

# **The Royal Veterinary College four-year self-assessment for the HR Excellence in Research award.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Royal Veterinary College was proud to be one of the first 50 UK HE institutions to achieve the 'HR Excellence in Research' award in January 2012. We then successfully renewed the award following submission of the two year self-assessment in January 2014. This report details the progress made against our HR Excellence Action plan, as well as the findings of the RVC internal review and revised action plan for 2016 -19.

## **HOW THE INTERNAL EVALUATION WAS UNDERTAKEN**

Review and implementation of the HR Excellence Action Plan is overseen by the Research Concordat Working Group (RCWG). This group, which was established in 2009, is comprised of representatives from the various stakeholder communities (Researchers, PIs, HR and Senior Managers) and is chaired by the Vice Principal for Research & Innovation. Regular review of progress is now an embedded part of RVC practices. Elements of the Concordat action plan affect a range of interest groups such as Research Strategy Committee (a strategic committee of the College's Academic Board), Training and Development, Appraisal and Recruitment review project group, Equality Strategy group, and Senior Management Group. We have worked hard to raise the awareness of the objectives of the Concordat action plan so that they feature in the planning of major decision making groups. We have managed to achieve this by ensuring that we have members of the RCWG represented at each of the above groups so that they can influence planning to meet key objectives.

The Royal Veterinary College is committed to aligning its practices with the Principles of the Research Concordat to support the career development of contract researchers. As part of our internal review to evaluate the impact of our current Action Plan and to help inform the creation of the new one, we took the opportunity to add additional tailored questions to both the PIRL and CROS surveys so that we could assess the impact of the actions we had taken to date. The response rate for these surveys were 40% (41/102) for the PIRL and 34% (29/85) for the CROS. The data generated from these surveys were then discussed at the RCWG and key issues for further analysis were identified. To further engage the research community we then organised a series of separate focus groups across both campuses for both PIs and contract researchers. We used the information from the CROS and PIRL surveys to inform the structure of focus group meetings so that we could obtain a deeper understanding of the areas we had identified. The Researcher Association, through their representation on the RCWG (three of the 8 members of this group are from the contract research community), took a very active role in developing the structure and format to be used for the discussions in the focus groups to ensure that it took into account the areas of interest for contract researchers. The focus groups were attended by 19 contract researchers and 15 PIs.

## **KEY ACHIEVEMENTS/PROGRESS BY CONCORDAT PRINCIPLE**

### **Principle 1: Recruitment and Selection**

Since the attainment of the HR excellence in Research award we have developed our induction programme to include a new staff handbook which contains a dedicated section on Research, as well as a section on 'Supporting the Career Development of Researchers' which references the Concordat, the Code of Practice and Guide, the Researcher Association and the HR Excellence in Research Badge. Human Resources meet with all new contract research staff within their first week of employment and take them through this information, ensuring that they are introduced to the range of resources available to them. In addition to this the Vice Principal for Research and Innovation meets with every new starter and reinforces our commitment to the Research Concordat and signposts them to the various resources on offer. New starters also receive a welcome email from the Researcher Association with an explanation of the work it does and the support it provides, as well as a list of advisors they can approach for advice on research career development. The 2013 CROS survey results showed that only 40% of respondents found the College induction useful; the 2015 CROS survey saw a dramatic improvement in that figure to 80%.

Evidence that we select and retain researchers capable of achieving excellence in research is as follows. Of the 112 academic researchers we returned in the REF 2014, 32 (28.5%) were early career researchers, 12 of whom undertook a fixed term post-doctoral contract with us prior to moving into an academic post (between 2008 and 2013), demonstrating we are retaining researchers with excellent potential. Six of these individuals were provided with an independent fellowship post at the RVC prior to their permanent appointment to help them establish their research career. These fellowships were funded by a combination of Wellcome Value in People award, RCUK fellowships and internal strategic fellowship funding. A further 3 contract researchers moved from post-doctoral positions elsewhere into fellowship posts and then permanent academic positions at the RVC. Another 3 researchers transferred their independent fellowships or chose to base them at the RVC during the REF 2014 period and 2 were subsequently appointed to permanent positions at the end of their fellowships. Since January 2013 we have collected data on contract researchers leaving their posts. Analysis of data until June 2015 demonstrated that of the 54 contract researchers who left, 6 (11%) have moved into

further training (PhD positions; n=5) or lectureships (n=1) at the RVC. Finally, over the last 3 years we have provided bridging funding for 6 contract researchers for a total of 26 months of salary to ensure we retain their skills within the research group until a second grant funding their contract has been secured.

## **Principle 2: Recognition and Value**

Throughout the last 4 years we have worked hard to identify ways of demonstrating to our contract researchers that they play a valuable role in contributing to the success of the College's endeavours. The actions taken include developing a training programme that specifically delivers on their career development needs. This training programme is now linked to an amended development section of the appraisal form with the career development needs of the contract researcher in mind. The appraisal system is key to ensuring contract researchers are recognised and valued and we have insisted that they, like all other staff, must be appraised. This message has been championed by the Vice Principal for Research and Innovation and the approach has made a very real difference. Thus in the appraisal year 2011/2012, only 14.2% of contract researchers were appraised whereas in the last appraisal year (2014/2015), the figure had increased to 61%. We have set up, and continue to support, the Researcher Association in its efforts to engage and support the research community it represents, as well as working with the elected leaders to ensure they develop a vibrant association that is fully integrated into College life. Through the Researcher Association, contract researchers have representation on strategic committees making academic decisions at the College. We have also actively promoted the PIRL and CROS surveys and discussion of their outcomes, thereby helping to ensure that the voice of the contract researcher is better heard and their views taken into account when enhancing the provision we make for them. The increasing number of contract researchers engaging with the CROS survey (16 in 2011, 22 in 2013 and 29 in 2015 with a relatively stable population of around 80) is, we believe, an indication of their increased willingness to engage with the College because they feel their opinions will be valued and acted upon. This is also evidenced by the percentage who agreed that they have opportunities to participate in decision making processes which has increased from 31.8% in 2013 to 55% in 2015.

## **Principles 3 and 4: Support and Career Development**

In the 2009/2010 staff training programme we created a dedicated section for research staff to promote and highlight the resources on offer to address their specific training and career development needs. Since its implementation the Research Staff Development Programme has continued to evolve and is now informed by the RDF, the College's strategic research objectives, feedback from the appraisal process, the results of the CROS and PIRL surveys and input from the Researcher Association. The programme for research staff is reviewed annually in July by the RCWG ensuring that the training provision we provide is fit for purpose, regularly refreshed and integrated as part of the College's Concordat action plan. Evidence that this is the case comes from the CROS survey which shows more training is being undertaken by contract researchers. In 2015 72.3% of respondents had undertaken 4 or more days of training in the previous 12 months whereas in 2013 the equivalent figure was 27.2%.

We have reviewed and enhanced the development section of the appraisal form to support contract researchers in being able to produce a personalised career development plan based on the RDF. To further support this all the research training courses were mapped to the RDF so that staff could easily identify those courses which would support them in achieving the relevant area of development. In the 2014/2015 appraisal year, 98% of all contract researcher appraisals contained development plans. The results of the 2015 CROS survey showed that 73.9% of respondents felt their appraisal had been helpful in leading to training and other continuing professional development opportunities; this represents a substantial increase from the results of the 2013 CROS survey in which the equivalent figures was 57.2%. The percentage of respondents agreeing that they had a clear career development plan has steadily increased from 26.6% in 2011 to 40.9% in 2013 and 51.7% in 2015 CROS survey.

We have developed a briefing session for PIs in order to increase their awareness and understanding of their responsibilities regarding supporting contract researchers in developing their skills and career pathways. This is run twice a year and there is an expectation that all PIs will attend. We currently have 102 research active academics (PIs), 37 of whom are line managing contract research staff at the present time. Since it was introduced in 2013, 52 people have completed this briefing. We have recently reviewed the process with the aim to improve the level of engagement with these sessions and have now made it a mandatory requirement that anyone who is awarded a research grant which funds a contract researcher is automatically enrolled on the next available PI briefing session. Attendance is monitored and overseen by Human Resources in collaboration with the Research Office.

In order to assist contract researchers in their career development we have compiled a list of experienced PIs selected from the different research groups who they can approach for advice; their details are published on the Researcher Association website. We also publish case studies that describe various career paths that contract researchers have taken after leaving RVC, as well as next destination figures; both provide current contract researchers with insight into the range of roles they might move into. The data collected between January 2013 and July 2015 shows what 44 (81%) of the 54 contract researchers who left the College went on to do. These contacts are then retained and are being used to develop our Alumni list, a new initiative that has been piloted during 2015 and which will be built on in the next Action

Plan. We actively support those individuals capable of applying for independent fellowship positions to be held either at the RVC or other academic institutions. Senior academic staff work with contract researchers to review their CVs, provide training in writing fellowship applications, provide constructive criticism of the applications drafted and help to prepare them for interview. In the last 12 months 5 researchers have submitted 8 applications resulting in 3 interviews and 2 awards. The feedback given to those who have failed has been reviewed and advice given as to improvements required for future applications. Proactive identification of researchers who are competitive for externally funded research fellowship is an agenda item for research strategy committee.

#### **Principle 5: Researchers' Responsibilities**

In order to encourage individual contract researchers to share responsibility and pro-actively engage in their own personal development we have offered one to one coaching sessions that provide them with independent advice and guidance on their career development. We have also run a mixture of workshop-based and on-line career development courses on topics including interview skills, building research relationships and Imposter syndrome. These courses are promoted by HR and through the Researcher Association which helps raise our contract researchers' awareness of the resources available to them and their relevance.

The Researcher Association has been very active in professionalising and branding themselves as an association that adds value to the contract researchers' experience at the RVC. A particular highlight for this group was the launch of the Research Highlights Day in 2015 which attracted 96 attendees. This event, which was run by the Researcher Association (with the full support of the RVC Events Management team), aimed through talks and interactive stands to actively engage staff (research, academic and non-academic) in the excellent research that is being done at the College. A second key aim was to provide contract researchers with a community engagement opportunity and gain confidence in promoting their ideas. A good deal of positive feedback has been received and we are encouraged that this event will grow each year into a significant public engagement forum for the College, demonstrating the positive contribution contract researchers make to academic life.

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

In April 2015 we were successful in our application to be re-accredited with the disability two tick symbol award. As part of our annual recruitment monitoring report we identified that it was our contract research positions that attracted the largest number of disabled applicants, representing 4.29% of our total job applicants in 2014/15. This was an encouraging increase from 2.9% in 2013/14. When looking at our 2014/15 recruitment data it was the contract research category that attracted the largest percentage of BAME applicants (21.1%) and, encouragingly, when looking at positions offered, it was also the research category that had the highest number of BAME offers (12.9%). Strategic partnerships in research have resulted in the College positively embracing research that addresses animal and human health and welfare issues in developing countries and working with scientists based in those countries (for example being a founding member of the London International Development Centre, supporting the Southern African Centre for Infectious Disease Surveillance; actively engaging with the BBSRC/DFID funded Zoonoses and Emerging Livestock Systems and the joint BBSRC and Indian Government funded Farm Animal Health and Disease initiative). Through these partnerships we hope to further diversify our workforce population.

In order to contribute further to strategic decision making, two members of the RCWG are now also members of the Equality Strategy group. This means that they now have a stronger voice on this committee and are able to highlight in advance any objectives that both groups are working on so that resources can be pooled and each group can support the other in achieving common goals. It has also helped to highlight the work of the RCWG to a wider audience.

As part of our commitment to the Research Concordat, the College established the Self-Assessment Team (SAT) which has been tasked with producing an Athena Swan action plan to be submitted for the Bronze award. As an institution we have applied for, but so far have been unsuccessful in, achieving this award. This has been very disappointing but we remain committed to gender equality. We have taken note of the reasons for the lack of success and are using this information to review and refine the tasks and objectives in the action plan, together with the resources necessary to achieve them. We believe we will be in a much stronger position when we submit for the award in November 2016.

#### **Principle 7: Implementation and Review**

The RCWG meets biannually to review progress against the Action plan but it is very much a living document which is reviewed informally on a regular basis. The Researcher Association has played a key part in implementing the plan and it is now a very active vibrant group with strong leadership. Members of the RCWG correspond regularly with the Researcher Association outside of the RCWG meetings. This close level of communication means that we can review and work together on implementing key areas of our plan.

Updates on progress against the Concordat principles are reported via the Research Strategy Committee to Academic Board and to the Senior Management Group through the Vice Principal for Research & Innovation.

In order to support the implementation of the Principles of the Concordat we developed the Code of Practice and Guide to the Management Development of Research Staff as a significant communication tool for our Research community and it now also forms a key part in the PI briefing sessions.

## **STRATEGY FOR THE NEXT 4 YEARS**

Over the next four years the Royal Veterinary College will focus on developing the following areas:

1. Review the recruitment process to ensure that potential barriers to underrepresented groups are removed as this could be limiting the diversity of the research population.
2. Provide a range of training that will support the College's efforts to improve the diversity of our workforce.
3. Take active steps to ensure that researchers are aware that their contribution to student supervision is recognised and valued.
4. Communicate with contract researchers more effectively as to how they can apply for research funding either independently or gain recognition for their input into funding applications made by their research team.
5. Actively demonstrate to our research community that they are valued by communicating more effectively the progress against the Action Plan
6. Establish the Research Highlights day as a major annual networking event for researchers, the wider College community and beyond.
7. Create a central self-service (on-line) system where researchers can record all their professional development activities in order to support them in planning their career.
8. Support the enlargement of a network of contract researcher alumni (building on the recent pilot) who are prepared to provide peer support and advice on career options for current contract researchers.
9. Actively promote a lively networking environment for researchers in order to increase their opportunities for learning, as well as increased exposure to a variety of career opportunities.
10. Focus on removing any potential barriers to career development for underrepresented groups of staff by contributing to the aims of the Athena Swan action plan

## **Critical Success Measures**

1. All recruitment processes including the online recruitment system and interview training have been reviewed to ensure that any unconscious bias elements have been removed. A critical success measure for this is that each year we would expect to see an increase in the percentage of underrepresented groups being shortlisted and appointed. This will be evidenced in our annual recruitment monitoring report.
2. Our commitment to this area will be demonstrated by the expansion (by 50%) of the number and range of courses offered within our awareness section of the College training programme. We will monitor the quality and attendance of these courses to ensure they are meeting need and expectations.
3. Contract research staff will enrol on, and successfully complete, the RVC run course which provides a qualification in Research project supervision and recognises their contribution to teaching. In addition we expect up to ten percent of contract researchers to be named as co-supervisors for PhD students.
4. The number of contract researchers being named on external grants applications will increase from 10% of our external grant applications to 15%.
5. Regular updates of progress made against the action plan are clearly detailed on our website.
6. Increased attendance at Research highlights day and improved awareness of the Researcher Association, Vitae and the Research Concordat, which will be evidenced in the CROS and PIRL surveys. Our aim is to achieve 75% awareness in all these areas in the 2017 CROS and PIRL survey.
7. Contract Researchers are using the online system, regularly updating it and view it as a useful tool for their career development (as assessed by the CROS survey)
8. A growing Researcher Alumni who are willing to engage with current contract researchers to provide career advice and who recommend the RVC as a place to work with 15-20 individuals agreeing to have their contact details published on our website as people for RVC contract researchers to contact and seek advice on the next steps in career development.
9. A vibrant and active Researcher Association with an increased number of well attended events run by the Researcher Association. Six networking events per year will be organised and attended by the research community.
10. Achievement of the Athena Swan Bronze and Silver awards.