

ENHANCING THE RESEARCH ENDEAVOUR

From the labs of Southampton and the USA to university management, Dr Lorna Colquhoun's career has enabled her to experience research from all angles.

A neuroscientist by training, Lorna has gone from researcher to research manager and enabler.

Now Director of Research and Innovation Services (RIS) at the University of Southampton, it is contributing to the success of University research, knowledge exchange and enterprise that inspires Lorna every day.

Of RIS, she said: "As a professional service, we aim to work in partnership with our University colleagues. We can make a material difference to people or bids getting funded – by building ideas and collaborative relationships through facilitation, or contributing expertise on how to prepare and write a bid for a particular call or funder, or prepping early career researchers for fellowship interviews.

"During my time as a research manager, particularly in previous institutions, I have had the freedom to be creative in the ways we can support research applications, from interesting ways to develop new interdisciplinary collaborations to using an acting company to help early career researchers – and more experienced researchers – to perform well at interview. It is something that's critical in many funding competitions and we can help give our people the edge.



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Dr Lorna Colquhoun
Director of Research and Innovation Services (RIS)

"This job is rewarding in many ways, especially being able to contribute to a successful application or collaboration. I am aware we can be seen as putting up barriers sometimes, but I really try to bring a philosophy of enablement to all that we do in RIS – where possible of course, which sometimes it isn't if we are trying to comply with external regulatory requirements."

In the labs

Lorna's career in Higher Education began when she studied pharmacology at Portsmouth Polytechnic and then came to Southampton for her PhD in neuroscience, examining nicotinic receptors in nematodes (microscopic roundworms). She worked with Professor Lindy Holden-Dye, who was a Research Fellow at the time, and was supervised by Robert Walker, now Emeritus Professor of Neurophysiology.

Lorna then went to the USA for two post-doctoral fellowships, the first at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, and the second at Tufts University School of Medicine, in Boston, Massachusetts.

"The opportunity to go and live and work in another country was given to me through science, through being a researcher," she said. "That's one of the huge opportunities that often comes with a research career."



The Microbicides Development team in Zambia

Back on home ground

Returning to the UK in 1999, Lorna joined the Medical Research Council (MRC) as Programme Manager for the International Health Portfolio.

She managed the portfolio that funded research into diseases that affected what we would call ODA (Official Development Assistance) countries now, such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV and parasitic diseases.

As well as advising on research grant funding, Lorna worked with other funders including Gates Foundation, and looked after two of the MRC's overseas research units in The Gambia and Uganda.

"Becoming a research manager was a really good opportunity to stay close to and contribute to science, but not stay in the lab," she recalled. "It let me look at the bigger picture more than my days at the bench."

As part of this role, Lorna helped to set up a multimillion-pound HIV prevention programme in six sites across sub-Saharan Africa, involving partnerships working with universities in the UK, with educational, health and voluntary organisations across Africa, and Government departments including the then Department for International Development.

The programme ran a large phase three trial in sub-Saharan Africa, trialling vaginal gels to prevent HIV transmission. Imperial College London won the funding to deliver this programme – the Microbicides Development Programme – and Lorna joined Imperial in 2003 as Senior Programme Manager to support it.

"The gel sadly did not provide the protection from HIV that initial trials had suggested it would, but the programme was hugely successful in delivering health education and capacity building in health services and research in the sites that participated," said Lorna.

University management

Lorna joined the University of Bristol in 2007 as Head of Research Development. Under Lorna, the Research Development team grew from five to 21, which contributed to the growth in both the size of the University's research portfolio and the success rate with funders. She also had the opportunity to work as Director of Enterprise, and did two stints as acting Director of RED, the RIS equivalent at Bristol.

One of Lorna's final projects in Bristol was a part-time secondment to the newly-established West of England Combined Authority (WECA), supporting strategy


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development and putting in place some of the groundwork for WECA winning two UKRI Strength in Places bids, which are worth multimillions of pounds to the region.

"It's great to be able to look back and know how relationships were built and to have influenced WECA's strategy," she said.

Lorna returned to Southampton as Director of RIS in 2018.

"Throughout my career in university management, I have had a lot of opportunities to work on really interesting projects, with lots of travelling and building collaborations around the world," she concluded. "Being able to facilitate new collaborations and support funding bids is very rewarding."

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