

What do applicants want from SUSTAIN?

Report prepared for The Academy of Medical Sciences

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SUSTAIN is a year-long project addressing the challenges women find in the early stages of an independent research career: at present, few women are progressing to senior roles, and the SUSTAIN intervention aims to provide training, mentoring and peer networking to help facilitate the advancement of women working in this field. This report presents the key issues identified by women applying for a place on the SUSTAIN pilot that they wish to address through the activities available on the scheme.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

There were 64 applications to the SUSTAIN scheme, from which 20 applicants were selected to take part: all applications have been included in the analysis here. Each applicant completed an application form, including the following question:

“Use this space to provide information about why you are interested in SUSTAIN and any particular areas of career development you would like us to cover. The information from participants will help us to further develop and tailor the programme of activities during the year (max 800 words).”

Using the information provided by applicants in response to this question, the aim of this

research was to identify what applicants hoped to attain through the scheme, using the research question “What do SUSTAIN applicants want out of the scheme?”

To carry out the analysis, the 64 responses were extracted and collated. The wishes of each applicant were coded, and the codes refined to develop a list of themes, subthemes and items relating to each subtheme. Each individual’s response was then reassessed within this framework, and the number of occurrences of each item established.

RESULTS

An initial list of 376 codes was refined to 48 items for the analysis. There were three main themes: Career Skills, Personal Qualities and Interaction.

- career development skills such as planning and managing progression
- research skills such as grant applications and publications strategy

CAREER SKILLS

This was the largest category, and can be further divided into

- professional skills such as communication and leadership skills
- time management: this related to both managing multiple professional activities, and achieving work-life balance

PERSONAL SKILLS

This category concerns improving personal qualities such as confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness.

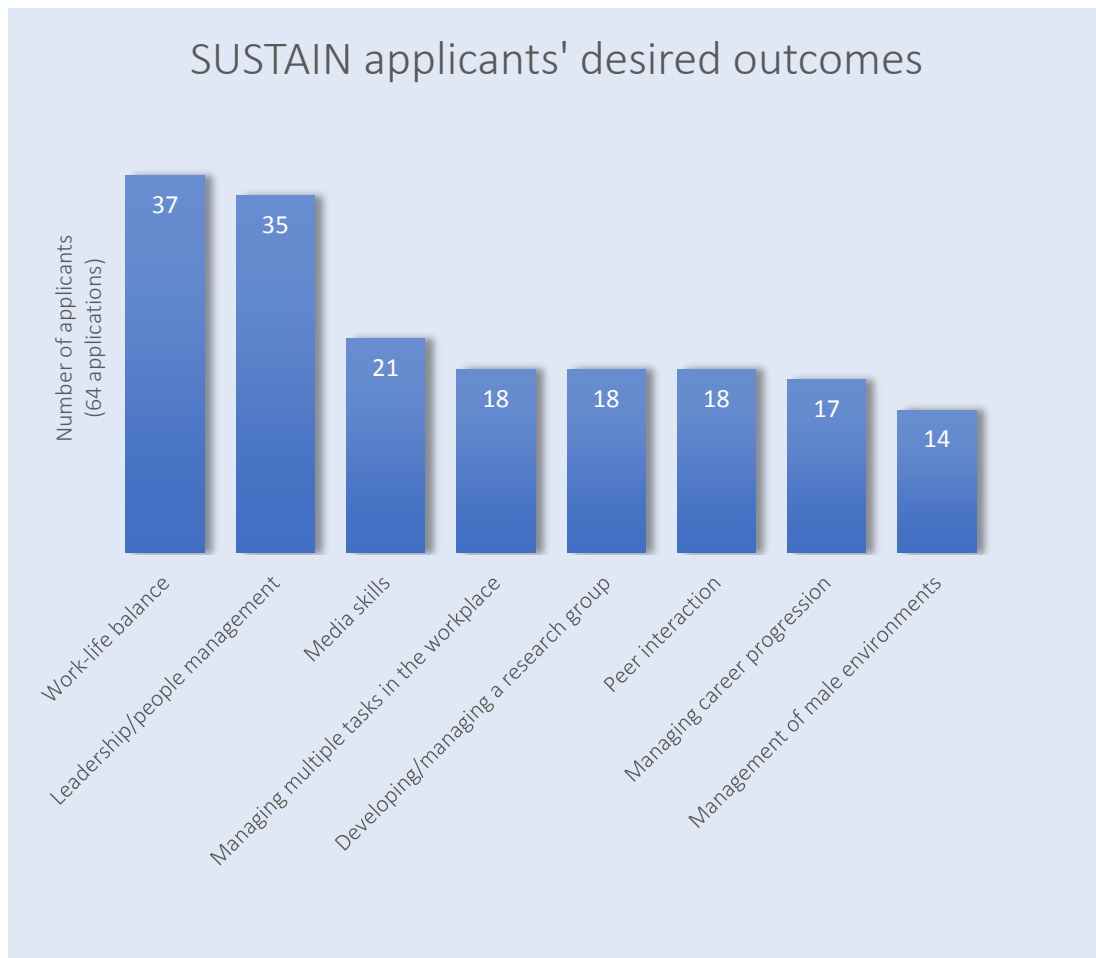
INTERACTION

The final category concerns a desire to interact with peers and role models, networking, exchanging ideas, and gaining advice.

MOST FREQUENTLY-MENTIONED OUTCOMES

Across the three categories, the most frequently-mentioned desired was to be able to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance (37

applicants), followed by the acquisition of leadership and people management skills (35 applicants) and media skills (21 applicants).



The following sections detail the different categories of desired outcomes, and show the priorities of the applicants within each category. Note that many of these covered several areas, in which case all were included: e.g. “I am particularly interested in learning how to negotiate a permanent position ...given the dual career and the family responsibility

challenges I will always have” was coded as career progression and work-life balance. These ‘context-based outcomes’ i.e. outcomes that would be influenced by other circumstances, were a strong presence throughout the transcripts, as will be seen in some of the examples below.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

| Areas identified for advice/support | Number of applicants |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Career progression | 17 |
| Career planning | 12 |
| Establishing oneself/being visible | 8 |
| Dealing with a crucial point in one's career | 6 |
| Interview and application skills | 6 |
| Dealing with personal life affecting career development | 5 |
| Career progression for part-time workers | 3 |
| Knowing when to move on | 3 |

The focus regarding career development particularly concerned long-term planning and progression, with several applicants noting that they were at a 'crucial point' in their careers and needing to progress to the next level. In some cases, this also involved improving other professional skills, as in this example where researcher development concerned both career progression and consolidating skills to deliver the new role effectively:

"I am in a whirlwind of paper writing, grant writing and exploring job opportunities in other research institutions. I would find it useful to discuss consolidating my research programme, improving my research profile, strategic publishing and further developing my leadership style."

Several applicants focused on career development within a particular context, such as family commitments and/or part-time working:

"I would also like to find out more about finding and negotiating a permanent position, especially considering the restrictions on moving around the country for a job that I, like many others with a family, are faced with."

"As I am only working part time, the three days a week I do work are very much focused on my

own research, and I have found it difficult to establish myself within my department as I am not teaching/involved in administration and often not at work when staff meetings are held. I would appreciate advice on how to manage my time better so that I can achieve my own research goals and be a more useful member of the department."

Other applicants sought to improve specific job-hunting skills:

"I would like to maximise my chances of success by getting tips on how to present myself at interview as a serious independent researcher,"

while others needed less clearly defined guidance:

"It mostly feels like I'm drifting with the current, rather than carving my own career path. So to summarise, I feel like I need help stepping out of my daily challenges and chores, and get a better perspective of intermediate and long-term consequences of momentary decisions."

Desired outcomes for career development are, therefore, wide-ranging, including specific skills, general planning and how to manage progression according to one's broader situation.

MANAGING RESEARCH

| Skills and outcomes sought | Number of applicants |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Developing and managing a research team/group | 18 |
| Grant applications | 12 |
| Publication strategy | 11 |
| Developing research goals/programmes | 10 |
| Developing research independence | 8 |
| Publication volume | 6 |
| Developing good projects | 5 |
| Finding a research niche | 5 |
| Developing and managing collaborations | 4 |
| Handling research budgets | 1 |

Although research might be seen as an additional facet of career progression, it has been considered as a separate section because applicants identified a number of specific research-related skills they wished to explore and develop. The most common of these related to developing and managing a research group, and this may also be related to the frequently mentioned outcome of leadership skills (covered in Professional Skills, below): of the 18 responses mentioning developing and managing a research team, 13 also sought leadership skills.

Several applicants noted a lack of experience in people management, and the need to have these skills for the next step of their career:

“The areas of the programme that I think would most benefit me personally are the training in building my research team (which I hope will also cover managing them: like most

new PIs I have never had to manage anyone before).”

Research was constructed as an activity needing a wide range of skills in order to succeed: typical is this applicant’s description of

“the challenges of obtaining appropriate funding, gaining independence from previous supervisors, convincing established researchers of the importance of this new area, and keeping up publications while developing new research projects. I continue to face the challenge of working on several different research projects while developing my own research niche.”

Thus while research outcomes concerned specific skills, there was also mention of the practicalities of juggling the demands of different projects and activities.

NETWORKING AND INTERACTION

| Activities sought | Number of applicants |
|--|-----------------------------|
| <i>Interaction with peers</i> | 18 |
| <i>Networking opportunities</i> | 10 |
| <i>Sharing ideas and experiences</i> | 5 |
| <i>Hearing from women who have made the career work for them</i> | 4 |
| <i>Gaining inspiration from successful female role models</i> | 3 |
| <i>Independent feedback and assessment</i> | 3 |
| <i>Effective development of a mentoring relationship</i> | 3 |

The opportunity to meet, network, interact and share ideas held a strong attraction to applicants, with peer interaction particularly valued. Several applicants described feeling isolated, or knowing few people who they felt were in similar situations to themselves:

“I think one of the biggest advantages of SUSTAIN is that it would continually remind me that I am not the only person to face some of these challenges. It would counteract my rather frequent feelings of isolation as there would definitely be a sense of solidarity due to shared experiences with other female academics.”

Both peer and mentee-mentor interactions were seen as highly desirable, particularly to be able to discuss issues with someone with an independent perspective:

“I will be looking to negotiate a permanent contract with the University, or a senior fellowship. Being able to discuss options with invested people, but people who do not gain from the outcome, will be very important for making these career decisions.”

Discussion of the mentoring scheme itself was not widespread, but was implicit in the identified need for support in areas such as career planning and exploring professional options.

PERSONAL SKILLS

| Skills sought | Number of applicants |
|---|-----------------------------|
| <i>Dealing with (assertive) male environments</i> | 14 |
| <i>Improving confidence</i> | 12 |
| <i>Developing assertiveness</i> | 7 |
| <i>Dealing with feeling isolated</i> | 2 |
| <i>Dealing with imposter syndrome</i> | 2 |
| <i>Improving self-esteem</i> | 1 |
| <i>Developing resilience</i> | 1 |

The development of personal skills was often mentioned in the context of dealing with male environments: applicants wanted to improve their assertiveness and confidence in order to

deal more effectively with the male-dominated cultures they found themselves working in.

“I struggle with assertiveness when supervising research staff and I lack confidence when dealing with senior colleagues (especially those with more assertive working styles/personalities, e.g. male medics).”

In some cases, relationships with male colleagues were more antagonistic, and applicants wanted help in dealing with such situations:

“I still feel somewhat of an imposter at times, and do not get the most from conversations with more senior (largely male in my particular department) staff. I would like to work on ...

handling situations in which you are undermined, overlooked, spoken over or even inappropriately spoken to. These occurrences are more frequent than I would like, and I do not deal with them.”

Not all applicants referenced male working environments, but similar skills were sought for general professional competence:

“I would like to learn how to ‘fake confidence’. This would be through body language/speech tone. This would be useful with public speaking, talking to fellow scientists, and when directing students.”

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

| Skills sought | Number of applicants |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Leadership and management skills | 35 |
| Media skills | 21 |
| Negotiation skills | 7 |
| Communication skills | 6 |
| Strategy | 6 |
| Dealing with people generally | 6 |
| How to network | 5 |
| Conflict management skills | 4 |
| Dealing with politics | 3 |
| Self-presentation skills | 3 |
| Public engagement skills | 3 |
| Project management skills | 2 |
| Presentation/public speaking skills | 2 |
| Self-assessment skills | 2 |

Applicants referenced a range of professional skills, most notably leadership skills. This was frequently mentioned in relation to next career steps, and there was a sense that many such skills had not been previously required, and that applicants had little experience or training in these areas:

“I have to start thinking about how to keep progressing. This means thinking about a lot of things which have less to do with science but more about management/politics/leadership, things for which I do not feel very well informed and educated.”

There was considerable interest in the training offered on media skills, particularly from those working in areas where there was strong media interest:

“I work on a topic that receives media interest, so guidance how to manage these extra demands and execute these media opportunities with maximum impact and confidence would be well received.”

Many of the skills sought related to interaction with others: networking, conflict management and general communication skills were all

referenced: note that in this section, networking concerns the skills required, whereas the desire to network and interact

with peers and mentors is covered in a separate Networking and Interaction section above.

TIME MANAGEMENT

| Areas where advice/support desired | Number of applicants |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Work-life balance | 37 |
| Managing multiple tasks in the workplace | 18 |

Time management was rarely specifically mentioned, but the challenge of balancing work and family life, and also of managing multiple work projects and demands, were two of the most frequently mentioned outcomes.

Work-life balance, particularly regarding having children, was the most frequently mentioned outcome that applicants wanted to address. Some had young children and were finding balance difficult:

“I am finding my schedule quite challenging with new found responsibilities in all three areas of my life – group leader, clinical consultant and new mother of two young children,”

while others were starting or hoping to start families, and were concerned about how they would manage a work-life balance:

“I am currently pregnant and I am worried about not being able to balance my personal and work life in the future.”

For others, competing projects and workloads were difficult to prioritise, with the result that the individual was beginning to lag behind in one or more areas:

“My publication record is low and I have been told that I need to be ‘selfish’ and strategic about getting more first or last authored papers; yet, there are competing pressures to contribute to teaching and citizenship (i.e. administration).”

There is a clear implication by the use of the word ‘selfish’ of difficulties putting one’s own needs first, suggesting that professional/personal skills such as dealing with people may also be relevant here.

CONCERNS

Two applicants expressed general concerns about the scheme: the first noted that the social media dialogues were focused on the issues of clinicians, and that as a researcher, she felt it important that both clinicians and researchers were catered for, but that the challenges faced by both groups were likely to

be quite different. The second applicant felt a need for inclusion of women without children in dialogues regarding the issues women face in their careers, since many of the challenges were relevant to both groups and went beyond child-rearing.

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

A final point to note is that the different facets of SUSTAIN were recognised by applicants as providing useful, holistic support for them in their careers, with training, mentoring and interaction all important elements:

"I have felt I am in an unknown territory and have at times been unsure of my decisions. I believe the training courses and mentoring SUSTAIN offers can provide insight and guidance on how to effectively manage these moments and take the best decisions."

CONCLUSIONS

The observations and statistics above demonstrate that applicants to the SUSTAIN scheme had a wide range of concerns. The widespread desire for improving leadership skills indicates a group keen to progress to higher levels in their careers, while the

concerns regarding work-life balance identify a widely-recognised challenge. Many applicants described struggling to balance work and family commitments, and wanting guidance on how to do so successfully.

APPENDIX: FULL LIST OF AREAS IDENTIFIED BY APPLICANTS AND FREQUENCIES

| Category | Item | Frequency |
|-----------------------------------|---|------------------|
| <i>Time management</i> | Work-life balance | 37 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Leadership and management skills | 35 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Media skills | 21 |
| <i>Time management</i> | Managing multiple tasks in the workplace | 18 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Developing and managing a research team/group | 18 |
| <i>Networking and interaction</i> | Interaction with peers | 18 |
| <i>Career development</i> | Career progression | 17 |
| <i>Personal skills</i> | Dealing with (assertive) male environments | 14 |
| <i>Career development</i> | Career planning | 12 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Grant applications | 12 |
| <i>Personal skills</i> | Improving confidence | 12 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Publication strategy | 11 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Developing research goals/programme | 10 |
| <i>Networking and interaction</i> | Networking opportunities | 10 |
| <i>Career development</i> | Establishing oneself/being visible | 8 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Developing research independence | 8 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Negotiation skills | 7 |
| <i>Personal skills</i> | Developing assertiveness | 7 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Communication skills | 6 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Strategy | 6 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Dealing with people generally | 6 |
| <i>Career development</i> | Dealing with a crucial point in one's career | 6 |
| <i>Career development</i> | Interview and application skills | 6 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Publication volume | 6 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | How to network | 5 |
| <i>Work v personal</i> | Dealing with personal life affecting career development | 5 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Developing good projects | 5 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Finding a research niche | 5 |
| <i>Networking and interaction</i> | Sharing ideas and experiences | 5 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Conflict management skills | 4 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Developing and managing collaborations | 4 |
| <i>Networking and interaction</i> | Hearing from women who have made the career work for them | 4 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Dealing with politics | 3 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Self-presentation skills | 3 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Public engagement skills | 3 |
| <i>Career development</i> | Career progression for part-time workers | 3 |
| <i>Career development</i> | Knowing when to move on | 3 |
| <i>Networking and interaction</i> | Gaining inspiration from successful female role models | 3 |
| <i>Networking and interaction</i> | Independent feedback and assessment | 3 |
| <i>Networking and interaction</i> | Effective development of a mentoring relationship | 3 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Project management skills | 2 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Presentation/public speaking skills | 2 |
| <i>Professional skills</i> | Self-assessment skills | 2 |
| <i>Personal skills</i> | Dealing with feeling isolated | 2 |
| <i>Personal skills</i> | Dealing with imposter syndrome | 2 |
| <i>Managing research</i> | Handling research budgets | 1 |
| <i>Personal skills</i> | Improving self-esteem | 1 |
| <i>Personal skills</i> | Developing resilience | 1 |