

The Royal Veterinary College “HR Excellence in Research Award” - 10 year review.

Award Date: 27th January 2012; 10 year Review Date: 15th September 2022

Background

The Royal Veterinary College (RVC) is a small specialized institution, the UK's largest and longest-established independent veterinary school and is a Member Institution of the University of London. The mission of the RVC is to be a leading international authority in education, clinical care, research, expert opinion, and employment in veterinary and biomedical sciences. The Royal Veterinary College (RVC) have been proud holders of the "HR Excellence in Research" Award since 2012, highlighting our commitment to supporting the career development of researchers. The current RVC Strategic Plan includes a commitment to “attract and develop world-class talent by investing in early career scientists...” and “production of a diverse cadre of graduates, postgraduates and early career researchers able to work within industry, government and academia, and equipped to address modern veterinary and biomedical challenges”. This award forms an important part of our action to deliver this.

A condition of this award is that assessment of progress against our Concordat implementation strategy is undertaken biannually. This report forms part of the RVC’s 10-year submission to the HREiR recognition process. Here we report the findings of the new assessment, highlight progress against the 2020-22 action plan and provide our strategy for the action plan spanning 2022-25. Our primary focus for this work is on our staff that are Early Career Researchers. For simplicity of reading this report, we are combining independent research fellows and fixed-term contract (FTC) researchers under the term Early Career Researchers (ECR).

Section 1: Outline of the internal evaluation process

The voice of the ECRs is represented by the Research Association (RA). All ECRs are members, and it is run by a committee of six enthusiastic ECRs. This group has been established for many years, is fully embedded into the RVC life, and is part of our internal evaluation process. This process was overseen by the Research Concordat Working Group (RCWG). The terms of reference for this group are to promote the interests of ECRs across the RVC, seeking to ensure they are fully integrated with RVC activities. The group, which reports via the Research Strategy Committee to the Academic Board and Council, reviewed progress and achievements against the 2020-22 action plan, and critically evaluated where further work is required.

A survey and staff feedback helped determine progress of our action plan. Researchers’ and PIs’ views were considered through the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) survey, which included additional questions specific to the RVC. The response rate to this survey by ECRs was strong (63%) and the results were reviewed by the RCWG, and appropriate responses and actions were incorporated in the new action plan. The present review is also informed by continuous assessment of the action plan and more widely the working life of ECRs through six monthly meetings of RCWG and monthly informal meetings between the Chair of RCWG, Human Resources (HR) and the RA committee.

Section 2: Key achievements and reflections on progress

Our action plan reflects our commitment to developing ECRs, and we have made considerable progress, although many actions will continue for the next period. Nevertheless, the COVID pandemic impacted on our ability to achieve some of the action plan, particularly within the originally envisaged timeframes.

Our activities set out in the action plan seemed to impact on a high level of job satisfaction (90%), feeling valued at work (86%) and feeling included in their research environment (91%) within our ECR community. This is significantly higher than the national CEDARS (75%) and gives us confidence that we are gradually enhancing the working lives of our ECRs despite some concerning individual narratives and there being plenty more to do.

Environment and Culture

Promoting awareness of Vitae, the Concordat and the Researcher Development Framework (ECI1) was achieved, and we have been working to enhance awareness by introducing these into training and communications to ensure alignment with the updated concordat (ECI2). We will continue to build on this including refreshing the Concordat Code of Practice and then re-publicising this.

Promoting diversity and equality formed a key part of our action plan at all levels (ECI2, ECM1, ECR1, ECR4). Overall, the results indicate that around 75% of respondents felt that they are familiar with the reporting structure to report incidents of discrimination, and a similar percentage would feel comfortable doing so. This trust is also reflected with regards to reporting/dealing with bullying/harassment claims: here again, around 75% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they are aware of the reporting structure, feel comfortable with reporting an event (78%), and trust that the RVC would deal with such a report in a fair way (69%) and would take appropriate measures (66%). We have made progress in the overarching Equality Objective and Action Plan, and on our Athena Swan action plan (Bronze Award status maintained) and Departments have localized plans to help action and embed these. The RVC also responded to the “Black Lives Matter” campaign by setting up a task force that reports to the Equality and Diversity Committee (EDC). A new role was created, and Dr C. Thuranira-McKeever appointed as Vice Principal for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. The Research Association is currently represented on the EDC by Dr Virginia Marugan-Hernandez, an RA committee member (ECI2).

During the pandemic, we continued to publish FAQs to ensure that these groups clearly knew where to go to for advice. We continue to raise awareness of the concordat and support for ECRs in events we are running, such as “get together coffee” sessions that were transitioned to an on-line virtual format to allow them to continue throughout the pandemic, and which will now gradually return to a face-to-face format. Despite the pandemic, we also had several meetings (mainly on-line via Teams/Zoom) highlighting the importance of research integrity, including reproducibility of data, which have been well received. All this was undertaken with the aim to ensure that research is conducted to rigorous standards and maintains an environment that facilitates this process (ECI5). As part of the RCWG, we are running presentations and interactive workshops on research ethics and integrity (ECI6). In addition, general Research Skills training is provided, and here, recognition for informal supervision is still an on-going theme from our previous action plans. The majority of ECRs feel valued for informal supervision. ECRs are now being officially recognized as supervising doctoral students and research staff and contribute actively to this (ECR5), and they are more aware of the function and responsibilities of our dignity at work and study ambassadors.

In addition, the number of female members of the Research Strategy Committee has increased to eight (50%), with two of these being from a BAME background. Furthermore, two major research networks (UKRI GCRF Hubs) are led by female RVC professors, and thus act as clear role-models to ECRs. Our actions with the action plan are interlinked with our EDI Action Plan (2020-2024), and we are actively working on further ways to maintain and increase this understanding (please see new action plan).

Principle 2: Employment, recognition, and value

Steps have been taken to strengthen our recruitment processes to ensure fairness and transparency and ensuring those involved in recruitment attend appropriate training (ECM1). HR offers unconscious bias training for recruitment panel members, and at least one panel member trained in good practice in recruitment is now attending every appointment board for ECRs. Our policy has been adapted and now includes that all panel members need to be trained to further reduce unconscious bias. This is reflected by the fact that all ECRs that answered the CEDARS found the recruitment, selection, and appointment process fair, inclusive, and transparent. In addition to this training, our overall staffing strategy has led to more women academics being appointed such that the male to female ratio in REF 2021 is 1:1 compared to 1.67:1 in REF2014.

We have enhanced our induction and probation processes, which has resulted in an improvement in the perceived usefulness of the induction process (EI2), and embedding this improvement is in our forward-thinking action plan (EI2). We have also (in the past 2 years, on-line during pandemic) held termly coffee sessions for new ECR starters, hosted by the Vice-Principal for Research and Innovation and the RA, to enable faster integration and establishment of networks for ECRs within the RVC research community through meeting people with broad knowledge of RVC research.

We have further developed our ‘Teaching and Learning in Higher Education’ (TLiHE) course for ECRs, which we reported on first in the 2016-2018 report, to enhance its relevance of project supervision. Further recognition of ECR contributions to postgraduate research student supervision has been enabled through a policy, agreed by the Research Degrees Committee, which details the terms for a contract researcher to be named as a PhD supervisor.

During the pandemic, promoting flexible working has been a key activity and the effect has been seen in the number of those working flexibly or working more days from home. These trends are important to support our ECRs with caring/wider responsibilities.

Most respondents felt that their support included discussion of wider career options (within and outside academia). The majority felt encouraged to do so by their direct line-manager. 68% are aware of the career and professional development possibilities offered by the Institution. This number (68%) may seem relatively low, but is still above the targeted 50%, and may be impacted on by the fact that roughly 70% of ECR started after the beginning of the pandemic (compared to 13% of PIs).

Principle 3: Professional and Career Development

We have piloted access to a range of ‘coaches’ for careers advice using a company called Chaperone that matches ECRs with relevant experts in the particular careers of interest or with careers advisors. Nine ECRs have accessed this and rated the experience 4.5/5.

Human Resources (HR) and the RA continued throughout the pandemic to collaborate to adjust/adapt, refresh training and development provision for ECR, and as set out in our last report, we have established our on-line induction probation process.

The appraisal rate targets achieved are above 70% (2020-21 period). This, and the accompanying training for the career development meetings, was found very useful or useful by 83.3% of ECRs, clearly achieving a deeper dialog between PIs and ECRs (as set out in PCD1, PCD4, PCDM1, PCDR4).

Our ECR mentoring scheme is now established with 20 people having been matched since its launch in Summer 2020. We have had some really encouraging feedback. We have also altered the time frames to be longer to enable a more in-depth relationship.

Summary of the priority-actions as outlined in our new action-plan

The RCWG will continue to meet formally biannually to review progress against the new Action plan and informally to keep momentum going. Indeed, the Chair of RCWG and key members of HR are meeting informally every month to discuss the progress on actions mentioned in the action plan.

We have a history of working collaboratively and productively and a strong collective commitment to continue to enhance the researcher experience at the RVC.

A key learning point from our previous plan is that with so many actions it has been hard to keep the focus on the most important areas and so plan to highlight the following themes.

Environment and Culture

As part of our new Action plan, we continue to work towards more cultural change and are developing a refreshed approach and strategy to equality diversity and inclusion. Our training and other interventions will change to emphasise allyship and empathy (EC11 and ECR1). We will advertise for an ECR to become a dignity at work ambassador (EC13). We intend to maintain this approach from start to end and will therefore develop use of exit interviews to inform actions to include questions on researchers' perception of inclusiveness and the environment. Through the work performed so far, we were able to create a new post (to be filled) to promote opportunities and training for open access. Finally, we are emphasising wellbeing (both, mental and physical) by encouraging an ECR to become a dignity ambassador, putting more emphasis on wellbeing in supervisor training and by integrating wellbeing in the new RVC strategy.

Employment

To support the induction of new ECRs we will offer fellow researchers as induction buddies to ensure that they more quickly understand the support for ECRs and feel part of a community (EI2). We will also explore mechanisms to support research staff on FTCs to minimize the impact of career breaks. This will be supported by the development of an action learning set for Principal Investigators who support ECRs., We will monitor the numbers of researchers on FTCs who then progress to open-ended but limited by funding or to permanent open-ended contracts (EM2 and ER1). As this might depend in part on research applications made between diverse groups, we will monitor for differences in success in research funding and will ensure that this knowledge is widely distributed.

Professional and Career Development

We will ensure that PIs understand the need for, and ECRs will receive 10 days of development. This will be monitored through our amended appraisal form (PCDI1, and PCDM3). We will also revise the concordat code of practice/policy followed by an awareness campaign (PCDI1). This will include appraisal guidance with a more structured approach to considering development and career review, with the aim to better recording non-course-based development activity (PCDI6). We are actively seeking to continue to expand the uptake of careers advice coaching sessions, following a successful pilot with the company Chaperone, which allows for career advice within and beyond academia (PCDI3). We will explore opportunities for joint training activities with other HEIs. We will also actively encourage ECRs to experience other employment sectors. We specifically intend to increase our links with SMEs based in the RVC hub LBIC (PCDI5).

We see this preparation as an absolute necessity and have embedded action points for this at all levels (see PCDM2, PCDR2 and PCDR6).