

**A Statement from the Perspective of Graduate Academies at German Universities  
by the Working Group ‘Competence Profiles of Early-Stage Researchers for Academic and  
Non-Academic Careers’  
of the German University Association of Advanced Graduate Training (UniWiND/GUAT)  
on the  
Feasibility of Vitae’s Researcher Development Framework (RDF) as a Standard European RDF**

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## **I. Background**

UniWiND/GUAT, the German University Association of Advanced Graduate Training, is an association of 35 universities that share the common objective of advancing the quality of academic education for early-stage researchers, i.e. doctoral candidates and postdocs, in Germany. The association's members are organized in working groups to exchange professional experience, initiate innovative concepts, and develop best practice models transcending disciplinary and university boundaries. The working group ‘Competence Profiles of Early-Stage Researchers for Academic and Non-Academic Careers’ is one of currently seven groups and was established in 2011<sup>1</sup>. During the first working phase, the group analyzed existing development frameworks and competence grids in conjunction with their potential utility to graduate academies of German universities. Here, the working group concluded that all existing models overlook two important factors:

- 1<sup>st</sup> – The applicability of existing models towards the German doctoral educational system and typical career pathways of German doctorate holders, the overwhelming majority of which proceed to non-academic career pathways.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> – The different challenges researchers face during different stages in their careers and the different sets of competence needed at different career junctures.

Hence, developing a complementary competence grid that takes into account the dynamics of competence development among researchers as well as the specific background of doctoral education and the researchers’ career pathways in Germany became one of the working group’s major objectives.

## **II. Vitae’s Researcher Development Framework (RDF) and RDF Planner**

Considering the present situation in European Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) the working group has no doubt that Vitae’s RDF is currently the most advanced Competence Grid Model for Researchers (CGMR) established: No other CGMR has reached a comparable level of market performance and expansion among a single European country’s HEIs – in this case the UK. Hence, Vitae’s RDF might be considered the current standard of market performance other countries should aspire to.

From the working group’s perspective, the success of Vitae’s RDF in the UK is based primarily on the following achievements:

- Following Roberts’ Report in 2002, the UK invested systematically into structure, development and quality increase in order to optimize competence development among research staff.
- Vitae developed its RDF through an empirical top-to-bottom-approach and high levels of feedback with UK’s HEIs. The RDF and the underlying competence grid are based on original data generated from UK professional researchers at different career levels and from different areas of research professions. Additionally, RDF, RDF planner and RDF lenses take UK national data on research careers and UK standards into account, e.g. the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching in higher education.
- Compared to other CGMRs the RDF covers the most detailed spectrum of competences relevant for typical researcher careers. Hence, it is the most extensive development framework for the work situation of professional researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> At present, the working group consists of 11 members representing 10 German universities.

- Due to the strong focus on typical professional researcher careers implemented during the development of the RDF and the degree of international comparability of these researcher careers, the RDF has potential for European transferability especially when considering traditional researcher careers.

However, when discussing the implementation of the UK's RDF as a standard for all European countries, some aspects and actions should be considered first. The following comments refer to the RDF, on the one hand, and Vitae, on the other hand. The comments may originate from the working group's German perspective onto academia, although we think some are applicable to other European contexts as well.

### III. Remarks on the RDF from a German perspective

- **Traditional career pathways of doctorate holders in Germany differ from other countries**  
The transferability to other countries' research staff development approaches is limited: RDF has a strong focus on a traditional researcher career (i.e. for careers at HEIs or Research Institutions). Although a certain level of transfer to other countries is possible, it is not clear when RDF or RDF planner is applied. Here, different traditions of career pathways and transitions in the different European countries exist.

- **Transferability of RDF from research to a non-research job market?**  
The RDF especially focuses on the professional situation of researchers, which is both: a strength as well as a weakness. From the working group's experience, the transfer of skills to a non-research context is frequently described as a substantial challenge for researchers entering the non-research job markets. Initially they will only be able to identify the research context. Here, the specific situation in Germany should be considered as well:

- a. Germany is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest producer of doctoral graduates worldwide: Graduations (ISCED 6) in 2011<sup>2</sup>

|         |         |
|---------|---------|
| USA     | ~73,000 |
| Germany | ~27,000 |
| UK      | ~20,000 |

- b. The transition rates (2011) to doctorate at German universities are ~19% (including medicine) /14.9% (excluding medicine)<sup>3</sup>
- c. The percentage of German citizens with doctoral degrees (2.6%) is quite high compared to OECD average (1.6%)<sup>4</sup>
- d. The doctoral degree opens access to a broad range of higher positions in the academic, the public as well as the private sector.

As a result, in Germany approximately 90-95% of the doctorate holders transition into the non-university job market after obtaining the PhD. Germany's HEIs need to consider this to a far greater degree and address other career pathways.

- **No distinction between skills and values/virtues**  
Descriptors of the RDF do not distinguish between skills and values/virtues. For instance, collegiality, enthusiasm, responsibility, and respect are descriptors. From the German perspective, this amalgamation is quite unusual. Here, competences are always composed by knowledge, skills and values, which hitherto have to be distinguished.
- **Neglect of human resource development outside of the UK**  
The European Research Area is characterized by highly diversified parameters concerning scholarship, teaching and learning cultures, university systems, standards in graduate training, to just list a few. All of these aspects play an important role when considering researcher development.

<sup>2</sup> Online Education Database – OECD: Data drawn August 24th 2013

<sup>3</sup> HIS: Forum Hochschule 11/2013 (based on Data from 2011)

<sup>4</sup> HIS: Forum Hochschule 11/2013 (based on Data from 2010)

Here, different systemic approaches to researcher development apply: At UK universities researcher development is mainly implemented by career service or staff development departments. In contrast, the majority of these departments at German universities address either the administrative staff or students in Bachelor/Master study courses. In Germany, researcher development, especially of early-stage researchers, was only established during the last 6-7 years, mainly by graduate programs.. There are still universities in Germany having no unit or institution for researcher development. This is true for other European countries as well.

- **Focus on the UK situation**

Additionally some of RDF's content obviously focuses on standards established in the UK. Hence, some of RDF's content and explanations might be misleading for researchers in other European countries.

For example the content of the descriptor 'teaching' and of RDF's 'teaching lens' is based on the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKSPSF) for teaching in higher education. In Germany, different sets of standards apply (like e.g. AHD „Leitlinien zur Modularisierung und Zertifizierung hochschuldidaktischer Weiterbildung“ URL:

<http://www.dghd.de/download.php?f=affa3cfb4a405681a9b89dee617eeba3> [02.04.2014]).

- **Complexity and applicability of RDF**

Vitae's RDF appears to be too complex to be used by individual researchers without professional consultation by experienced career development specialists.

The RDF contains four domains composed of three subdomains. They include 63 descriptors, each composed of 3-5 development phases. The working group and individual researchers experienced the RDF as being too overtaxing for individual researchers to analyze and manage their skill development when using the RDF (see the comment on the Feasibility Study below). In order to really benefit from the RDF for professional development on an individual level, there is a need for institutional feedback and guidance. Hence, it might lead to frustration when a researcher recognizes that he or she needs development, wants development, but cannot benefit from workshops or other measures – because these might not be realizable or financed by a given institution.

Here, another question arises: What will be the full costs an institution will have to pay for the RDF, including visible costs (license for RDF) as well as invisible costs (e.g. support staff for advising, different measures like training, coaching etc.)?

- **Experienced as an overtaxing requirement profile on the level of personal qualification**

Due to the number of descriptors and phases, the RDF is frequently perceived as an overtaxing requirement profile on the level of personal qualification, especially by junior researchers. See the comment on the Feasibility Study below.

Several different RDF lenses were introduced subsequently to make the RDF appear less challenging and more accessible to individual researchers. However, from the working groups' perspective many career pathways and preferences require no single lens, but different lenses at the same time. In these cases, especially the following questions are still in need of an answer: Do the lenses solve the problem of feeling overtaxed? What are the experiences on lens application? Do users access the RDF itself or via the lenses? What impact does the introduction of lenses have on the user behavior? Do I feel less overtaxed when I have to consult several lenses at the same time?

#### **IV. Questions and remarks concerning the evaluation of RDF, Vitae and CRAC**

- For the working group it did not become transparent how many UK universities realistically apply and use Vitae's resources and materials on a broader scale. In this context, it might be revealing to see how many UK universities will take the opportunity to become institutional members of Vitae after 2014 in order to access Vitae online resources and other material and activities.
- The working group's impression is that international participation in Vitae's researcher development international conference was moderate in the past. This leads to the following questions: Is the development of a "researcher development culture" in other European countries not that advanced? How well known is the RDF in other countries' universities? How

will the acceptance of other countries' universities look like, when the RDF becomes a pan-European standard? How many organizations from outside the UK have already taken the opportunity to join Vitae as members?

- Three German universities (Freie Universität Berlin, Heinrich-Heine Universität Düsseldorf, Universität Göttingen) participated in a feasibility study by the ESF Member Organisation Forum „A pan-European professional development framework for researchers“<sup>5</sup>. Here, 14 researchers of these universities and in different career stages, from doctoral candidates to full professors, tested the RDF and the RDF planner. In a focus group meeting in December 2011 in Düsseldorf the participants reported their personal experiences. Among other, the following issues were highlighted by the German participants which in the pan-European context of the final report seemed to have only a minor impact:
  - Descriptions of phases were perceived as being unclear. Participants reported that according to some descriptions they came to the conclusion to already have developed to a higher phase while the subsequent lower phases did not apply. Thus, the following question arises: Is there always a linear development in accordance with the phases of each descriptor?
  - As a general consent, all participants agreed to the statement that the RDF descriptors do not fit towards non-university careers.
  - Critical remarks addressed the fact that some phase descriptions obviously refer to the UK context only.
- The pan-European study on the feasibility of Vitae's RDF was realized by Vitae/CRAC itself, focusing on a manageable, but quite small number of individuals from each country. From the perspective of the working group, a larger independent study of any CGMR would form a desirable basis for discussing any CGMR's application to the European level.
- It is the working group's conviction, that if a CGMR is to be established successfully in a pan-European approach, then the participating countries' researcher development cultures and the experiences and concerns of a large number of stakeholders at policy as well as at the operational level have to be considered carefully and to a larger extent (bottom-to-top approach).

Working Group

**Competence Profiles of Early-Stage Researchers for Academic and Non-Academic Careers<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.esf.org/fileadmin/Public\\_documents/CSSD/MO\\_Fora/ESF\\_RDF\\_pilot\\_report\\_310812\\_final.pdf](http://www.esf.org/fileadmin/Public_documents/CSSD/MO_Fora/ESF_RDF_pilot_report_310812_final.pdf) [19.12.2013]

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.uniwind.org/ag-kompetenzprofile> [07.05.2014]