

## **HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH AWARD REVIEW PROCESS 2015 – A COMMENTARY**

### **THE CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCHERS ACTION PLAN:**

#### **Review of Progress and Next Steps**

##### **Background and context**

Since 2014 the University has continued to transform in a rapidly changing HE sector and gain capability and experience in organisational change. During this period of institutional change, the proportion of academics on Teaching and Research (T&R) contracts has reduced by 6%, the proportion of professors has increased by 2% and the proportion of academics on Teaching and Scholarship (T&S) contracts has increased by 4%, while the number of research-only staff has remained the same. The Academic Investment Initiative (AII) enabled the University to carry out an in-depth review of the contributions of individual academics to research and teaching with a view to investing in the institution's research capacity, intensity and performance. The next phase of the transformation is a 'shape and size' review of University including all faculties, departments and central services to ensure that organisational structures and disciplinary groupings are appropriate to meet the University's strategic ambitions. The Research and Enterprise Teams are being reorganised along with a number of new senior appointments to drive forward the research agenda and provide the academic staff base additional, and higher level, research support. This, together with the development of the institution's research infrastructure, with input from researchers, will create the framework for developing a thriving research community with an enhanced international reputation. Performance management allied to support and additional training provision is seen as integral to this change agenda and the full performance management framework is currently being refreshed to enable staff, particularly research staff and those on fixed-term contracts, to engage fully with a step change in performance.

##### **Evaluation process**

The review was initiated with a meeting to discuss and agree the composition and plan of action for the review team. It was agreed that the composition of the Internal Review Team would be the PVC (R&E), members of the Concordat Steering Group (CSG), academic, HR and Staff Development (SD) staff. Responsibilities were agreed for reviewing different aspects of the existing plan. The composition of a wider group of institutional stakeholders was also identified for consultation on specific issues (via email or 1to1 meetings) and for their more general thoughts and ideas for future directions within the context above. These included senior colleagues from the Careers and Employability Service (CES), Research Funding Office (RFO), Knowledge Exchange (KE), Learning Enhancement and Academic Practice (LEAP) Directorate and the Graduate School (GS).

It was also agreed to consult directly with researchers to enrich the feedback already received from local responses to the 2015 CROS and PIRLS surveys which had 38% and 17% response rates respectively. A dedicated two-hour Focus Group (FG) with 15 researchers drawn from across the University was held in December 2015. SD facilitated this within a structured session examining the HR Excellence plans and narrative. Users of the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) Planner App were also consulted on their experience of using the RDF to plan their development. The original plan from 2012 was kept in view throughout although the focus was to evaluate achievements against the 2014/15 plan. The new plan for 2016-17 focuses on those sub-principles which are relevant to current on-going initiatives aimed at achieving Concordat aspirations and improving institutional performance. The evidence base used in the review is a mix of expert judgement, survey data, management information and University policy and planning.

##### **Actions and achievements by Principle**

###### **Principle One: Recruitment and Selection**

The RFO offers comprehensive advice to researchers about any specific requirements of funders and the internal expectations of good practice, including the Concordat, when applying for funding. The new Research Information System (RIS) will enhance the consistency of this service as the software development is based on stringent process analysis and specification.

It is well established through professional standards in HR, and supported by evidence from CROS 2015, that the use of named researchers for recruitment is limiting and that selection through open competition is best

practice in the sector. All vacancies are supported by detailed, evaluated job descriptions that are aligned to the RDF. Researchers in the FG raised concern about the tension of adhering to principles of open competition and developing existing researchers. Currently the use of named researchers is addressed on a case by case basis, however a review of the effectiveness of this practice would be beneficial. Current recruitment and selection training provision uses readily accessible online learning. Recent experience has suggested that the scope of the course should be extended to include the importance of the applicant experience. Whilst all applicants are encouraged to seek feedback from a representative of the selection panel, there is still further progress to be made to ensure that this has a consistent developmental focus. Initial work (described below) to make explicit links between the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) and the Higher Education Role Analysis (HERA) role descriptions suggest that this is a feasible route and will be made more explicit in the revised training.

### **Principle Two: Recognition and Value**

A main focus of the 2014-16 plan was to re-establish the CSG structure as a working arm of the University's Research and Enterprise Committee (UREC) with a wider remit to implement the research concordat within University processes. The CSG includes representation from all faculties and a research assistant representative, plus colleagues from a range of central services. The group is chaired by the Associate Dean for Research (ADR) from Science and Engineering, the area of greatest research activity. The first meeting was held in September 2014; five meetings had been held prior to this external review. The terms of reference for the group include the creation and oversight of action plans to meet the Concordat principles and reporting progress to UREC. Each concordat is assigned an action lead to ensure persistent monitoring and timely progression against the agreed action plan.

Early achievements for the CSG in meeting the researcher development agenda include a focus on existing mentoring schemes, good practice for managers of researchers and engagement on how both can be developed further. One of the key roles for the CSG is communicating and demonstrating the value of the Concordat principles to research community to support an effective research environment. It is an excellent forum to discuss identified areas for development and make recommendations to UREC to influence strategic direction and practice.

Recent evidence from CROS 2015 raises some doubts as to whether research-only staff feel valued and recognised as a key component in delivering excellent research. Certainly fewer researchers felt integrated into their area's research community than in 2013 (64%:81%), although more feel integrated into the wider interdisciplinary community (82%). This perhaps reflects the University's research strategy that is investing heavily into interdisciplinary research areas. CROS15 suggests that nearly half of researchers had been formally appraised in the past year although for those on Fixed Term Contracts (FTCs) this was less likely. Three quarters of our researchers are on FTCs; a proportion in line with the national picture. There is a need to continue to address this issue and ensure that research assistants on FTCs are appraised effectively so that their employment experience and personal development are integrated.

FG comments suggest that Principal Investigators (PIs) see more value in their on-going informal interactions with the researchers rather than a formal recorded mentor/appraisal interaction. PIRLS results suggested that locally three quarters of PIs recognised that formal appraisal was important but felt that they had limited time and scope to coordinate this as they would want. This is an area to be addressed in the revised performance management framework. A seminar on 'sharing good practice in managing researchers' was initiated by ADRs with the feedback suggesting it was a beneficial session for the participants prompting its inclusion in the annual staff development programme. There is now a process in place for researchers to apply for promotion and two people have been re-graded since 2014. In the current system, there is very little opportunity to reward for outstanding performance across all groups of staff. A proposal for having a more integrated and flexible recognition scheme which would include high performing researchers is being explored by HR.

### **Principles Three and Four: Support and Career Development**

An extensive range of opportunities is offered by Staff Development, with events and sessions offered by the team and by colleagues from across the University. These range from the Vitae 'Researcher Futures' suite through to workshops on open access publishing, managing research data and a series of events specifically targeted to Horizon 2020 bids. During the year 2014/15 there were in excess of 500 registrations on such events. There was also an increase in the number and scope of events directly supporting career development,

for example the Vitae 'Managing your academic career' was run in conjunction with colleagues from the Centre for Educational Studies and academics from across the University. CROS15 suggests an increase in training, a recommendation supported by researchers at the FG; one commented: '*Central events are very useful but could do with being better advertised – especially by pushing PIs to sign up their PDRAs*'. Some PIs in the FG were concerned about the time needed by their PDRAs to attend such events, although survey evidence suggest PIs see it as important.

Take up of the Vitae RDF planner app has continued to increase, with 150 annual licences for researchers. A usage review by Faculty is currently taking place which will inform the future marketing of the application. System statistics suggests that 64% of licence holders are active users. While the Knowledge segment of the RDF wheel is the most widely used, considerable interest is reflected in other areas of personal effectiveness, engagement and governance. A project was undertaken with researchers from one area to map the role descriptions for research grades 6, 7 and 8 to the RDF descriptors. This translation was then used as the basis for a career development event in 2015 so that researchers were able to identify and plan their development within this clearly articulated framework. This trial will be expanded into the future.

Our current RIS does not support records of individual research portfolios however it is expected that the new RIS system will record all dissemination, impact and public engagement activity related to a specific project, which can act as an archive of activity for researchers and will have a reporting tool for rapidly generating information from the system.

The 2014-15 plan envisaged further engagement with All as an important stimulus to encourage research expectations and career planning. Generally, perceptions of All were varied but most staff saw it as a means of rebalancing the academic profile: to enable greater investment in the development of research active teams. Evidence from CROS15 suggests that such mechanisms have been effective to some degree, with most researchers feeling encouraged to plan their career development. However, evidence from PIRLS15 suggests that significant numbers of research managers do not feel valued for providing career advice to their researchers especially for careers outside of Higher Education. It is important to note that more PIs from REF Panel A areas were positive about its value and being recognised for doing so, which suggests areas of good practice. In general, PIRLS15 results showed that over half felt that nurturing researchers' careers was very important behaviour for excellent research leaders suggesting scope to promote its value.

The University provides the opportunity for researchers to participate in accredited management development. Provisions are currently being extended for an Associate Fellowship route and passport courses are available for PGRs who are involved in learning and teaching. From 2016, lunchtime events specifically designed for researchers will be offered. This will enable demand to be assessed. The University has had a Research Staff Association (RSA) since 2013 and moves to improve communication between the RSA with the CSG are on-going as this should allow more holistic interfacing of research staff with CSG processes.

Results from the CROS 2015 survey has raised concerns about the effectiveness of induction processes available to researchers. This is being addressed through a more tailored 'on-boarding' process for each staff member. Developing mentoring provision for researchers is an important objective for the CSG. Establishing mechanisms and mentoring relationships that have the researchers' development as their main focus is identified as a vital ingredient to enriching the overall research environment.

#### **Principle 5: Researchers' responsibilities**

Our plan in 2012 identified the relevance of research integrity in developing research careers. Since 2014, the CSG in its work across all three Concordats, has given greater prominence to work on Research Integrity and Governance as a mechanism to deliver this support. The success of CSG in influencing research governance and training at the University is a notable achievement and augurs well for the role of CSG in influencing further the nature and extent of support for career development of individual researchers. The importance of raising awareness and the need to communicate these messages meaningfully to researchers is recognised as an on-going challenge. Work to develop a supportive, informative and relevant portfolio of information for each new researcher as part of their 'on-boarding' to the University is an action in the next plan

The University's Open Campus Programme offers opportunities for research active staff to develop and deliver public engagement talks. Other opportunities are encouraged by Associate Deans for Engagement, for example, at the annual Science Festival. The University's current strategic direction emphasises the

importance of translational interdisciplinary research and other forms of knowledge transfer and commercialisation. Evidence from CROS and PIRLS2015 suggest recognition of their importance.

Evidence from the FG suggests that researchers find that the most useful career development discussions occur in on-going interactions with their PI as part of their research work. Investing in integrated performance management and appraisal so that it becomes more meaningful for both the researcher and their PI will help to build the research environment. Raising awareness of the utility of the RDF as a tool to articulate and plan relevant areas of development should be an important aspect of this message and of the revised performance management process. Developing a mentoring system which matches the researcher with a mentor separate from their immediate line manager will add substantial benefits for the both the researcher and the research environment.

#### **Principle 6: Diversity and Equality**

Progress made under this principle is closely linked to the University's work on Athena SWAN and the Athena SWAN Steering Group secretary is a member of the CSG. The University achieved the Bronze Award during 2015 and a number of individual departments have either submitted or are planning to submit applications for a Bronze Award, one already being successful. Evidence from the CROS and PIRLS surveys informed the University's self-assessment and reference was made to the University's commitment to implementing the Concordats. An important action for CSG is to influence policy across these areas to ensure that those on research-only contracts are included in positive actions in this agenda.

Female researchers form a strong presence in the Minerva Academic Women's Network which provides the opportunity for women from all academic roles to meet and exchange ideas and experiences. The meetings have included talks from STEMM women about their participation in 'Soapbox Science' and the Aurora leadership programme. The meetings also provide a forum to share and generate ideas to celebrate the role of female researchers as a part of International Women's Day.

In the broader scope of equality and diversity, work has recently taken place to review and improve support for staff with disabilities creating a central budget managed by HR to support reasonable adjustments, enhancing awareness and education, and improving access to information, guidance and external resources. Networks for a range of diversity groups are facilitated by the University and there has been recent approval for a significant investment in the restructuring of the University's Diversity and Inclusion office to ensure this work remains a priority.

#### **Principle 7: Monitoring and Evaluation**

The role of the CSG is central to the University's plan to implement the Concordat and its effectiveness will be reviewed by UREC. The University continues to engage with national surveys and maintains its membership of the Vitae organisation. It also has representation in the 'Network for Expert Researcher Developers'.

#### **Next steps including success factors**

The University is putting structures and processes in place to develop a dynamic research environment based on vibrant research groups. Aligning this strategic aim with achievement of the Concordat principles enables focus on the development and well-being of researchers who are seen as key to the success of this endeavour. The CSG brings together academic representation and influence with a range of central support services to influence implementation of the strategy through UREC. Specifically, the work of the group will be to:

- Continue to listen to the voice of researchers by commissioning surveys such as CROS and PIRLS 2017, focus groups on specific topics e.g. barriers to participation in development; receiving reports on the results of Employee Engagement Surveys so as to influence practice through UREC.
- Support the development of an effective mentoring scheme for researchers which is separate from the line manager to enable an independent focus on career development. CROS 17 data to inform.
- Work with HR to support and influence the development of the new performance management framework and appraisal scheme in order to align it with the needs of researchers and developing the research environment. Success factors to include engagement and impact of appraisal.
- Work with SD to advise and commission development activity for researchers.

- Work with HR to develop ways to recognise and celebrate excellent researchers out-with project funding.