Narrative CVs

Supporting applicants and review panels to value the range of contributions to research
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Summary

We undertook a three-month project at the University of Glasgow (UofG) to review the effectiveness of the current narrative CV format (also known as résumé for researchers) from the point of view of the CV writer and the review panel. In this report, we share our findings so far, including feedback from both groups, some tools which might be of use for writers, and a set of recommendations and considerations for funders, societies or institutions thinking of adopting narrative CV formats in researcher assessment. This project was developed in collaboration with the UK Reproducibility Network (UKRN).

Background and aims of project

In September 2020, UKRI announced that it would replace the many and varied formats for providing CV and track record information with a single CV format based on the Royal Society's résumé for researchers (see Appendix 1).

The goal of this format is to help researchers to share their varied contributions to research in a consistent way and across a wide range of career paths and personal circumstances, and to move away from relying on narrowly focused performance indicators that can make it harder to assess, reward or nurture the full range of contributions that a researcher or academic makes to their field or discipline. An example of this new CV template, commonly referred to as a 'narrative CV', can be found here and is currently being piloted in several UKRI funding calls. Other research funders are also either piloting or considering moves towards more narrative approaches (e.g. Science Foundation Ireland, NWO (stemming from the concept note: room for everyone's talents) and Swiss National Science Foundation).

In this project, we worked with 8 early career researchers (ECRs) and a mock review panel to pilot a narrative CV format, with the aim of producing enhanced guidance for writers and reviewers.

The project was motivated by initial feedback from an ECR workshop at UofG in February 2021, which highlighted the challenges that researchers face when completing this new template, including:

- Where to describe what information, while avoiding redundancy and repetition.
- How best to document and evidence the quality of outputs, contributions, and activities.
- How to select examples of activities and outcomes that demonstrate quality, wider contribution to leadership, culture, and practice, and society.

The workshop also highlighted the challenges that a review panel might face: How easily would a reviewer find the information they require, and what types of evidence and examples would they look

for when assessing both a researcher's academic achievements and their broader contributions to their community or discipline?

To respond to these questions and challenges, we undertook a 3-phase project in Spring / Summer 2021 with the aim of providing researchers at UofG and in the wider research community with more detailed guidance on how to complete a narrative CV template: this additional guidance would advise users on where specific information should go, the type of evidence to include, and to improve the template's overall structure.

Project methodology

Phase 1
We worked with eight researchers at UofG to draft a narrative CV for the first time, using the format being piloted by UKRI in 2021. The researchers included a senior lecturer in the group, as well as researchers with a variety of years and types of experience (including a gender balance, international researchers, and those with diverse career paths, including industry and spin-out experience and career breaks). The 8 researchers worked with an external editor (JA), and with support from a researcher development professional (EA), to shape a narrative CV based on the template being piloted by UKRI. Challenges and reflections from the participants of this phase are provided in Box 1.

Phase 2
Narrative CVs from the eight researcher CVs were shared with a 10-person mock review panel, comprising representatives of three UK funding bodies, UofG academic staff from a broad range of disciplines with experience of sitting on review panels for national funding schemes, and a research management professional who might typically support researchers in writing fellowship or grant applications.

Panel members were asked to comment on each section of the application and to provide, for each applicant, feedback for the applicant and for us on the format, including any suggested guidance for either applicants or reviewers. The panel was asked to assess the candidate against independent Fellowship criteria; given that the CV was being assessed in the absence of project details, it is recognised that in this exercise it was not possible to comment on an applicant's suitability for a Fellowship. Feedback was provided to the participating researchers following the review panel meeting.

Phase 3
We are currently in Phase 3. The researchers have been asked for their feedback and we are now consulting with the wider sector (including funders) on where to go next. We intend to create resources, including some example sections of CVs for ECRs who are currently completing this new CV format. These resources and a copy of the report will be shared via the UKRN website.

Findings

A summary of feedback from panel members and CV writers is provided in Appendix 2.

Overall, CV writers and panel members appreciated the aim of the new format and its potential to highlight a variety of contributions and thus increase the diversity of research community. However, more clarity is needed to ensure a more consistent interpretation of what material should be included under each heading, and how material should be valued: reviewers often struggled to locate the relevant information, and CV writers struggled to know how to identify and present the relevant information.

The workload associated with completing and reviewing the narrative CV was not insignificant. Reviewers reported taking up to two days to read all 8 narrative CVs, and ECRs reported taking 2 days to convert their traditional academic CV into the narrative CV format. This time estimate does not include the input from an external editor and a researcher development professional, who suggested modifications and teased out additional detail or examples.

The findings of this pilot indicate that the current narrative CV format might cause considerable additional workloads for both CV writers and reviewers. We cannot exclude that the additional workload might lead some reviewers to resort to shortcuts when assessing applicants (or might not engage with the CV format at all). The ambiguity in the current structure of the narrative CV also carries the risk of introducing disadvantages for non-native English speakers and minority groups, and more generally those in organisations that did not provide expert support to complete the CV template.

Given these observations, we propose below some relatively simple adaptations that retain the advantages of the narrative CV format, while avoiding some of its potential pitfalls.

Recommendations

The aims and ethos behind the narrative CV are clearly important in promoting a culture where the variety of contributions to research projects are valued.

We propose four recommendations, noting that they are a suite of interlinked actions and that if only some are adopted and not others, they are unlikely to have a positive impact on their own.

- **The CV template does not exist in isolation from the rest of the system.** Without changing how much time reviewers can spend reading and reviewing each document and without providing guidance and training to reviewers on how to assess candidates using this new CV format, the introduction of the narrative CV has the potential to compound existing biases. If reviewers do not have sufficient time to review each CV, they may be forced to scan for key words and to 'take their own shortcuts', often based on unconscious biases.

  Recommendation 1: Funders should ensure that reviewers have adequate time to undertake a review, and that reviewers are supported by appropriate training and guidance. This could involve increasing the number of reviewers who are enlisted on review panels, where appropriate drawing from more junior career stages. Panels may also find it useful to have a member dedicated to ensuring that the CV is assessed as intended. The School of Chemistry at the University of York includes an [Unconscious Bias Observer](#) role on their academic interview panels, highlighting key things to watch out for during shortlisting, which are likely to be relevant to this format too.

- **What should be valued or counted as relevant experience?** Since this is an issue that can relate to any form of CV, not just to narrative CVs, it highlights the need for reviewer training. However, an unstructured narrative format might be even more overwhelming and confusing for reviewers, leading to important information being lost or ignored.

  Recommendation 2: A more structured approach and template should be used, with a blend of narrative and lists, based around sub-headings and more comprehensive criteria (e.g. [Example from CRUK).](#) Funders should also ensure that templates are appropriate to career stage (e.g. ECRs should not feel that they must necessarily be able to detail extensive

'research impact'). See <u>Appendix 3</u> for suggested modifications.

- **Acknowledging and addressing the challenges of writing a narrative CV.** A narrative CV can offer a useful prompt for a researcher to present their broad range of skills and contributions to a research project and to their wider community or discipline. It can also encourage ECRs to consider not only their academic career progression, but also the skills, attributes and experience they might bring to a range of careers and other sectors. Inclusion of narrative elements in CVs is already commonplace in other sectors. However, without appropriate support for how to write and construct a narrative CV, this task can prove to be a demoralising experience for some. It can also disadvantage non-native English speakers, applicants who have not received adequate support (or are unused to expressing their track record in a narrative form) and those who may feel uncomfortable with being asked, as they see it, to 'brag' about their achievements. Many researchers working as part of a team or in particularly hierarchical cultures or where the PI on a project has the formal recognition status (for grants or supervision) might hesitate to claim credit for contributions to these activities.

  Recommendation 3: Funders, universities and research institutions should provide staff and applicants with adequate and appropriate guidance and support for constructing and writing a narrative CV.

- **Documenting adverse circumstances or breaks to careers**. There was no consensus among the review panel as to how researchers should report difficulties they may have experienced in previous positions, which led to poor career, personal or project outcomes (e.g. 'toxic' workplace environments), or any other disruption (e.g. due to caring responsibilities, impacts of COVID-19, parental leave, illness or disability). Guidance from funders in this area is currently sparse.

  Recommendation 4: Funders should provide clear guidance on how to document adverse circumstances or breaks to careers. Development of this should involve engaging with specialist organisations who can provide advice on best practice, such as disability-inclusive recruitment practices.

At the University of Glasgow, we have created a toolkit to support ECRs when writing a narrative CV for the first time, directly addressing Recommendation 3 above. This will be openly available under a creative commons license (via <u>UofG Lab for Academic Culture</u>). However, funders should be aware that some Universities will be better placed than others to provide careers support and resource for applicants. To help to level the playing field, and to ensure that the narrative CV does not disadvantage applicants from less-well-resourced universities, funders should consider what support they can provide to applicants in understanding what is expected of them. This support should include examples, website information and open sessions for Q&A.

<u>Appendix 3</u> sets out some practical suggestions for funders, societies or institutions that are thinking of adopting narrative CV formats, including what questions could be asked, and what guidance might be required. However, these suggestions should be read in the acknowledgement that the system needs to 'catch-up' with the progressive ethos of the CV and that the introduction of a template on its own, without other structural changes, could do more harm than good.

Where next?

There are many other options for assessing researchers — a narrative CV format is just one of them. One of the challenges that our mock review panel identified was how to assess the *potential* of ECRs in areas in which applicants had no previous experience (e.g. in research impact or leadership). This could, of course, be done through other areas of the application, but it might be worth considering the role of a set of focussed questions and the use of optional audio or perhaps even video (although this is not without its challenges), in which ECRs could outline their ideas or intended approach to these areas.

Narrative approaches are commonly used in many other sectors; we should take advantage of this learning in HE, for example, around how to communicate expectations to potential applicants. Additionally, many employers have made a deliberate shift over the past few years to strengths-based application processes and will be able to share experiences of:

- Articulating what strengths are expected via webpages and events
- Training for and investment in review panels (particularly in the area of unconscious bias)
- How they responded to applicant feedback as they made this change and honed their practice

Through discussions with ECRs, we have also identified two other areas in need of further thinking, which relate to CV templates and applications, although these issues are not specific to the narrative CV format:

1. Reducing bureaucracy: Consistency of approach across funders and institutions could reduce the considerable burden currently placed on ECRs on precarious contracts, who are having to reformat applications and retype information each time they make a job or Fellowship application.
2. Quality feedback: It would be interesting to compare the process and quantity / quality of feedback provided to applicants between funders and in different countries. For example, in some cases, all reviewer comments are fed back to applicants or even made openly available to the public. This may also reduce bias and improve transparency, as can be seen in the open peer review of papers and preprints.

Key recommendation

Ultimately, whatever approach is adopted to the format and process for submission and review, **a pilot should be undertaken, with a thorough equality impact assessment.**

Appendix 1: Guidance and template provided to mock review panel at the University of Glasgow (July 2021)

Assessing Narrative CVs

Thank you for agreeing to be a member of the mock assessment panel. The purpose of the exercise is to develop a set of guidance notes that will be useful both to those writing a narrative CV and to those who will assess it.

In assessing these CVs we are attempting to do something quite unusual, namely to assess a candidate's CV, potentially in relation to a fellowship application, yet in the absence of their proposed project. This is a challenge for the assessment but it also a liberation in that it allows the review panel to focus on the person independently of the technical merits of their research proposal.

Each reviewer has been assigned 8 narrative CVs from ECRs at the University of Glasgow.

As a reminder, the narrative CV, as adopted by UKRI, is structured as below.

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1. Personal details *Use this section to provide personal details such as your education, key qualifications, relevant positions, funding obtained, and awards received.*

***2.** How have you contributed to the generation and communication of new ideas, hypotheses, tools or knowledge? This section is to highlight your contributions to and skills acquired from previous research, innovation or technical projects. It can include a small selection of key outputs such as data sets, software, conference presentations and innovation, research and policy publications.*

***3.** How have you contributed to research teams and the development of others? Examples might include: project management, supervision, mentoring or line management contributions to the success of a team or advancement of colleagues, involvement in collaborations/networks within your organisation and/or beyond or where you exerted strategic leadership in shaping the direction of a team, organisation, company or institution.*

4. How have you contributed to the wider research and innovation community? *Examples might include: commitments including editing, reviewing, refereeing, boards and panels, appointments to positions of responsibility such as committee membership and corporate roles within your department, institution or organisation. Recognition by invitation within your sector, organisation of workshops, conferences or other events that have benefited your research and innovation community and contributions to improving research and innovation culture.*

5. How have you exploited your research? *Examples might include: knowledge exchange, engagement with industry, private/public sectors, clients, policy makers, researchers in different fields/disciplines or the broader public and other impacts across research and innovation.*

6. Additional information *This section is an optional invitation to include any relevant additional information relating to your proposal such as career breaks, secondments, volunteering, part-time work and other relevant experience (including time spent in different sectors).*

Assessment guidance

When reviewing these CVs, please reflect on whether the information provided addresses the key person specifications that one might expect an independent Research Fellow to satisfy, e.g. a track record or potential for:

- Working **independently** of their former supervisor/group head
- Learning new skills and applying them to the **creation of original concepts** and lines of research
- Contributing positively to the **research environment** by upholding the highest standards of research practice, including a commitment to open research and research integrity.
- Ability to **lead and manage a team** of their own, and demonstrate a support for developing the careers of others.
- Potential to fulfil a more **rounded function** which might include: teaching, project supervision, raising of research funds
- Willingness to **contribute to the community** which might include refereeing and reviewing, event organisation, mentorship.
- Desire to **engage with stakeholders**, whether they be potential collaborators or end-users both within and outside of academia, **ensuring the maximum societal impact** of their research.

It is important that each of the specifications above is supported by the guidance notes, and we must support applicants to include the relevant information the appropriate sections of the narrative CV.

For each section of the narrative CV, please provide the following feedback:
- Feedback to the candidate, e.g. how they could better have evidenced the specifications above, what information was superfluous. Feedback will be collated across the panel members and will not be attributed to individual reviewers.
  Key points of advice to include in guidance notes, e.g. opportunity to refer to and evidence person specification, what information was superfluous.

1. Personal details
Feedback to the candidate:
Key points advice to include in guidance notes:
2.* How have you contributed to the generation and flow of new ideas, hypotheses, tools or knowledge?***
Feedback to the candidate:
Key points of advice to include in guidance notes:
***3.* How have you contributed to research teams and the development of others?**   *strategic leadership in shaping the direction of a team, organisation, company or institution.*
Feedback to the candidate:
Key points of advice to include in guidance notes:
4. How have you contributed to the wider research and innovation community?
Feedback to the candidate:
Key points of advice to include in guidance notes:
5. How have you exploited your research?
Feedback to the candidate:
Key points of advice to include in guidance notes:
6. Additional information
Feedback to the candidate:
Key points of advice to include in guidance notes:

Appendix 2: Selected feedback from participants and mock review panel members

Reflections from the participants

Opinions from researchers involved in this project were varied, as was the time that it took them to write the CV (around one to three days). Feedback was mostly around a lack of clarity and confidence around what should be included and what is valued by reviewers.

I think it is very important to know how such a CV format will be received by reviewers. The guidelines for us are pretty straightforward but it isn't the same as a template-ed, chronological CV that "sort of" levels the playing field.

Judging by the review from the panel, there seems to be a lot more scope for reviewer interpretation of the narrative CV that I think you get with an academic CV. The comments are contradictory, which is a concern if I ever have to submit one to the funding council. I'd not be convinced that it'd be judged to a well-defined standard.

I do think a narrative CV has lots of benefits in terms of not only stating achievements and impact indicators, but also provides the author with a chance to delve into their motivations and put a bit of personality on paper.

I guess like academic CVs, a narrative CV will need to be adapted to the specific application. This is another drawback that I see - tweaking a few bullet points or the introductory statement of an academic CV is routine, whereas adapting a narrative CV could be an incredibly time-intensive exercise for the applicant.

It is not clear where to put some of the information. I would ask the panels to be considerate since not everyone is good at writing and expressing themselves, especially those who are not native English speakers. Also, I would ask from them clarity towards what exactly expect in each section, and being specific what it might include and what it shouldn't be there (e.g. teaching?)

I appreciated the chance to create a narrative CV. It was particularly helpful for me to explain myself and my unusual career path more easily within a narrative! I felt disappointed though that they still appeared to focus on drawing out the academic experience in the cv, more than seeing the value in diverse skillsets coming from a more varied career path. It made me realise how much I need to spell out my transferable skills and the value of cross-functional skillsets, as well as emphasising the academic experience they want to see. I guess the reviewers themselves may have followed a more focussed academic career so might have less appreciation for family flexible career experiences.

I like it because I always wrote my track record a bit like this and I like to write at the first person (but I would say it is difficult with the questions as they are written to 1) understand what goes in which question and 2) to make it tailored to a particular project (which I feel should be the aim really).

Reflections from the panel

Format

- A hybrid CV, containing both a list and narrative components, was generally preferred over an entirely narrative-based CV. There are challenges with only using lists (e.g. basing the assessment on narrow success measures and unreliable proxies) and also with only using a narrative (time-consuming, difficult to understand the path through a career, and potentially missing key indicators or information). However, a hybrid format might also have challenges, as it might tempt reviewers to focus on the lists and ignore the narrative when skim reading.

- It is preferable to combine Section 2 (How have you contributed to the generation and flow of new ideas, hypotheses, tools or knowledge?) and Section 5 (How have you exploited your research?): these two sections were daunting for ECRs, whose research will typically have not had time to deliver societal impact.

- Agreeing an optimum length for the CV and for each section was challenging – not enough space for more advanced researchers but having short sections (e.g. where an applicant had no direct experience) could feel demoralising to early-stage researchers.

Content

- The CV should assess the applicant based on past experience, not potential; the guidance should make this clear. There was a difference in opinion about the relevance of leadership and management experience in other sectors.

- Applicants should be encouraged to write about the impact (scale, reach, feedback, relevance) of their activity, not just the activity itself.

- Make it clear why certain decisions are made in one's career – what motivated going from one step to the next and how an applicant took advantage of the opportunities open to them. Although it should be noted that this advice conflicts with the idea that people might make decisions for reasons outside of their control, ranging from disability to caring responsibilities or bullying – Wellcome have specifically said they don't need to know the reason for such decisions but rather want to focus on the impact on the research and where you went from that point onwards.

- There is no need to include EVERYTHING. For example, top 4 or 5 outputs could be prioritised. There is also no requirement to start at the beginning of your career (e.g. inclusion of Masters Degree).

- Funders could be clear about what they expect from applicants for each grant career stage (akin to this competency framework from CRUK) as an applicant can then tailor the CV to evidence the relevant competencies.

- Better guidance is needed on whether an applicant should include hobbies or voluntary work. Some members of the panel suggested including this information only if it was relevant to the research, as otherwise it might create an opportunity for biases to creep in around prestige. For other panel members, inclusion of extracurricular activities sent a strong message of being a well-rounded individual (presumably with work–life balance).

Assessment

- Some words were not very clearly understood (e.g. impact, 'flow of ideas')

- Time requirement: It took as long as two days to read 8 CVs. We had anticipated that each of the CVs might take about 25min, which was incorrect.
- Non-native English speakers and minorities who often do not want to 'brag' and therefore do not feel able to sell their achievements, or lack the written English skills to do so effectively, might be disadvantaged by this format.

Appendix 3: Recommendations for incorporating narrative elements into researcher CVs and assessments

1. We recommend that a **hybrid approach** is adopted, where researchers list a small number of outputs (for example) and provide some narrative underneath which outlines what their contribution was to each and the importance of the work. Where contextualised, some citation data may be relevant. A standardised set of sub-headings will help to ensure that the CV is still easy to read or navigate by reviewers and will help to ensure consistency of review.

2. Funders should clearly articulate their expectations for length and whether this might differ across career stages (particularly if there are sections which might be difficult for early-career researchers to complete and are therefore not expected to be fully populated). This recommendation goes together with funders making use of competency frameworks, or similar, to articulate their expectations for different career stages.

3. Provide guidance to applicants on:
   o Responsible use of metrics: advice on how to talk about outputs (such as choosing the highlights, avoiding dubious metrics) and not including all career history and information to date if not relevant.
   o How to deal with disruptions to research (including health, caring responsibilities, or previous experiences in poor cultures) and situations where funding was awarded but the activity did not take place (e.g. travel grants or summer project students which were cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions).

A set of four example questions are suggested below:

1. Personal details *Use this section to provide personal details such as your education, key qualifications, relevant positions, funding obtained, and awards received. Only relevant information should be included (e.g. only the last 10 years, unless particularly important to establishing credibility). The use of a blend of list and narrative is encouraged. Key dates should be included, with reverse chronological order preferred. Career breaks, secondments, and any other relevant work/ voluntary experience can be Included (including time spent in different sectors), with clear articulation of its relevance.*

2. How have you contributed to the generation and flow of new ideas, hypotheses, tools or knowledge, including to communities beyond academia*? This section should be used to highlight your contributions to and skills acquired from research, innovation or technical projects, including evidence of commitment to open research. It can include up to five key outputs such as data sets, software, conference presentations and innovation, research and policy publications (for these, please articulate your contribution to these and the importance of the work). You may also provide examples of knowledge exchange, engagement with industry, private/public sectors, clients, policy makers, researchers in different fields/disciplines or the broader public. If early career, you may wish to explain how you have developed skills and networks to support you with knowledge exchange in the future.*

3. How have you contributed to research teams and the development of others? *Examples might include: project management, supervision, mentoring or line management contributions to the success of a team or advancement of colleagues, involvement in collaborations/networks within your organisation and/or beyond or where you exerted strategic leadership in shaping the direction of a team, organisation, company or institution.*

4. Academic citizenship or service: how have you contributed to the wider research and innovation community, beyond your immediate research group? *Examples might include:*

commitments including editing, reviewing, refereeing, boards and panels, appointments to positions of responsibility such as committee membership and corporate roles within your department, institution or organisation. Recognition by invitation within your sector, organisation of workshops, conferences or other events that have benefited your research and innovation community and contributions to improving research and innovation culture.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the 8 ECRs who participated in this pilot and provided feedback, as well as to our panel members (listed below).

Panel members