

Being a SHAPE Researcher

Synthesis report

September 2024

This report sets out the key themes emerging from engagement activities undertaken to date as part of the British Academy project on the SHAPE of Research Careers. Activities have included online workshops, held with early-, so-called "mid"- and later-career researchers across the humanities, arts and social sciences; an 'unconference' held in Birmingham with stakeholders including researchers and researcher developers; and insights from a survey of researchers in higher education and other sectors conducted on behalf of the Academy by a team at CRAC/Vitae.

Contents

Background and methodology	4
Drivers and motivators for pursuing research	8
Addressing complex societal challenges and contributing to knowledge	8
Collaboration and Community	9
Personal Values, Development and Skills	10
Identity	11
Disciplines and interdisciplinarity	11
The freedom to ask questions	12
Different identities for different contexts	13
External influences	14
Change over time	16
Precurity	16
Mobility	18
Sectoral mobility	18
Disciplinary mobility	21
Contracts and institutional mobility	22
Geographical mobility	23
Final reflections and next steps	25
Next steps	26

Background and methodology

In 2023, the British Academy launched a major project to better understand the careers, pathways and experiences of SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy) post-doctoral researchers in academia and other sectors. Informed by a series of evidence gathering and engagement exercises with the SHAPE research community, the project supports the broader Academy aim of advocating for a sustainable research ecosystem for all disciplines.

Published in 2021 by what was then the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the *R&D People and Culture Strategy* brought a renewed focus on how best to nurture the diversity and talent of the UK's research, development and innovation (RD&I) workforce.¹ The UK's RD&I base has a global reputation for research excellence and vibrancy, and research skills are therefore in high demand across a range of sectors and employers.² However, we need a systems-wide approach that values and articulates the contribution of all disciplines to meet society's increasingly complex challenges.

As part of a longstanding programme of work to promote SHAPE research and innovation, the Academy has sought to look at how we can develop and improve research cultures and the wider RD&I landscape.³ Along with activities undertaken by the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Royal Society looking at the future of research in their respective disciplinary areas, this project takes the view that research occurs across multiple sites, contexts and activities, and that while this breadth is a key strength of the UK's RD&I base, ensuring it remains well-coordinated and sustainable in the long-term is crucial.⁴ As such, we need to support and invest in the people at the heart of our research environments.

Under our previous flagship Skills Programme, we collected a series of case studies to illustrate the diversity of career pathways taken by SHAPE doctoral graduates and the wide applicability of their skills and knowledge.⁵ Qualitative evidence such as this demonstrates that SHAPE researchers and their skills are highly sought-after in multiple sectors. Part of the problem for researchers themselves and for the wider research landscape, however, is a lack of recognition or visibility of the multiple routes open to SHAPE researchers in and beyond academia. As such, this work, along with our broader research and innovation activity, has signalled a need to explore the full spectrum of research careers and trajectories.

¹ Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2021), *R&D People and Culture Strategy. People at the heart of R&D*.

² Wagner, S., Zhao, B., Rahal, C., Li, L., Spiers, A., Lu, Y., Leasure, D.L., REF 2021 LCDS Project Team, Verhagen, M., Mills, M (2024), *The SHAPE of research impact*, British Academy.

³ For more information, please see the British Academy's [R&D and Innovation policy and research](#) page.

⁴ See, for example, The Academy of Medical Sciences, *Future-proofing UK Health Research: a people-centred, coordinated approach*; The Royal Society, *Science 2040*.

⁵ British Academy (2020), *The Career Pathways of Doctoral Graduates: Case Studies*.

Developing the project

Around 70% of postdoctoral researchers leave academia after three years.⁶ However, little is still known about their pathways out of academia, between industry, independent research organisations or back into academia. This is particularly true for SHAPE doctoral graduates, where the pathways and opportunities available for this cohort may appear somewhat nebulous to policymakers, prospective students, industry leaders, and even institutions and researchers themselves.

A conceptual challenge was deciding whether this project was to look at the careers of SHAPE researchers (i.e. all possible career pathways available to SHAPE doctoral graduates), or if we wanted to explore different SHAPE research careers (i.e. where research constitutes a significant day-to-day part of a professional role). Since this project is intended to give greater recognition to the people at the heart of our research ecosystem to strengthen research capability in the UK, we opted for the latter. However, we expanded the scope to include research-related careers or activities to give greater visibility to the hidden or hybrid employment routes within the research landscape.

Following a literature review and gap analysis, we identified three primary groups of questions around identity, mobility and porosity. From these questions, three broad themes, or ‘phases’ for the project emerged.

Identity: What, who, and where are SHAPE researchers? What does it mean to be a researcher in SHAPE? Does this identity change over time or across sectors?

Mobility: What does mobility look like for researchers in our disciplines and what does ‘mobility’ mean to them? What are the drivers and potential barriers to mobility for SHAPE researchers?

Porosity: How free are SHAPE researchers to move between and across academia and other sectors? Does this look different for different disciplines?

Although with a primary focus on SHAPE research and researchers, these align with the stated aims of the *R&D People and Culture Strategy* to ‘enable talent and ideas to flow freely between academia ... and other sectors’, to ‘... ensure that everyone’s contribution is valued’, and that the UK’s broader research culture and ecosystem ‘... offers varied and diverse careers that bring excitement and recognition’.⁷ What our findings to date demonstrate, however, is the distance still to travel on such ambitions for many researchers in SHAPE.

In the first instance, we wanted to understand who we mean when we talk about SHAPE researchers and the multiple settings where SHAPE research can take place, or where SHAPE research skills are used. To investigate this, the project has concerned itself with exploring the identity of SHAPE researchers. As we will see, this can be highly subjective: for example, doctoral graduates who have left academia may not self-identify as researchers, even if a considerable portion of their day-to-day work involves some kind of research activity. Furthermore, some academics may not necessarily see themselves as researchers in a ‘pure’ sense of the word if they are more occupied with teaching, administrative tasks, or managing the research of others.

⁶ Hancock, S., Wakeling, P. and Chubb, J. (2019), *RoRI Working Paper No. 2. 21st Century PhDs: Why we need better methods of tracking doctoral access, experiences and outcomes*, Research on Research Institute.

⁷ Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2021), *R&D People and Culture Strategy*, p. 5

Secondly, we wanted to capture a clearer sense of how, where and why ‘mobility’ occurs for SHAPE researchers and how they understand the term. Other studies of the links between academia and business have suggested that a highly mobile research workforce indicates a strong and vibrant research and innovation base for all disciplines, and the project seeks to assess what this looks like for SHAPE researchers.⁸ Connected to this, is the extent or ease of ‘porosity’ – the ability, extent or absorptive capacity of the flow of people in and across academia or other sectors – both in terms of perceptions and actual experiences.⁹

The third theme, which really underpins this project, is to better understand what a good, sustainable, and meaningful career does or can look like for a SHAPE researcher. There is no prescriptive element since research across all disciplines is becoming more complex and dynamic. Those working in research or related careers should therefore have autonomy in deciding what a ‘good’ career is for them. To that end, this project contributes to and develops the evidence base to support researchers, researcher support professionals and potential employers in achieving this.

Project activity to date has primarily focused on the first and aspects of the second of these themes.

Gathering the evidence: engagement with the SHAPE community

Scoping

Given the broad conceptual dimensions present when scoping the project, we set up a series of meetings in autumn 2023 with experts in researcher careers and mobility. This included consulting with the other national Academies and their work on the current and future research base across their respective disciplines, researcher development and support professionals, and academic researchers with expertise in the area of research career pathways. These meetings enabled us to refine the project’s aims from a SHAPE perspective and to understand some of the existing and emerging evidence into research careers and outcomes.

Survey

In November 2023, following a competitive tender process, we commissioned the Careers and Research Advisory Centre (CRAC) to develop and run a survey that would address two central research questions aligned with the project’s first two themes: *Who are SHAPE researchers (identity)?* and *What do mobility and porosity of careers look like for SHAPE researchers (mobility and porosity)?* The rationale for a survey was to build an evidence base with responses from a spectrum of SHAPE researchers in and, as much as possible, beyond academia, blending quantitative and qualitative insights. The survey was designed to interrogate the project’s key themes of identity, mobility and porosity across a broad demographic of researchers in a way that would enable the data to be compared and analysed against other markers, such as career stage, discipline and sector. This was important, since individual experiences, perceptions and even definitions/understanding of terms can be highly subjective and nuanced.

Comprised of twenty questions, the survey ran from January until March 2024. After cleaning and deduplicating the data, we received 910 usable responses. Around 80% of respondents worked in academia/higher education (HE), with the remaining 20% in another sector.

⁸ See for example, National Centre for Universities and Business (2023), [Pathways to Success: NCUB Researcher Development Taskforce](#).

⁹ In this context, the definition of porosity builds on the understanding of it as movement between academia and other sectors, while extending it to concern the ability to do so. See, for example: Flinders, M. (2023), [Strategic scaffolding: Supporting mid-career and senior research leaders in the social sciences](#), for ESRC, ii. This definition or understanding is not intended to be prescriptive at this stage of the project; rather, we have adopted it to invite SHAPE researcher perceptions of porosity. We will interrogate it further in the next stage of the project.

As such, the results from the survey cannot be taken to be wholly representative of the entire SHAPE research community. As our understanding of and focus on SHAPE research careers develops over the course of the project, other considerations or researcher experiences, may come to light. However, as this synthesis will set out, the results provided a highly informative foundation to consider and compare professional identity, career motivations and barriers, and experiences and perceptions of mobility, against a range of SHAPE researcher backgrounds. A full report detailing the survey responses across all questions is published alongside this synthesis.¹⁰

Online workshops

In parallel with the survey process, we also ran a series of facilitated online workshops with SHAPE researchers, beginning in December 2023, to explore researcher identity and mobility. The workshops have brought together participants from diverse disciplinary and research backgrounds from across the SHAPE spectrum. We engaged with participants from different institutions, sectors, and career stages to investigate the themes of identity, mobility and porosity. To enable us to compare and contrast discussion, we ran separate workshops by broad disciplinary area and by career stage. The first workshop was for so-called "mid"-career (hereafter MCR) and later-career researchers from humanities and arts disciplines; the second "mid"- and later-career researchers from social sciences; and the third for early career researchers (hereafter ECRs) from across all SHAPE disciplines.¹¹ Some of the material from the preliminary sessions held with mid- and later-career researchers was also used to help develop and frame the survey questions.

In-person 'unconference'

In collaboration with the British Academy's Early Career Researcher Network (ECRN) and the University of Birmingham, we also delivered an in-person event, which took place in late March 2024. In the spirit of an 'unconference', the event focused on co-producing and building policy interventions with the attendees. We used a facilitated and semi-structured format with a policy lab at the event to both present findings from the survey to attendees and focus on policy challenges. Attendees represented a mixture of participants from the online workshops, as well as wider members of the SHAPE research and researcher development community from academia and other sectors.

The intention of this present document is to outline the primary findings to date from across these different activities. It is intended that this synthesis will benefit the wider SHAPE research community and other stakeholders including employers and those engaged in researcher development and careers support. This synthesis does not present an exhaustive account of all the examples, experiences, and views which have come out of the different engagement activities for this project. There were many excellent stories, quotes, ideas, and data points which came out of the workshops, unconference, and survey. Each has been invaluable in driving the direction of the project and helping us to identify themes and challenges, and we would like to thank everyone who has shared often very personal reflections with us over the course of this project to date.

¹⁰ Jonsas, K. and Mellors-Borne, R. (2024), *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers: Final Report*. A report by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC).

¹¹ We acknowledge that terms such as 'later-career' and 'mid-career' in particular, are somewhat contested and increasingly being reconsidered and replaced, see for example the work being undertaken by the N8 Research Partnership, which prefers the term 'established researchers': Bramley, A. (2023), *Report from N8 workshop of on experiences of researchers in their mid-career*. We have used the terms early-career researcher (ECR), mid-career researcher (MCR), and later-career researcher, throughout this report and the project-to date for consistency of terminology and to enable comparison by career stage and experience, but always with these challenges in mind. Participants in both the workshops and the survey were able to self-identify which 'group' they felt they best fit into. For early-career researchers, we have used the broad definition employed by the Academy's [Early Career Researcher Network](#).

Drivers and motivators for pursuing research

Research and research-related careers are highly attractive pathways. Data published by the Higher Education and Statistics Agency indicates an overall 5% increase in the number of postgraduate research degrees obtained in the UK in the decade between 2012/13 and 2021/22.¹² Uncovering what the ‘pull’ of a research career – not least a SHAPE research career – might be for different people can provide a crucial insight into what drives researchers, helping us to gauge individual experiences and interests, but also to interpret any wider patterns in what attracts people to work in research and any barriers they have faced in this pursuit.

Addressing complex societal challenges and contributing to knowledge

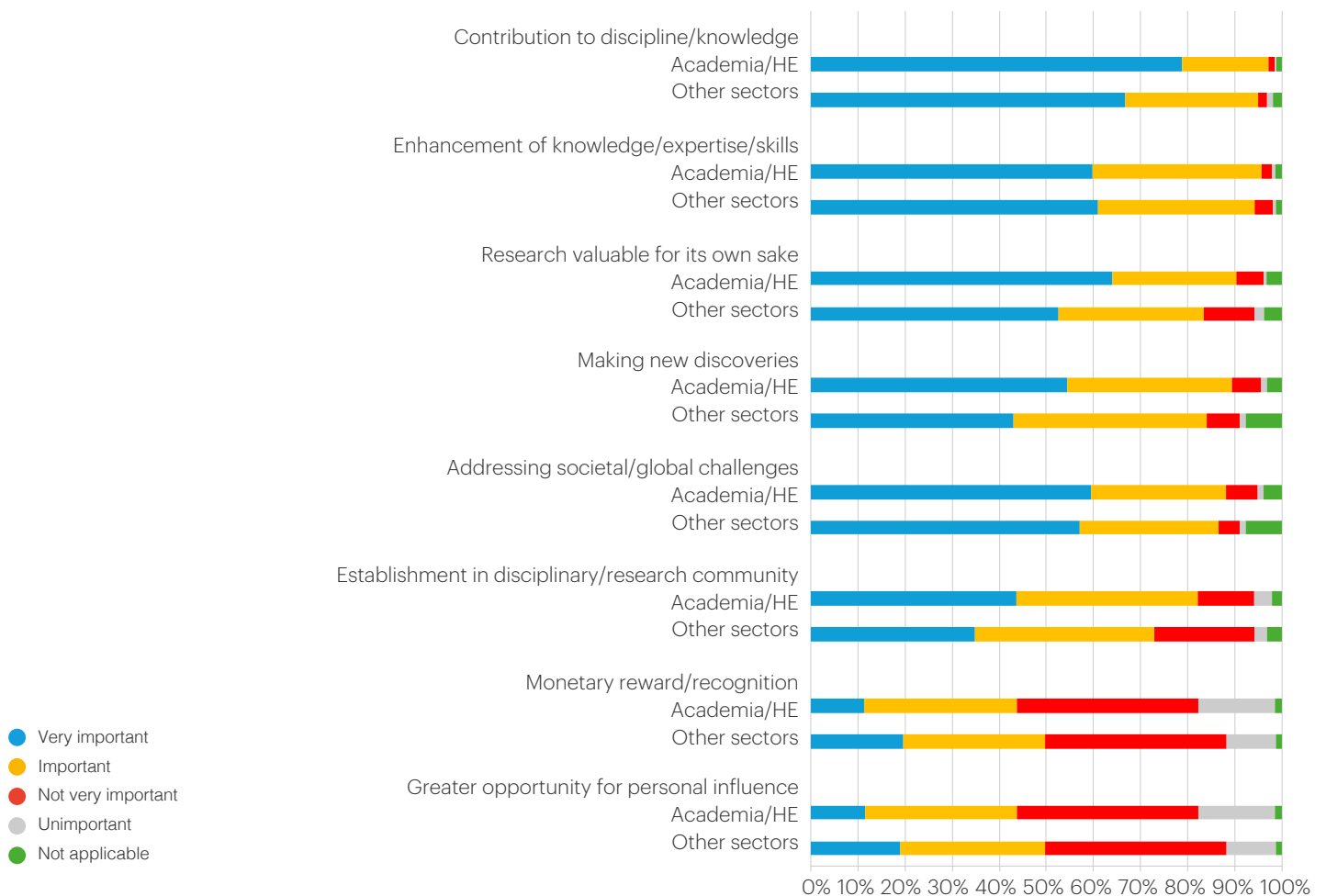
A main driver for a SHAPE research career, as expressed by our survey respondents, and workshop and unconference participants, is the opportunity to work towards addressing societal challenges. This is perhaps unsurprising, since SHAPE research has a profound impact on our knowledge and understanding of governance, democracy, environment and sustainability, and our cultures and histories.¹³ Indeed, our survey showed that the main areas of employment beyond academia for SHAPE doctoral graduates were in the public and third sectors, in roles ranging from charity and development, to health and public administration, and the creative industries.¹⁴ There is a clear impetus to producing and applying SHAPE research (as well as harnessing the skills gained from a PhD in a SHAPE discipline) for wider social and public good. Results from the survey showed that, proportionally, respondents working in both academia and other sectors saw the ability to tackle global or societal challenges through research as highly important to their work (see Figure 1).

Another significant driver was the opportunity to advance or contribute to knowledge in their respective fields. Although many still cited a broader democratic or societal aim for their research, a significant portion of researchers in both the survey and online workshops responded that developing knowledge for its own sake was a very personal and important motivator for engaging in research. Some participants at our ECR workshop noted the ‘addictive quality’ of research that comes from the excitement of discovery and knowledge-creation, leading to an increased desire to find out more. This sentiment was echoed in the MCR and later-career workshops, particularly for those working in academia, where participants considered the capacity to carve out a research niche as a key source of motivation for developing a career as a researcher.

¹³ Wagner, S., Zhao, B., Rahal, C., Li, L., Spiers, A., Lu, Y., Leasure, D.L., REF 2021 LCDS Project Team, Verhagen, M., Mills, M (2024), *The SHAPE of Research Impact*, British Academy.

¹⁴ Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, pp. 10-11 and 15-18.

Figure 1: Personal motivations for engaging in research or research-related activities (Respondents working in HE/academia N=726, respondents working in other sectors N=184).



Source: Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 5.5, p. 27.

Collaboration and Community

Our participants also challenged the view of a researcher, particularly within the SHAPE disciplines, as being a 'lone' individual working in isolation. Rather, a driver for research was to be less, rather than more, isolated, through working in collaboration with others on interesting and creative projects, with interesting and creative people – whether from academia or other sectors. This was noted particularly by those mid-career researchers in our arts and humanities-focused workshop, and by those whose research featured an element of creative practice – regardless of how this might be viewed externally in terms of being research.

While teaching-heavy contracts or schedules were cited as a barrier to a research career, some participants, in particular ECRs, felt that the integration of research and teaching in academia was fundamental, especially in producing research outputs for undergraduate teaching.¹⁵ Some described students as the primary audience of academic research and therefore research was not just about the intrinsic value of discovery of new knowledge, but also an instrumental good in supporting the next generation of learners and future researchers.

¹⁵ For this 'nexus' between teaching and research, see The British Academy (2022), *The Teaching-Research Nexus: Project Summary*.

Connected to this, participants at our workshops and unconference viewed knowledge exchange in and beyond academic channels as a clear motivator for their work. They pointed to circles or communities of learning between researchers and, importantly, those with lived experience or expertise of a particular subject matter, through initiatives such as community projects, public policy programmes, or partnerships between universities and local authorities. However, as one MCR participant noted, when working at the intersection of 'academic research' and 'knowledge exchange', the impact of this work could be overlooked by other academics who may not see it as fulfilling 'serious' or 'pure' research goals.

Collaboration and connecting academia to 'industry' was identified as a motivation for switching sectors, but one MCR participant now working in galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) sector organisation, felt that making the switch from academia had enabled them to foster and be part of what they saw as a broader intellectual culture, doing the work of connecting academia and 'industry'. Research no longer featured as a formal part of their role, but this was seen as an acceptable trade-off for a permanent contract and being able to remain part of this wider culture. This breadth and range of opportunity was something they contrasted with a moment at the end of their doctorate, when options and pathways had felt narrow.

Personal Values, Development and Skills

External-facing goals, such as a commitment to wider societal or culture issues or collaborating with a diverse set of stakeholders, resonated with all our participants. Many also reflected on the personal and professional fulfilment not necessarily from the outputs of research, but the *ways* of working in SHAPE research and research-related environments. This included the potential to enhance and master high-level skills and the importance of aligning their careers with their workplace and personal values. For example, autonomy at work was a recurring driver of research careers, particularly for academics. The extent to which a role could provide autonomy and self-determination in producing and/or managing research was often the basis of its appeal, sometimes more so than other markers of meaningful employment. Academia was therefore seen as a space or sector which provides a certain legitimacy to self-management and autonomy. For some of our workshop participants, particularly those in the mid-career workshops, this was part of the underlying motivation for working in academia, and large, multi-national corporate structures in some other industries were not a space in which they wanted to operate.

Indeed, this perceived binary divide between a career in academia or a research-related career in a corporate setting as the only two options available to SHAPE doctoral graduates was described by some as the result of poor careers information during the PhD stage. As the survey results show in Figure 1 above, mastering skills and expertise are notable motivators for SHAPE researchers. These advanced research skills are attractive to a broad spectrum of sectors and fields, but guidance on research-related careers beyond academia could be lacking. At our ECR workshop, for example, participants wanted higher education institutions (HEIs) to embed a greater focus on professional development as part of the doctorate, or at the very least provide more support on career options after the PhD.

Similarly, persistence and self-motivation cannot be discounted as an important driver for researchers, particularly those who have remained in academia. As one MCR participant put it, pursuing a research career within academia is a conscious choice, likened in this case to a marriage where, "you wake up every day and you choose [to be there]. ... When you wake up and cannot make that choice anymore, is the first day that you leave". Others likened those working in academia to elite athletes through the "sheer bloody mindedness" which was needed to keep going and succeed in the career. Researchers, regardless of discipline, are highly motivated, highly skilled individuals.

Identity

A central aim of this project has been to investigate what it means to be a SHAPE researcher and whether this identity changes over time or across sectors. Survey responses suggest that, for those currently working in academia or higher education (HE), the terms they most recognised in relation to their identity were ‘academic’ and ‘researcher’ – though many more identified with the former (75%), compared to the latter (just under 50%).¹⁶ For those employed in other sectors, the picture was much broader, with ‘expert in my profession/field’, ‘professional in my discipline/field’, and ‘research professional’ featuring more prominently.¹⁷ Those working in other sectors, however, still identified as a ‘researcher’ and this label had the most parity of responses across sectors. This suggests that this identity is not unique to academia or higher education more broadly and that it can be transferred to other sectors of employment.

Qualitative inputs to the survey, however, as well as discussion in our online workshops, suggest that the term ‘researcher’, and how individuals identify, can be much more nuanced and complex than the data perhaps suggests. It also became apparent that identity could be quite fixed for some, but more flexible and context or career-stage dependent for others. Below we set out some of the main themes which have emerged from our engagement activities in relation to research identity.

Disciplines and interdisciplinarity

The term ‘researcher’ may not always be a comfortable fit for all disciplines in the same contexts. MCR workshop participants from social science and interdisciplinary backgrounds, for example, felt that ‘researcher’ may be more helpful to those in social sciences, given the more physical aspects of practice and exploration in some of these disciplines, rather than the critical analysis which forms a central part of much research in the humanities. For other disciplines, particularly those more arts-focused, it was suggested that ‘creative practice’ might be a more appropriate description than ‘research’. Other terms of self-identification which came out of the workshops included ‘scholar’. This term also featured in survey responses, with around 20% of those working in academia/HE recognising this title as part of their professional identity.¹⁸ It was suggested that this might be more appropriate for humanities disciplines or those with a greater theoretical or critical approach.

Differences were also noted by workshop participants when it came to how a term like ‘researcher’ could be understood across SHAPE and STEM disciplines, where medicine, for example may use ‘researcher’ to distinguish from positions such as ‘clinician’. Similarly, they viewed the ‘research staff’ career track as perhaps more familiar within STEM disciplines or corporate settings. A clear distinction was, however, made between what might be more appropriate in the day-to-day reality and working of an individual or discipline and what was required or expected from others. For funding calls, for example, workshop participants acknowledged that a certain research-focused rhetoric was needed in order to be successful. Such external influences on identity are also explored further below.

As we heard in the workshops, research methodologies also play a role in identity. This was the case for those in both academic and non-academic roles and there were both individual and external aspects to this. For those working in interdisciplinary research spanning both higher

¹⁶ Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 5.1, p. 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

education and other sectors, there was a feeling that their work could be judged by some to not constitute traditional ‘research’ and be seen more as a series of knowledge exchange activities - regardless of how they themselves viewed it or identified as researcher. This was also the case for participants from disciplines such as Creative Writing, where it might be more challenging to separate research from other activities.

As we heard from many of our workshop participants, however, the freedom or opportunity to broaden a research identity away from traditional disciplinary silos may be more feasible or less risky for those already well established and secure in their academic careers, with fewer concerns about precarity.

‘It [my identity] changed from describing myself as “a sociologist” to seeing myself as intellectually located in a multidisciplinary space that has little to do with the traditional concerns of much (but not all) of sociology’

Male, later-career, academia/HE (survey, p. 21)

The freedom to ask questions

Something which emerged through our online workshops as central to the concept ‘being a researcher’ in a SHAPE discipline was the importance of being able to ask questions and to disseminate and share knowledge with others. This was echoed by workshop participants at all career stages and regardless of disciplines. This is where the self-described definitions of ‘research’ and ‘being a researcher’ which came out of the project’s engagement activities most closely align with established frameworks for assessing research, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF).¹⁹ It also aligns well with some of the Frascati Manual’s criteria for what constitutes research and experimental development.²⁰ One participant in the workshop for humanities and arts MCRs suggested, however, that, ideally, being a researcher should not be so defined by disciplinary differences, departmental rankings, or other external pressures, but should be characterised by being able to express oneself freely and courageously.

For our ECR workshop participants this freedom also needed to be weighed against the day-to-day realities of academia and their career stage. There was also a balance to be drawn between the uncertainty of “chasing” projects and funding for research, coupled with navigating a higher education landscape of precarious contracts, and the enjoyment which they derived from working on a range of projects and having the facility to do this. This could also entail the need to balance a passion for research or a particular disciplinary area, with the desire to do different activities, such as organise conferences or other things which had meaning and significance to them but which may receive less external recognition as part of wider research activity.

For those disciplines with traditionally close links with practice, such as Law, an MCR workshop participant cited a greater freedom to choose topics or cases within an academic environment than would be possible were the individual employed in professional practice full-time. Teaching and public engagement, alongside other activities, were also identified as offering different avenues for conveying knowledge and ideas which were not so readily available in other sectors. Linked to the ability to ask questions and pursue particular topics, therefore, was the ability to pass this knowledge and enthusiasm on to students, colleagues, fellow collaborators and peers.

¹⁹ See, for example, REF 2019/01 (2019), *Guidance on Submissions*, ‘Annex C: Definitions of research and impact for the REF’, p. 90.

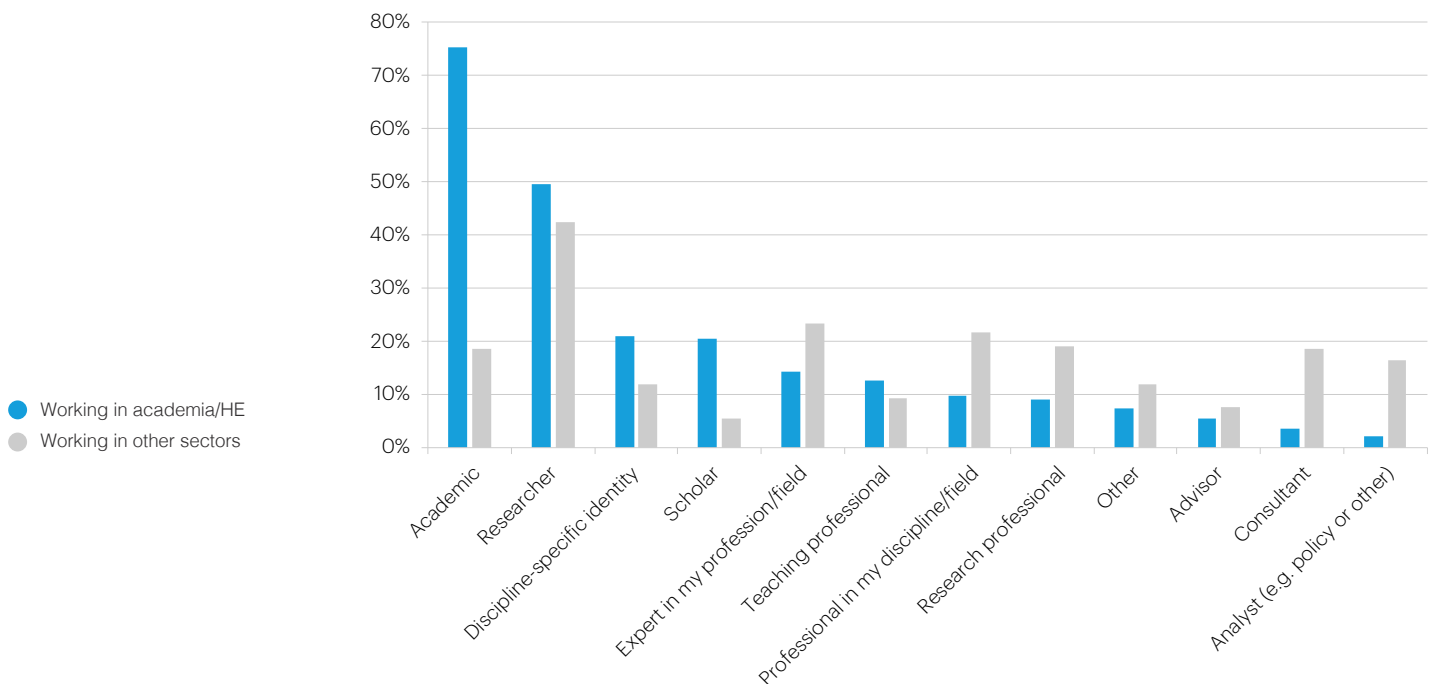
²⁰ OECD (2015), *Frascati Manual 2015. Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development*, ‘Part 1: Defining and measuring R&D: General Guidance. Chapter 2.2, Definition of research and experimental development (R&D)’, p. 44.

Despite being an important part of conducting research and being a ‘researcher’, however, more than one participant at both the online workshops and the unconference expressed a feeling that this freedom in academia was becoming less possible in reality, though specific examples of why were not given. In some cases, therefore, it was only in leaving academia that individuals felt that they had been able to freely pursue the research that they wanted. This was in addition to being able to better balance research with family and other commitments, or feeling more able to express other important aspects of their identities, while still identifying as a ‘researcher’. Some, however, felt that level of flexibility, either in terms of research area or balancing commitments outside of work, was only possible within academia, particularly in terms of working schedules.²¹ This aspect of identity, therefore, was very subjective and dependent upon an individual’s own experiences and wider biography.

Different identities for different contexts

Rather than a fixed identity, the term ‘researcher’ was also understood by many of our participants to be highly subjective and context dependent on someone’s background in SHAPE, their contract type, or who they were talking to at a point in time. Survey responses show that the term ‘researcher’ had the most parity of recognition as a term from both respondents working in academia/HE and those working in other sectors, across all career stages. Many other titles, however, also resonated, as can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Recognition of potential titles for professional identity (respondents working academia/HE N=726, other sectors N=184; multiple responses allowed).



Source: Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 5.1, p. 19.

For those online workshop participants who had left what we might term ‘mainstream’ academia and were working freelance, their professional identity was shaped more by the client they were engaging with, and they felt that referring to themselves as a ‘consultant’ could often be more appropriate than ‘researcher’. This may account for many of the numbers employed in sectors other than academia/HE in the chart above, for whom that term resonated as part of their professional identity.

²¹

See for example a female, later-career survey respondent answering a question about barriers to mobility to another sector outside of academia/HE: ‘Fear of working in a 9-5 job after more flexible schedules in academia’. Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, p. 36.

'I have spent most of my career moving between different kinds of knowledge institution (e.g. museums and universities) and, increasingly, working between these 'spaces'. In the process, my research and professional identity has become more complex – cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary – and multi-faceted'

Female, mid-career, public sector (survey, p. 22).

There were also differing views on the extent to which 'research' was central to identity. For a humanities and arts workshop later-career participant who had always worked within academia, research for them was at the core of what "makes academics special and the core of what they do", even when engaged in a range of activities alongside this. For others research was only a part of an identity, given other activities which can also include training other researchers and facilitating (and inspiring) the pipeline of research talent through supervision, leadership on research projects, and teaching. Some participants even questioned whether we can sensibly talk about 'a researcher' or 'doing research', given the variety of what this can look like across different disciplinary and methodological perspectives, as well as at different career stages or across location and contract type.

There were positives attributed to researchers' flexibility and ability to adapt or identify in different ways, something which was seen as preferable to having to pick a 'label'. Having to pick a single identity was seen as potentially frustrating, given the range of activities an individual can engage in and the range of responsibilities they acquire, particularly as they progress through their career. A female, MCR survey respondent, working within academia/HE, commented that 'overall, my identity [is] shaped by a combination of scholarly pursuits, advocacy work, and educational outreach within the broader archaeological community'.²²

When it came to teaching, many of our MCR workshop participants felt that students saw them more as 'educators' and were less interested in any 'researcher' part of their identity, despite research activity helping to guide and improve their teaching.²³ Participants themselves, however, were less likely to describe themselves as a 'teacher' or 'lecturer', as this was perceived as having less gravitas.

A contrast to the potential benefit of multiple 'labels' and identities came from the pressures associated with these different roles and responsibilities – referred to by one workshop participant as the 'pressure cooker' of academia – where an individual can be expected to juggle so many different roles and their accompanying identities, that this can impact a sense of belonging. This feeling was noted in particular by participants across our two workshops for MCRs and later-career researchers, who had seen the number of different responsibilities expected of them increase over the course of their career.

External influences

One of the most commonly cited influences on an individual's identity was external factors – both on how they were viewed by others, but also how they viewed themselves. This also links to challenges experienced by some participants in whether or not their type or method of research was appreciated or valued as such.

²² Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, p. 20.

²³ For the importance of the relationship between teaching and research see, The British Academy, *The Teaching-Research Nexus*.

It is a sense of self-perception that has shifted, forming different core identities; moving from a “fledgling academic” to “recognised expert” has been equally reliant on my own understanding and others’ understanding of my work’s contribution to interdisciplinary research/the profession/ knowledge/ social challenges. Recognition in the form of publications, successful grant capture, career rewards, and positions of esteem ... enable [...] the perception of the self-as-expert to be grounded in tangible outcomes’.

Female, mid-career, academia/HE (survey, p. 20).

The influence of external forms of assessment, particularly the Research Excellence Framework (REF), was also cited by many workshop participants, chiefly when it came to defining research and being a researcher from an institutional perspective. For the ECRs in our online workshops, this included linking identity to how ‘success’ is understood and what is recognised and rewarded. For some, a person’s identity can be so deeply rooted in academia and being ‘an academic’ (or researcher), that doing anything else feels like failure. Anecdotally, this is a major barrier to mobility in careers and to individuals feeling able to explore alternatives.

Differences were highlighted in what an individual in a given field may identify or understand as ‘research’ and what institutions or departments may define as ‘research’ or ‘rigour’. The feeling was that institutions and departments’ views on research were shaped to a greater degree by external measurements of research and its impact such as REF or publications. In light of this, there was some debate amongst our workshop participants about the extent to which differences between more qualitative and quantitative research methods – such as the differences between using randomised control trials and using creative practice – were really appreciated, both within higher education institutions and wider frameworks of research assessment.²⁴ Those undertaking these practices would understand them as being research, but workshop participants questioned the extent to which they would be understood as such by others, including employers in other sectors.

Differing external perceptions of research can also impact the ability to undertake research in the first place through access to funding. One workshop participant referred to “the political economy of [academia]”, whereby there was often a need to identify as a researcher, or to adopt or adapt to this type of rhetoric in order to secure funding and to avoid pushes towards teaching-only contracts.²⁵ As well as financially enabling research, the legitimising quality that funding brings to an individual and, by extension to their research and practices was also noted. Again, those in more practice-based disciplines, or those working in an interdisciplinary context with practice-based or creative aspects to their work, felt that what they understood to be research was not always seen as such by colleagues or funders. There may also be challenges to external perceptions of these forms of research from limitations in data capture, as arts and creative practice disciplines tend to receive more private funding from sources not recorded in HESA data, making them seem less well supported and appreciated in this way.

‘Previous applications to roles outside of academia have been largely met by some confusion on the part of the interviewers, who have needed to be informed about the transferable skills I could bring from academia and particularly my specific discipline’

Female, mid-career, academia/HE (survey, p. 36).

²⁴ See, for example, some of the challenges for and concerns around proposed criteria and assessment for REF 2029, expressed in a recent article by Mathew Flinders. Flinders, M. (August 2024), ‘[Is it safe to trust that the next REF will reward a wider range of outputs?](#)’, Times Higher Education, August 1, 2024.

²⁵ See for example, British Academy, [The Teaching-Research Nexus](#), pp. 22 & 25.

There was an element of disconnect between these external influences on identity within academia and what may be experienced in other sectors. The importance of winning grants and the need to find external sources of funding to maintain a role, or at least a research role, was identified by workshop participants as a feature of academia which was not so common in other sectors. As we will explore further below, as well as influencing identity, this can translate into a perceived lack of experience or credibility relevant to other sectors of employment. Some workshop participants therefore questioned the extent to which academia and other professional contexts can overlap, given this flexibility of interpretation from external influences when it came to what constitutes 'research' and 'being a researcher'.

Change over time

A small number of survey respondents (fewer than 5%) indicated that their professional identity, whether as a 'researcher' or another chosen label, had remained constant over the course of their career.²⁶ This is not to say, however, that changes in context were not experienced, with one respondent commenting: 'My professional identity has remained similar throughout my career but has been applied to different topics'.²⁷ This comment, however, was made by an ECR respondent working in academia/HE and our other engagement activities and responses from participants further on in their careers suggest that this perception could change.

The majority of survey respondents saw significant changes in their professional identity over time, primarily as a result of progression and changing roles going hand in hand.²⁸ Our MCR workshop participants from arts and humanities disciplines perceived the range of roles undertaken by academics, particularly at their career stage, as more akin to being managers of research/research management, than being 'a researcher' themselves, in contrast with the types of activities they had undertaken earlier in their careers. Research activity and therefore identity was seen as having peaks and troughs, with periods of more intense research focus, such as when in receipt of a research grant, or less so such as during term time or with heavier teaching loads. Across both of our workshops for MCR researchers, and so across SHAPE disciplines, the point was repeated that they did not feel as though they had fully been 'a researcher' and able to engage in pure research since they had completed their doctorates, even when in receipt of a research grant.

This suggests that researchers' identity changes over time as roles develop and individuals have to take on more responsibilities. While perhaps not unique to SHAPE or to academia this was felt to be particularly the case for those working in higher education institutions.

Precarity

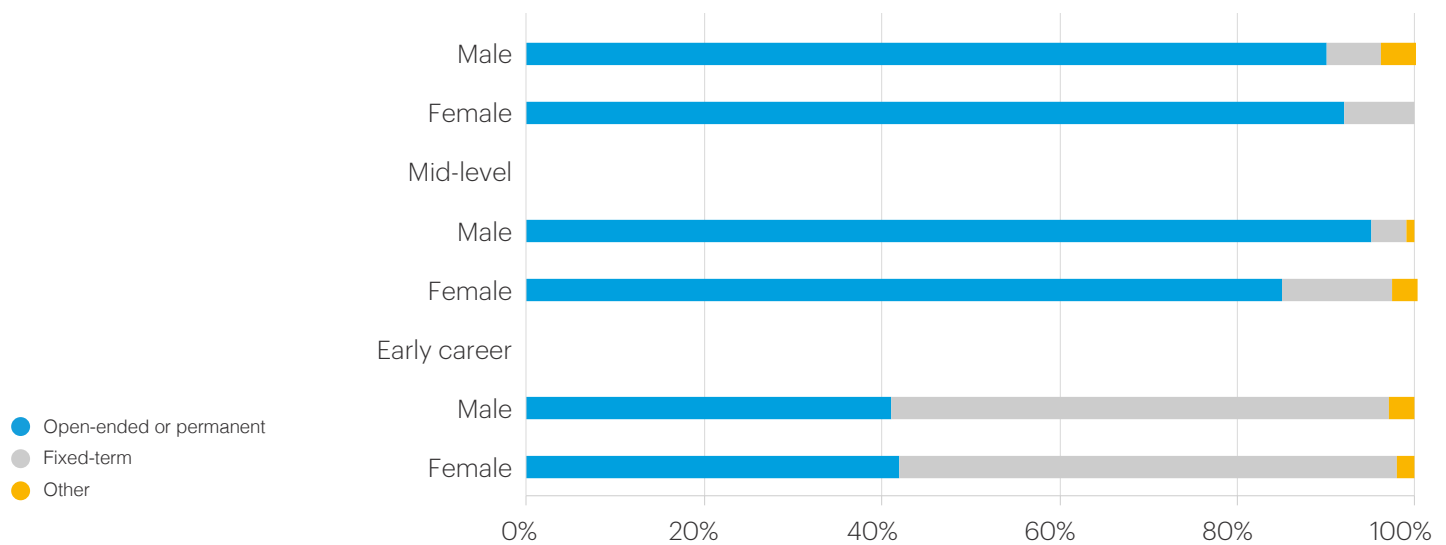
Closely linked to change over a longer period of time was the impact of precarity within academia and the way in which this can become a dominant part of an individual's identity, to the extent that it can almost overwhelm disciplinary or academic identity. This was expressed particularly clearly by participants in our ECR workshop, and can also be seen reflected in the differences in academic/HE contract-type by career stage in the survey report, with fixed-term contracts being significantly more common for ECR respondents, as shown in Figure 3.

²⁶ Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, p. 20.

²⁷ Male, early-career academia/HE, *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Figure 3: Proportions of respondents working in academia/HE with different types of employment contract, with job level (N=726).



Source: Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 4.2, p. 14.

Such was the perceived influence of precarity on an individual's identity, that our workshop participants described it as something which could effectively put a research identity 'on hold'. Terms like 'flux' and 'balancing act' were used, with identity changing with each new fixed-term contract and according to each new department, location, or type of institution. The very real impact of precarity in putting 'on hold' not just a research identity, but also so many other aspects of an individual's life outside of their professional role, and the interplay between the two, should not be underplayed. One female, ECR survey respondent, currently working in academia/HE stated the challenge clearly: 'precarity is the biggest barrier to research progression. If you want to raise a family and have a stable home, part-time temporary research contracts are usually not the way to go'.²⁹

This can also be linked to an important wider point about equality, diversity, and inclusion and who 'gets to be a researcher', with some groups increasingly more able to sustain this profile than others. While Figure 3 may suggest that those who are able to persevere will be rewarded with a more secure contract, some gender differences are still apparent at the MCR stage, and this does not paint the whole picture of who 'gets' to stay the course and why. Our survey responses on this theme came primarily from those working within academia/HE, with one male MCR respondent commenting that: '... there are in-built cultural and systemic factors that effectively favour the economically privileged, normally abled person who doesn't have care requirements'.³⁰ As well as impacting on an individual's ability to be or identify as a researcher, such factors can also impact mobility and how this is experienced.

²⁹ Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, p. 41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Mobility

In addition to investigating what it means or looks like to be ‘a researcher’ or conduct research in SHAPE disciplines, we also wanted to better understand what the concept of mobility meant to these people and their careers. As a term, ‘mobility’ was seen as having many positive connotations. It can be good for ideas, different research methods, refreshing an individual’s love of teaching and research, or help to promote knowledge exchange between institutions and sectors. There was no single agreed understanding of what ‘mobility’ means, however, and it was not viewed purely in terms of movement between academia and industry. Rather mobility was seen as having many different guises, such as mobility between disciplines, departments, sectors or geographical locations.

There were also negative connotations and associations. Mobility was contrasted with stability, and not always understood as purposeful, or desirable, but rather something which could be necessitated by precarity. By contrast, stability was identified as having other benefits, both for individuals but also for research, particularly where research and its outputs may have a more local geographical focus, helping to embed an institution in its wider community.

Such insights are unlikely to be unique to those from SHAPE disciplines, but do highlight the fact that, when policies or initiatives talk about ‘mobility’, there are many different ways that this can be interpreted, understood, and experienced by researchers themselves.

Sectoral mobility

Questions in our survey about motivations for sectoral mobility gave some interesting results, with only minor differences for those who worked in academia/HE and those employed in other sectors. Better work/life balance and increased satisfaction were identified as the primary motivators (88% and 84% respectively).³¹ This applies both to what *could* motivate these individuals to change sectors, as well as what had motivated those who had already moved. Analysing these responses by career stage, however, also brought some different results, with 90% of early-career respondents and 80% of mid-career respondents, across all sectors of employment, reporting enhanced job security as a motivating factor and, perhaps somewhat concerningly, 56% of those at later-career stages reported the same.³² While a lower share than earlier career respondents, this suggests that precarity is pervasive and remains a preoccupation for those at a more established stage in their careers.

Making this move is, however, not seen as without its challenges. The survey results show a higher percentage of those currently working in academia seeing every option as a potential barrier to moving from academia to another sector, when compared to those already working in other sectors.³³ Significantly, many of those respondents currently working within academia/HE identified a lack of guidance and support (42%), a lack of local opportunities (38%) and/or a lack of opportunities to try it (36%), as potential barriers to this type of mobility.³⁴ Whether this represents perception or reality, it does suggest that there is a piece missing in connecting SHAPE researchers to these opportunities and therefore could better facilitate mobility and a diversity of career paths.

³¹ Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, p. 33.

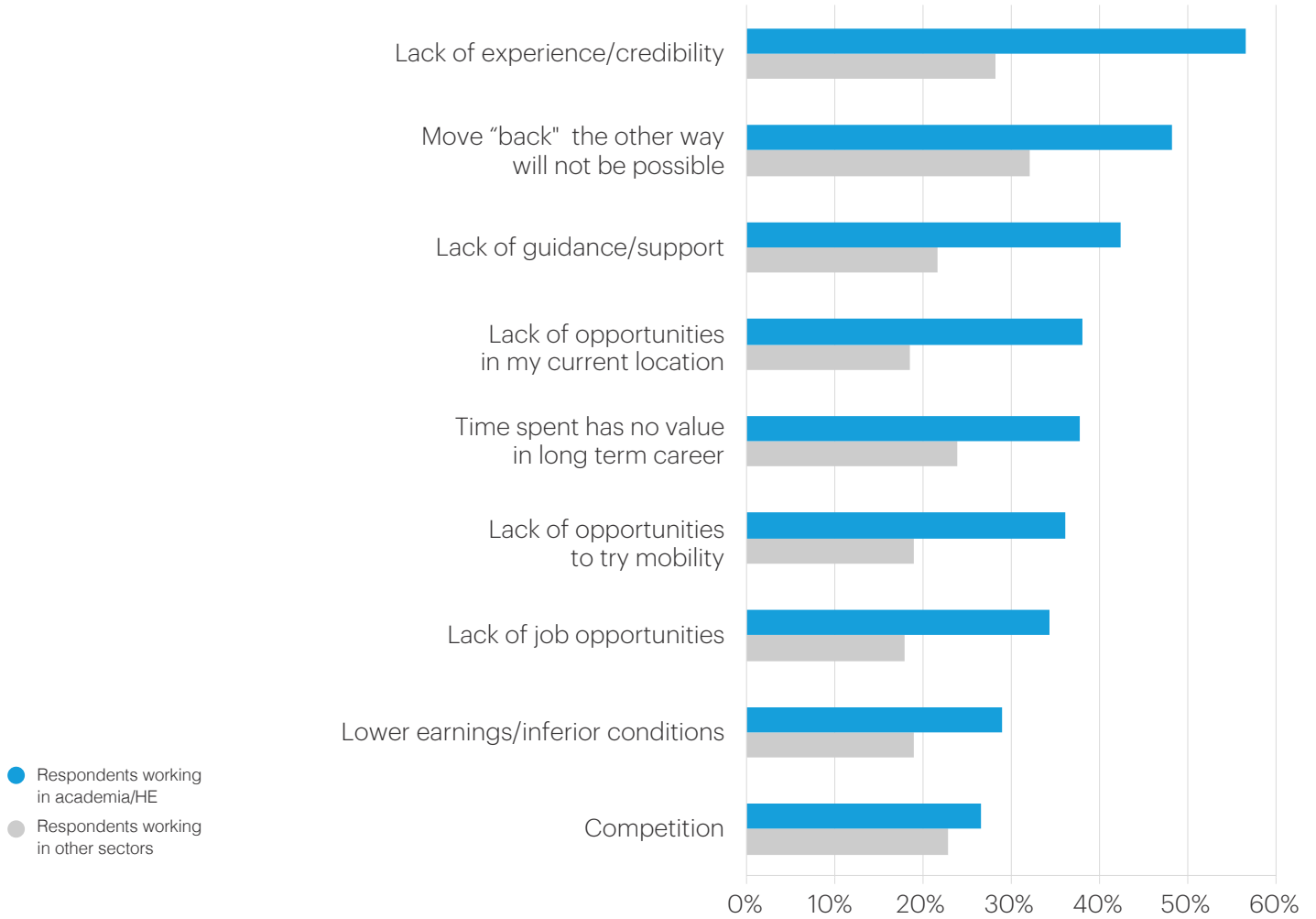
³² *Ibid*, p. 34.

³³ *Ibid*, Figure 6.5, p. 35.

³⁴ Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 6.5, p. 35, and p. 36.

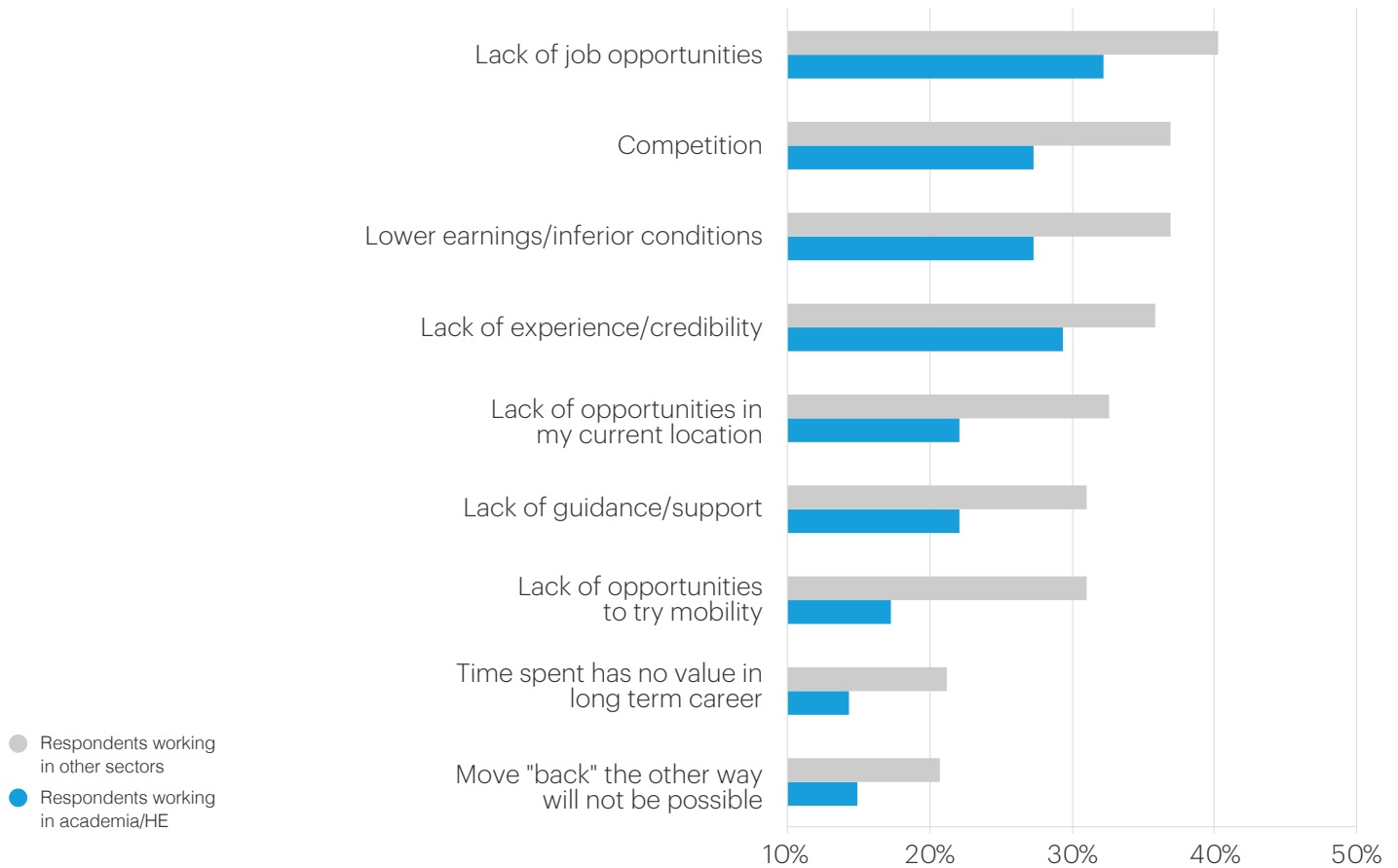
What is notable is that these potential barriers to mobility from academic employment to another sector were viewed as significantly less of a barrier by those currently working in other sectors. When it came to perceived barriers to moving back into academia/HE from another sector, however, the reverse was true.

Figure 4: Perceived barriers to sectoral mobility: moving from academic employment to another sector (working in academia/HE N=726, working in other sectors N=184).



Source: Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 6.5, p. 35.

Figure 5: Perceived barriers to sectoral mobility: moving from another sector to academic employment (working in academia/HE N=726, working in other sectors N=184).



Source: Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 6.6, p. 37.

A comparison of the perceptions of these barriers, therefore, presents a challenge to the concept of porosity between academia and other sectors, particularly for those in SHAPE disciplines. An analysis of HESA data, conducted by the National Centre for Universities and Business in 2023 with a particular focus on STEM disciplines, also showed very small percentages for mobility between academia and industry by career stage between 2017/18 and 2021/22, particularly as career stages progressed.³⁵

An MCR workshop participant from an arts and humanities disciplinary background noted the challenge for those moving into academia later in their careers because this can mean moving from a secure role or contract to one which may be less secure and more reliant on funding. Other participants likened this aspect of being a researcher within academia to being ‘a bit of an entrepreneur’ and described the need to keep bringing in funding to sustain a role which you are already contracted for as being quite alien (one participant used the term ‘mindboggling’) to many sectors.

‘Many academic posts do not credit previous experience elsewhere. I think it would be more difficult now, when top universities require a strong publications record, to move from another sector into academia.’

Male, later-career, academia/HE (survey, p. 36).

³⁵ National Centre for Universities and Business (2023), *Pathways to Success. NCUB Researcher Career Mobility Taskforce 2023*, Figure 3, p. 16. The report also highlights the limitations of this HESA data, due to inconsistencies in institutional reporting and the specific time points at which this data is captured.

More specifically, the need to publish was cited in qualitative responses as a barrier to moving back into academia by both those currently working in academia/HE and those who had made the switch to other sectors. An ECR respondent, working in an unspecified ‘other’ sector, also highlighted the difficulty in moving back into academia because ‘job applications require teaching and research plans, and experience of winning funding, and it can be hard (if not impossible) to know what’s required here, even if you bring experience of researching in the real world’.³⁶ The prohibitive cost of demonstrating a research portfolio was also noted by an MCR respondent currently working in the legal services sector.³⁷

When researchers do make the move from academia to other sectors, however, survey responses highlight the range of sectors in which SHAPE researchers, from all disciplinary backgrounds, can be found. Education and training, charity and development work were the main sectors represented outside of academia/HE.³⁸ For those respondents from arts and humanities research backgrounds, the creative and cultural sector was well represented; and for those from social sciences, health and social care and government and public administration were also among the top sectors.³⁹

Research skills remained important in moving to other sectors, both for those roles and for the researchers themselves, even if not all research they undertook was as a main or integral part of their job.⁴⁰ The importance of research skills for obtaining their current role was almost as high for those working in other sectors (88% either strongly agreeing or agreeing) as for those working within academia and higher education (92% either strongly agreeing or agreeing).⁴¹ One survey participant noted that ‘having moved from academia into industry I’ve gained a much greater awareness of the need for practical, applied and ultimately impactful research’.⁴²

There were examples of researchers who had been mobile across academia and other sectors throughout their career, demonstrating that, where these opportunities arise, there is the potential for greater porosity. The wider creative arts and cultural sector (where the greatest proportion of arts and humanities survey respondents working in other sectors were to be found), particularly galleries, libraries, archives and museums (the GLAM sector), was also identified by an ECR workshop participant as one in which extra research is welcomed and seen of benefit to a role and organisation.

I have spent most of my career moving between different kinds of knowledge institution ... and, increasingly, working between these ‘spaces’. In the process, my research and professional identity has become more complex – cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary – and multi-faceted’

Female, mid-career, public sector (survey, p. 22).

Disciplinary mobility

Inter- or multidisciplinary – is increasingly spoken about and encouraged by research funders and assessment frameworks such as the REF. While interdisciplinarity is not inherently a form of researcher mobility, it can lead to a greater flow of researchers across disciplinary boundaries, particularly for collaborative research. Although not a form of mobility mentioned by survey respondents, it was cited by participants in both our unconference and the online

³⁶ Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, p. 37.

³⁷ *Ibid.* The high cost of publishing, particularly with increased moves towards Open Access, and particularly for researchers in the SHAPE disciplines, is also a potential challenge for mobility and progression for those within academia/HE, particularly at ECR level. For further background on debates around publications and Open Access for researchers in SHAPE disciplines, please see: British Academy (2024), *Open Access and the REF: A British Academy position paper*.

³⁸ Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, p. 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Table 4.1, p. 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴² Male, mid-career, public sector. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

workshops for MCRs as a type of mobility they had experienced. Motivations for such mobility and interdisciplinary practice included the fact that it made them feel continuously engaged, interested and as though they were always learning. As with sectoral mobility, however, this was not without its challenges.

Moving between or across disciplines in one's research practice or focus could make applying for jobs within academia a challenge, as it was seen to clash with more traditional and siloed disciplinary pathways and what was perceived as a need to still prove one's track record as a researcher in this narrower way. When it came to promotion pathways, interdisciplinarity brought with it questions of what such a researcher would be a professor 'of'. This type of mobility could also make finding a sense of belonging in an institution or department more challenging, as well as knowing what courses to offer or where to publish. There was also some debate about the types of output which were really seen as having the most value in terms of research, and whether monographs and journal articles were still paramount. These challenges were understood as not being specific to SHAPE, but ones facing colleagues from STEM backgrounds and engaging in research across other disciplines and methodologies too.

A number of our workshop participants working in interdisciplinary or more arts-based research also spoke about challenges in how conducting research with third parties, such as third sector organisations, could be viewed within academia. The suggestion was that the validity of such "external" input to key aspects of a project, such as the research questions, could still be seen as something which infringed academic independence. While participants did feel that things were changing, there was still a feeling that such attitudes were contradictory to apparent drives for wider social and cultural engagement in research and co-production.

Contracts and institutional mobility

Of our survey participants who responded to questions about their experiences of mobility 60% of those currently employed in academia or higher education had moved between academic institutions.⁴³

A theme which arose when considering mobility and, in this case a lack of it, from an institutional perspective was flexibility of contracts. Workshop participants suggested that, where there had once been more options allowing people to move between full-time and part-time as their personal needs required, this was increasingly less possible. This type of mobility was also considered in relation to roles and responsibilities within institutions or departments, and whether mobility was possible between positions of academic leadership and what participants described as research at 'the coalface'. Again, the extent to which this was currently facilitated within academia was questioned.

Contractual and institutional mobility was also heavily linked to precarity, by both our mid-career and early career workshop participants, across all disciplines. Here institutional focus on mobility as desirable for researchers was perceived as being at the expense of what might be termed 'home-grown' or local researchers and staff, with institutions exhibiting a greater desire to look outside what they already had to focus on the best international researchers or the 'big names' when it came to hiring and promotions. For participants, this meant that institutions were in reality prioritising those who were less likely to stay there for a longer period of time over those who had already demonstrated a willingness and desire to stay and had contributed more to the overall research culture of a place.

This suggests that there is a delicate balance between a focus on mobility in terms of the flow of ideas and talent, and greater precarity and negative experiences for researchers, particularly those earlier in their careers. This was something which elucidated an emotional response from

⁴³

Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 6.1, p. 30.

a number of participants, expressing deep personal frustrations and challenging experiences that this involuntary mobility had resulted in, with one MCR arts and humanities workshop participant describing feeling "angry and upset ... no one will keep you". Another MCR participant from this workshop added that there was a "myth that we all really want to move ... and that we're all endlessly replaceable widgets".

Mobility in this sense was therefore linked to a considerable toll on individuals. It was associated with uprooting one's life, having to develop different personalities in different places, and moving between different departmental and institutional cultures, while simultaneously finding it difficult to be part of the community because of the temporary and precarious nature of a role. It was also associated with time and administrative burdens, both for institutions and individuals, as teaching courses and materials do not always correlate across institutions, with individuals having to spend time re-learning much of this and adapting. Similarly, it was also associated to a loss of institutional memory and continuity in leadership in departments, institutions, and research, with consequent impacts on research culture.

Workshop participants felt the situation described above was less common in other employment sectors and what they termed 'committed businesses', focused on developing younger and less experienced staff, with the intention of retaining them, as a positive action. While it was noted that there are some examples of higher education institutions following this as a better practice, it was felt that this was an approach which could be adopted more widely. There were some workshop participants who had been recruited directly into roles from their doctorate within the same institution and had remained there. It is also important to note in this context that remaining in an institution in this way did not prevent the individual researchers from feeling 'secondary' to those who had been recruited externally or who had competed to get in.

Geographical mobility

Linked to both sectoral and institutional mobility, geographic mobility was something which had been experienced by many of our workshop participants and survey respondents, as shown in the Figures below. Relocation, including internationally, was more common, however, for those working in academia/HE than for those working in other sectors.

Figure 6. Experiences of geographic mobility while remaining in the same sector (working in academia/HE N=726, working in other sectors N=184).

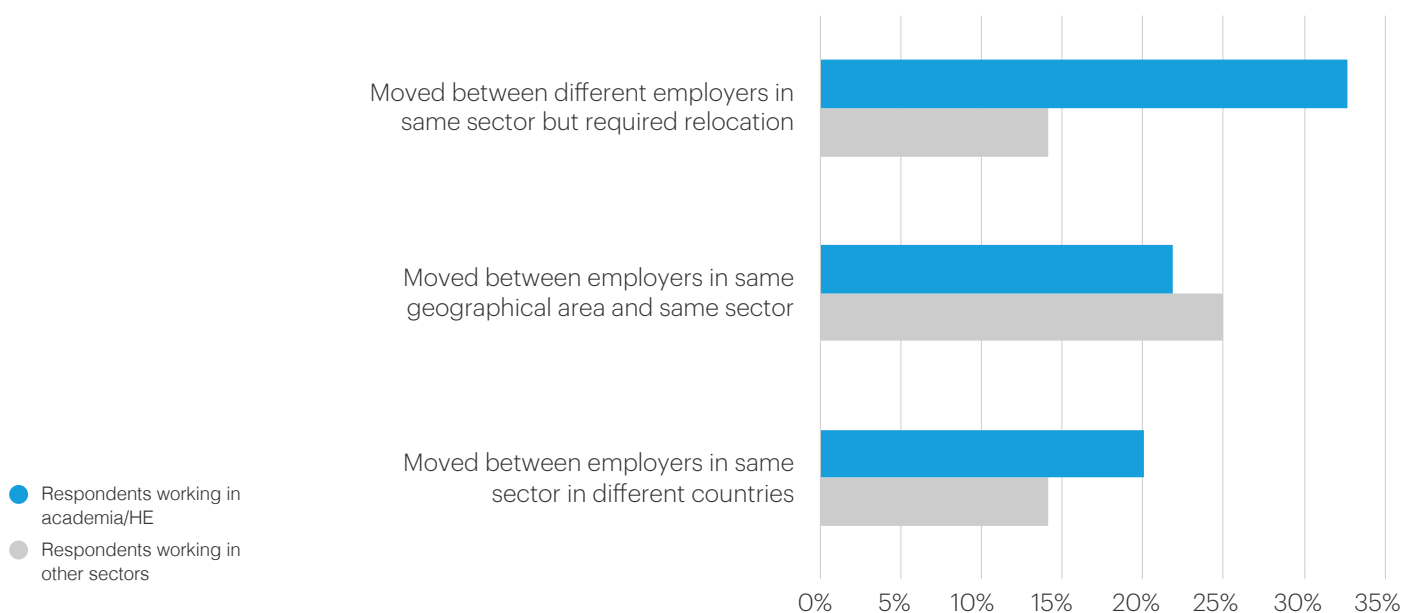
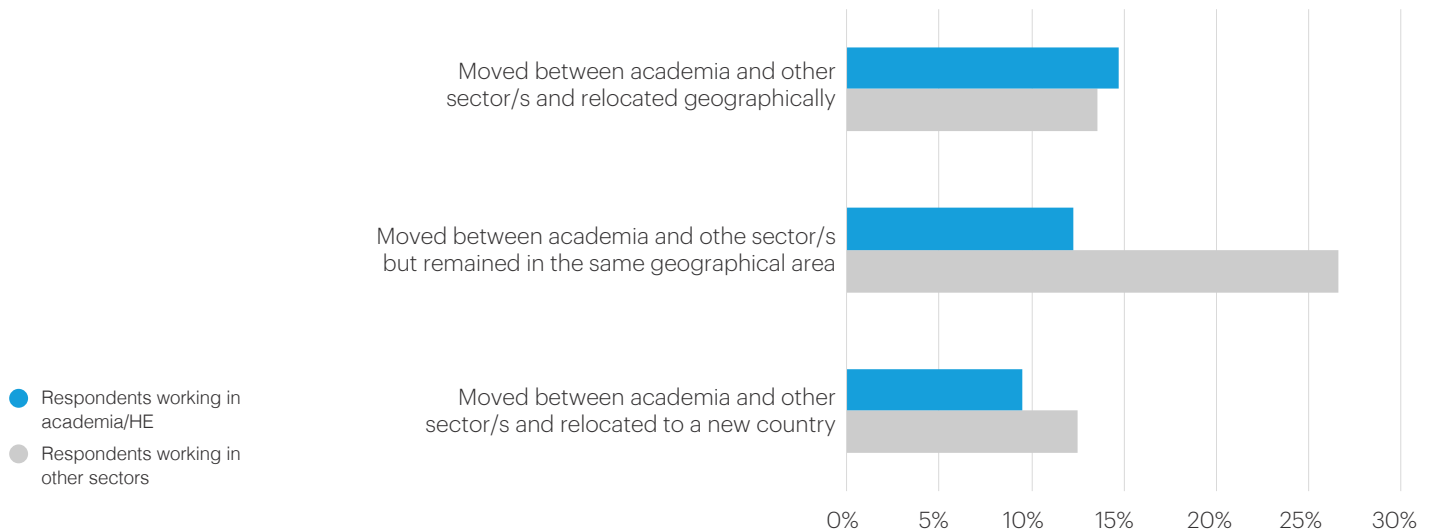


Figure 7. Experiences of geographic and sectoral mobility (working in academia/HE N=726, working in other sectors N=184).



Source: Jonsas and Mellors-Bourne, *A Survey of SHAPE Research Careers*, Figure 6.3, p. 32.

A number of workshop participants said that remaining in a given location or area – whether for family or other reasons – required a conscious decision to narrow a job search and, given the nature of the academic job market, could lead to what was termed ‘eleventh-hour’ positions being the ones which worked out, further increasing uncertainty and precarity. A desire to be less geographically mobile may be a reason for the higher proportion of respondents, shown above in Figure 7, who had moved between academia/HE and other sectors (i.e. sectoral mobility) but remained in the same geographical area.

Geographical mobility was identified as something which could change in its relative appeal over time. Participants in our MCR social sciences researcher workshop contrasted their current views on geographical mobility to earlier on in their careers, when the potential could seem exciting, attractive, or even a motivator for career progression. The main factor in this change, however, was increased caring responsibilities which, they were also clear, could extend beyond children and childcare. This was accompanied by a feeling that such responsibilities were not accounted for when it came to the demands placed on individuals by employers. This view was also shared by those who had come into academia later on in their career path.

These limitations on mobility applied not only to moving institutions or geographical areas for new jobs or roles, but also to travel associated more directly with research, such as fieldwork, archival research, or attending conferences. For researchers with caring responsibilities, in reality such mobility can be almost impossible. When it came to attending conferences, it is also interesting that our MCR participants indicated that this became much more difficult for researchers at these career stages, not only because of caring responsibilities, but also because of the pressures of doing much of the ‘heavy lifting’ in teaching and administrative roles, compared to those at early- or later-career stages. This impacted their ability to make the most of these opportunities to build and maintain networks, or for knowledge sharing and developing new ideas or collaborations.

Final reflections and next steps

Initiatives such as the *R&D People and Culture Strategy* talk about ‘researchers and technicians’ and the numbers that will be needed to match ambitions to grow and diversify research, development and innovation, but without setting out what and who is meant by the term ‘researcher’.

While the importance of being able to ask questions and disseminate and share knowledge with others was identified as an important part of being a SHAPE researcher, and aligns well with established frameworks for assessing research, such as the REF or other criteria for what constitute R&D, the words and experiences of ‘researchers’ themselves has revealed a complex picture of a multiplicity of identities, in different contexts and at different times. This may particularly be the case for those from SHAPE disciplines and is certainly the case for those at the MCR stage. At present, therefore, many individuals, their contributions and their skills are potentially being overlooked and lost in debates around topics such as RD&I and careers.

While there are many excellent initiatives currently in place across the higher education sector and many individuals providing excellent careers guidance, 42% of our survey respondents working in academia/HE perceived a lack of guidance and support as a barrier to sectoral mobility. Workshop participants noted that academia should not be described as the ‘lead career path’, but rather a first career path up to that point, which does not preclude other paths in other sectors. Previous Academy work has also spoken about the need to move beyond the binary language of ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ careers in guidance for postgraduate research students.⁴⁴ This may be even more important for those at ECR-level, MCR-level and beyond not to feel that other pathways become closed off once they reach postdoctoral level. Using language such as moving from academia to ‘industry’, however, may also appear exclusionary to many SHAPE researchers and a wider range of sectors.

Anyone working in academia at postdoctoral level, regardless of their contract-type or discipline, has studied and worked for a long time to get to that point. Mobility of any kind, but especially that between sectors, can therefore be a high-stakes decision, particularly while there is still a perceived predominant sense of ‘either/or’ when it comes to working in academia or working elsewhere. 53% of ECR survey respondents in academia/HE also highlighted a concern that a move ‘back’ the other way would not be possible. That a lack of opportunities to try mobility and lack of opportunities locally were cited as a barrier to sectoral mobility by 36% and 38% of survey respondents from academia/HE respectively, however, suggests opportunities for improving the situation for SHAPE researchers, offering the potential for more ‘blended’ career pathways, and removing an element of risk.

While there are opportunities for mobility, some felt that these might be more common and prominent for those in STEM disciplines. Participants at the unconference noted, for example, that there could be more parity of placement opportunities offered across different funding councils, such as between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). While the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) does offer opportunities for cross-sector experience

⁴⁴British Academy (2020), *Good Practice in Providing Careers Guidance for Postgraduate Research Students*.

through doctoral training partnerships (DTPs), doctoral training centres (DTCs), or collaborative doctoral partnerships (CDPs) are focused on students at doctoral level and available to the few rather than the many. Opportunities such as the AHRC Early Career Fellowships in cultural and heritage institutions, or the British Academy's Innovation Fellowships and Talent Development Awards offer some examples for other career stages.⁴⁵

Participants at both the workshops and the unconference suggested that secondment opportunities, which still enabled the individual to return to their academic role without any penalty, could be extremely beneficial. There are examples of such opportunities being offered at bigger scales, such as is the case at Aix-Marseille Université and which also applies to other National Research Organisations in France, and is available to any permanent researcher; though this would still present a barrier to those on fixed-term or other temporary contracts.⁴⁶ Such opportunities may, however, serve to highlight the value of experience or research undertaken in other sectors, which may in turn help to overcome some of the perceived barriers to porosity.

Next steps

The project will build upon the findings from these activities as we move into phase two, which will focus more closely on mobility and porosity, particularly from the point of view of other sectors.

As we saw above, the survey revealed an interesting and contrasting picture of SHAPE researcher's perception of mobility, both in terms of moving from academia/HE to other sectors or back the other way, but also dependent on whether respondents themselves were currently working in academia/HE or other sectors. The challenge that this presented for concepts of 'porosity' between academia and other sectors, particularly when it comes to opportunities to return to academia and whether or not this was feasible. A quick search online suggests that there are interesting disciplinary differences to be explored in order to help us understand if and how more porous or 'blended' careers can be better facilitated and supported.⁴⁷

Responses from both the survey and online workshops suggest that there are still barriers to overcome in terms of how other sectors view SHAPE researchers and the value that they can bring. Building on Academy work on the value of SHAPE for R&D and innovation, we will focus on pathways taken by ECRs and MCRs from academia into or working in partnership with other sectors.

Given the importance of role models and examples for overcoming what an ECR workshop participant described as the 'scariness' of "if I'm not this [i.e. a researcher or academic at a higher education institution], then who am I?", this project also hopes to produce a series of case studies to help demystify different career pathways for SHAPE researchers.

⁴⁵ AHRC, *Early career fellowships in cultural and heritage institutions*; British Academy, *Innovation Fellowship Scheme – Route A: Researcher-led*; British Academy, *Talent Development Awards 2024-2025*

⁴⁶ Unité de Recherche d'Aix-Marseille Université, *'Dispositifs de mobilité pour les enseignants-chercheurs: détachement, délégation et mise à disposition'*.

⁴⁷ See for example responses to the question: *'Is it possible to return to academia after an industry experience?'* on the Academia Stack Exchange forum, a question and answer site for academics at all levels.

The British Academy
10–11 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5AH

Registered charity no. 233176

thebritishacademy.ac.uk
Twitter: @BritishAcademy_
Facebook: TheBritishAcademy

© The British Academy. This
is an open access publication
licensed under a Creative
Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial-NoDerivs
4.0 International License

[doi.org/10.5871/shape/
researchers](https://doi.org/10.5871/shape/researchers)

Published September 2024