

HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH AWARD REVIEW PROCESS 2013 – A COMMENTARY

THE CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCHERS ACTION PLAN: Review of Progress and Next Steps (2014-2015)

Background and Context

In January 2012 the University of Hull was awarded the HR Excellence in Research Award in recognition of its commitment to promoting the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. To achieve this award the University undertook a review of existing support for research staff, along with a gap analysis against the requirements of the 2008 Concordat. The Action Plan has recently been reviewed and evaluated. There have been some important achievements over the last two years but there are significant challenges still to be faced particularly in light of major institutional transformation and change. The Action Plan for 2014-2015 seeks to address these challenges.

Evaluation Process

A collaborative partnership comprising representatives from HR, Staff Development, the Strategic Development Office, Research Funding Office, Equality and Diversity Office and the Concordat Steering Group (which included a cross section of researchers from PI to research assistant) was responsible for the internal evaluation guided by the Director of HR. Engagement with key stakeholders including members of our research community enabled the collection and analysis of key data which allowed us to identify progress made. The evaluation drew on data from the 2013 CROS and PIRLS surveys, the Academic Investment Initiative, Staff Survey, work on Athena Swan, Equality and Diversity data and S188 (union consultation) meetings. The original plan remains live but we have drafted a 2014/2015 plan which removes those actions that have been completed and focuses specifically on actions still required as informed by the evaluation. The completed actions will remain the subject of monitoring to ensure good practice is maintained and embedded.

Actions and achievements by principle

Principle 1: Recruitment, Retention and Selection Practice

The data from CROS 2013 indicates that progress continues to be made as over 90% of applicants at Hull were supplied with a bespoke research job description and competence framework. Since the award, investment has been made in producing a library of HERA evaluated research role profiles. Grading decisions are built into the on line recruitment approvals process. The role profiles and associated competency frameworks provide a framework for giving focussed feedback to applicants.

Initial and refresher training in recruitment and selection are mandatory for anyone involved in recruitment. On line training as well as quarterly workshops are provided for staff. Training includes specific material on recruitment of research staff. Attendance at training is monitored by HR. Results from PIRLS 2013 suggest that PIs are confident in carrying out their recruitment and selection responsibilities.

The University is committed to reducing fixed term contracts although, in line with national figures, the use of fixed term contracts for research staff at Hull has remained at about 70% of all research posts. University policy on the Use of Fixed Term Contracts and associated HR processes and online systems ensure that they are only used when relevant and appropriate.

Principle 2: Recognising and Valuing Researchers

Attendance at mandatory Equality and Diversity training, with refresher courses every three years, is firmly embedded. Managers are required to have meetings with their contract researchers six months before the expiry of contract and to make them aware of the opportunity to register for redeployment. Any request for bridging finance to retain researchers between grants is considered on a case-by-case basis. The use of fixed term contracts is also monitored centrally by the Redundancy Committee and Section 188 (Union Consultation) meetings. The provision of on line and local Induction materials for researchers and establishment of researcher role profiles for different grades has also provided a framework for career development and opportunities for grading review/promotion.

Disappointingly CROS 2013 results suggest that about a third of research staff had not been invited to an appraisal meeting by their research leader. This is being addressed through the Academic Investment Initiative

which requires that every member of academic staff has a development plan with clearly defined expectations and targets and regular review/appraisal meetings.

The University's strategic plan published in 2011 identifies that one of the key aims of the University is to achieve an internationally recognised research profile. The impact of this positive drive is reflected in the improving trends identified in CROS 2013 results which indicate that researchers appear to feel increasingly integrated into their departments and recognised and valued by the institution (63% in 2009; 79% in 2011 and 81% in 2013).

Principle 3: Equipping and Supporting Researchers to be adaptable and flexible

Staff Development (SD) have played a major part in providing development opportunities in research practice, research data management, public engagement, applying funding, and delivering career development opportunities based on Vitae programmes including Effective Researcher and Broadening Horizons. In addition the University took part in the national pilot of the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF) in 2012/13 and has recently doubled the number of licences available for use by researchers and research students. Work continues to embed this as a useful tool for planning and recording development for all researchers. The RDF is used as part of the PhD development skills course in the Postgraduate Training Scheme. Despite the disappointing figures for appraisal CROS 2013 results suggest an appetite among researchers for engagement in development opportunities across a range of topics with communication, dissemination and public engagement highlighted as particularly important

PIRLS 2013 results show that developing research staff is seen as an important management activity by 95% of research leaders at Hull and that providing career development advice to others is seen by 90% of the respondents as an important aspect of inspiring and leading research staff. The survey does however highlight a significant minority of research leaders do not feel that they would be recognised for this. It is anticipated the Academic Investment Initiative will, over time, be instrumental in changing perceptions of the value that the institution places on these activities.

Principle 4: Recognising Career Development Needs and Lifelong Learning at all career stages

Significant progress has been made to recognise and promote the role of researchers within induction processes including the online induction programme. A checklist for Principal Investigators, based on the Concordat, is used in local induction and signposts important information about research policy and practice at the University. Researchers continue to benefit from accredited postgraduate development programmes in both academic practice and management in HE. CROS 2013 results suggest an increased take up of local, area and central induction by researchers and increases in perceptions of benefit.

Principle 5: Researchers' Responsibilities

All staff at the University were consulted on the Strategic Plan and when finalised received copies in 2011. The implementation of the plan emphasizes the importance of research and its integrity to the University's aims. There is regular communication with researchers about training and development opportunities to encourage their engagement using normal SD channels as well as a bespoke email list to highlight opportunities for research only staff.

CROS 2013 suggests that researchers at Hull are more aware of UK initiatives in relation to career development and support that is available to them than researchers at other Universities. That said there is clearly scope for continued promotion of opportunities.

Researchers are encouraged to use the Careers Service to consider the full range of careers open to them. This is also a central theme in the Vitae Broadening Horizons course offered by SD. During the period a Research Staff Association was set up with support from SD with members sponsored to attend the annual Vitae Conference for Research staff.

Principle 6: Diversity and Equality

Engagement with equality and diversity training has been a priority for the University in this period and results from the CROS and PIRLS surveys in 2013 show that this initiative has reached most people. Additional training based on the ECU REF code of practice was provided to those involved in deciding the University's submission to the REF in 2013. Recent surveys are encouraging. 96% of the CROS2103 sample believed that the University is committed to equality and diversity and 85% were satisfied with their work life balance. Results from PIRLS 2013 suggest positive perceptions about career progression and promotion although participation in decision

making and reward are areas where fewer staff are confident that everyone is treated fairly. Age, gender, pregnancy and maternity were identified as areas for concern by a small but significant minority. During the period the University has applied for the Athena Swan Bronze award, the increased focus on gender-related issues will undoubtedly lead to greater awareness and progress in addressing these issues.

Principle 7: Monitoring and Evaluation

During its life cycle the original Concordat Steering Group met three times each academic year and reported to the University's Research and Enterprise Committee on plans and actions for implementation. Membership included those with research responsibilities from each faculty, central professional services and a post doctoral researcher. The Group reported to the University Research and Enterprise Committee. The University has taken part in the CROS and PIRLS surveys since 2009 and is committed to taking part in 2015.

Next steps including success factors

Engagement with the Academic Investment Initiative is an important stimulus to transformational change in the University in line with the Strategic Plan for 2011 - 15. Using the Grade Point Average as a metric of research achievement by academic and research staff will promote focussed discussion between academics, researchers and their managers to agree expectations of performance and development plans to support achievement. Success factors in the short term will include the proportion of staff engaged in the initiative and evidence of its value to those taking part from the CROS and PIRLS surveys.

Our evaluation made it clear that in order for the University to demonstrate its commitment to all three research concordats¹ a Concordats Steering Group should be established to a) ensure an integrated and coherent approach b) to reflect the importance of institutional engagement with all three agendas and c) to create synergy between their overlapping objectives. The proposed terms of reference for the group will reflect these and membership will have strong researcher representation.

Encouraging mentoring opportunities within and between research areas and extending development opportunities available to researchers and research leaders remain priorities. Success factors will include the volume and perceived impact of collaborations including increased research income, publications and research profile and reputation.

Embedding the Researcher Development Framework as a career development tool for all research staff and students will continue, investigating the scope for its use as part of All and appraisal discussions and supervisory meetings for supervisors and students. Success factors will include the number of licences held by the University and the beneficial impact of using the framework in the PIRLS and CROS surveys.

Integral to the delivery of HR Excellence in Research is the part played by Associate Deans for Research and Enterprise in driving the agenda forward at the interface of the University and individual faculties. The Associate Deans will continue to translate the University strategic research aims into operational plans which will build and nurture research capacity at Faculty and departmental level. Each faculty will have a local champion to promote the principles of the Concordat. Success factors will monitor the delivery of local KPIs on research.

There is also a need to engage fully with the Career Service to develop further the service available to early career contract researchers. Success factors will reflect increased engagement with a range of career options as reported in the CROS survey.

¹ The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2008); The Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research (2010); the Concordat to Support Research Integrity (2012)