, an ECR who would normally use a lab) so that there is a better understanding of the challenges faced.

Action: Items to be taken to the next RIEG matters needs further discussion which should include senior members of staff (Andrew Prof McRae/Fiona Pac-Soo/Drs Astrid Wissenberg) and would like Reps to be involved in the writing of RIEG papers too.

Dr Wood fed back that Drs Wissenberg had said that we need to know issues in advance of our ECR LF in order to be able to ensure that the correct people are present at the ECR LF to discuss issues. There may be a need to involve more senior members of staff in the ECR LF going forward. Dr Wood asked for feedback on how we run future ECR LF virtual meetings (eg, smaller/more regular meetings?)

Dr Postma expressed his concerns about whether Reps are speaking for the whole community or individual experiences? What platforms are in place to gather feedback from whole community? Dr Wood reiterated the purposes of the ECR LF and how the Networks should feed into LF's and pointed out that we need to strike a balance as to what we are asking and what we should reasonably expect RIEG to address. Dr Postma stated that there may be some ECRs who are not aware of the Networks and LF's.

Dr Falagan Rodriguez suggested a more open LF or to have issues raised beforehand for inclusion on the ECR Agenda might be better approach. Dr Wood reiterated that ECRs can raise issues beforehand for inclusion on the Agenda.

Action: Dr Chris Wood to find out if RIEG information relating to ECR activity can be circulated, (actioned & approved - shared above).

Dr Eyles asked about the ECR Steering group for the RIEG paper development. Dr Wood explained that a Steering Group meeting had been convened before the last RIEG meeting in order to shape questions. Dr Eyles explained that ECR focused RIEG meetings are 2 hrs long and held termly, with c. 20 mins for ECR business therefore it is very important that only the most important points are taken to RIEG.

Dr Sharma shared his perspective on shared spaces, etc. at Cornwall. Following calculations, desk space is reduced by 75% with social distancing measures in place. He explained that there are challenges in ensuring that access to these spaces/parity is given across all Colleges and wondered how much senior management engagement there had been on the decision making process. CLES (Biosciences) has organised an open staff meeting to help ECRs and other staff around these types of questions. Perhaps other Colleges could do something similar?

Prof McRae asked for attendees to consider what our coordinating role might be in order to maximise impact at RIEG and asked for better connectivity at a local level ensuring that Colleges take a lead on this but also there is a responsibility on higher management to connect with Colleges and reiterated the need to be specific about what items are brought before RIEG.

Dr Wood agreed that we need to look at how the LF operates and suggested that some members meet in order to do this more effectively. He reported that there are in-roads to improving ECR Culture. There will be upcoming discipline specific Research Culture and Responsible Metrics workshops taking place that everyone is encouraged to attend. These will look at making changes to improve future working conditions and support available for ECRs.

Action: Dr Chris Wood to coordinate a meeting to discuss operational role of the LF's.

6 Invitation to join a British Academy workshop

Dr Moise spoke about his work with the British Academy. If you would like to apply for various positions funded by British Academy please contact him directly (I.Moise@exeter.ac.uk). An Interdisciplinary Conference is due to take place either in Exeter or London and he would like to circulate ideas for feedback from as many people as possible from a wide range of disciplines. Dr Moise shared documents in the Chat Box ([Doc 1](#) and [Doc 2](#)).

7 Any Other Business

Dr Yeomans feels that the communication issues arising from the discussions earlier in this meeting, may be a departmental issue where information is not being cascaded. He asked that notes from meetings are passed around to Networks in order to see what is being considered/decisions made.

Prof McRae replied to a question from Dr Garrett around funding extensions for PGRs from UKRI. He commented that there will be less funding than we had hoped would be provided.

Other areas of ECR representation include the Academic Steering Group and Positive Working Group. There is a call from the [Exeter Academic Steering Group](#) for an ECR Rep, a request to contact Dr Wood (c.b.wood@exeter.ac.uk) was made if colleagues were interested in fulfilling this role.

8 **Close of Meeting** (date to be confirmed)

The meeting closed at 12.31 pm.

Exeter ECR Liaison Forum - Action Points Summary

Item No	Action Point	Assigned to	Completed
5	Items to be taken to the next RIEG matters needs further discussion which should include senior members of staff (Andrew Prof McRae/Fiona Pac-Soo/Drs Astrid Wissenberg) and would like Reps to be involved in the writing of RIEG papers too.	CW	CW
5	Find out if RIEG information relating to ECR activity can be circulated.	CW	CW
5	To coordinate a meeting to discuss operational role of the LF's.	CW	CW