

Ruth Cameron and Serena Best

Professors of Material Sciences, Department of Material Sciences and Metallurgy

Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz

If Ruth and Serena were interviewing for a vacancy in their lab and an excellent applicant told them that they would only be able to take the job on a part-time basis, they would never assume the person was less committed or rule them out. For the past ten years, Ruth and Serena have been directing the Cambridge Centre for Medical Materials together. They currently lead a team of around 30 people, many of whom are working flexibly. Quite a few have families and are also working part-time. Having managed such a group, Ruth and Serena have experienced the positive impact both freedom and flexibility have on people's motivation and commitment.

Ruth and Serena have also been working part-time for long periods of their research careers to accommodate family commitments. They were both working 80% when they began running the group together in 2006 and continued to do so thereafter. The exact details of the part-time arrangements have changed over the years to adapt to external circumstances. At present, Ruth works her hours over 5 days while Serena is in the department for 4 days per week. On an everyday basis they share most of their responsibilities. Some projects are particularly closely linked with one or the other, but generally they are involved in projects together. Their unique arrangement allows them to work together and, if necessary, for one to make a decision on behalf of both of them. They actively make time to discuss particular issues regularly and always keep each other updated by email. Their unique arrangement allows them to work together and, if necessary, for one to make a decision on behalf of both of them. For example, Serena has been very busy over the past weeks with teaching commitments and examinations. Ruth, currently on sabbatical leave, has therefore taken on more research duties and dedicated more time to supervision and meetings than Serena.

Working and leading a research group as a team has been very advantageous for them. Not only is there somebody to back you up in a family emergency, but there are two heads thinking about the same scientific problems from different points of view. "Working as a pair can help you to take braver decisions", Ruth says. Where an individual group leader might hesitate, two people can cover more knowledge and gather more evidence to then follow through with a high risk project. In a team one can support each other and be altogether more effective. When either attends a conference and gives a talk they speak for the group as a whole. They have recently been awarded a joint Fellowship by the EPSRC in recognition, by the wider scientific community, of their collaborative working arrangements. The majority of the community is possibly not even aware that they are working part-time, they say.

The Department has always been very supportive of their working arrangements and takes the issues around Equality and Diversity very seriously. Both were Lecturers when they originally reduced their hours and they have since been able to progress to Professorships without problems. Every two or three years, Ruth and Serena renew their flexible working arrangements. They are also fortunate to have the opportunity to go back to full-time hours should they want to. Each time they re-evaluate their circumstances and decide what is best for all involved.