The Royal Veterinary College "HR Excellence in Research Award" Eight-Year Review

Award Date: 27th January 2012; Review Date: 11th September 2020

Introduction

In 2012 The Royal Veterinary College (RVC) received the "HR Excellence in Research" Award highlighting the College's commitment to supporting career development of researchers. A condition of this award is that assessment of progress against our Concordat implementation strategy is undertaken biannually. Here we report the findings of the eight-year evaluation, highlight progress against the 2018-20 action plan and provide our strategy for the action plan in the new format spanning 2020-22. For simplicity of reading this report, we are combining independent research fellows and contract researchers under the term early career Researchers (ECR)

Outline of the internal evaluation process

The internal evaluation was overseen by the Research Concordat Working Group (RCWG) comprising: Vice-Principal - Research & Innovation (VPRI), Associate Dean for Research (ADR), Deputy Director of Human Resources, Head of the Graduate School, Staff Development Manager, the Researcher Association (RA), Committee comprising 5 ECRs, and 3 Principal Investigators (PIs). The group, which reports via Research Strategy Committee to Academic Board, reviewed progress and achievements against the 2018-20 action plan, and critically evaluated where further work is required. Researchers' views were considered through the biennial CROS (Careers in Research On-line Survey) and PIRLS (Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey) 2019 results midway through our 2-year action plan which was reviewed in light of the results and actions amended and added where necessary. Due to the COVID-19 related lockdown, we did not perform a Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) in 2020. Instead, a more focused internal survey, referred to as the "RA COVID-19 survey", was conducted in May 2020 with two aims: (i) to inform some short-term actions responding to researcher experience in COVID-19 related lockdown, and (ii) a general section to inform our longer-term action plan. The response rate to this survey was 57% (45 of 79 ECR responded). Our 2020-22 action plan was subsequently reviewed in July 2020 incorporating feedback from the RA COVID-19 survey.

Key achievements and reflections on progress

Principle 1: Environment and Culture

- We had committed to raise awareness of the concordat, Vitae and the Research Development Framework (RDF) to above 50% and we have been working to enhance awareness by introducing these into training and communications to ensure alignment with the updated concordat. However, as this specific question was not asked in our RA COVID-19 survey, we cannot verify whether we have achieved this and will know more as result of the next CEDARS.

- The RVC is a founding member of the UK Reproducibility Network (UKRN; one of 7 HEIs). This is helping us to raise awareness of research integrity and disseminate best practice in reproducibility of research, which includes ECRs. The RVC has currently an Institution lead (Prof Dominic Wells) and a local UKRN network lead (Dr Charlotte Burns). A program of interactive seminars and focused discussion including staff and ECRs around the issues affecting reproducibility was organised in 2019-20 (20/11/19 and 29/01/20). Furthermore, a research integrity/reproducibility champion was elected from the ECRs (Eleanor Lynam), who organised a first journal club (15/07/20). The College recently achieved the AUA Mark of excellence for the College's behaviour framework (https://aua.ac.uk/professional-development/mark-of-excellence/; June 2020), an achievement that is important in the context of changing the culture related to research integrity and reproducibility.

- Our "RA COVID-19 survey", aimed at ECRs indicated that the RVC is an inclusive environment (87%) and appealing as a place to apply to work (82% agreement; CROS survey).

- Our CROS and RA COVID-19 survey indicated that ECRs are aware of welfare support within their working environment at all levels of the College (Support Staff, Employee Assistance Program, "Dignity at work" Ambassadors, RA). The majority (58%) of ECR answered the CROS survey. Of the respondents, 64% had a good awareness of welfare support with a further 31% knew that it exists. The awareness of welfare support was up to 76% in our recent RA COVID-19 survey. As part of our recent review of the Dignity at Work policy we have re-trained existing and trained new Dignity at Work Ambassadors and launched Dignity at work training for managers so that they feel supported in how to create an inclusive environment and deal with allegations of bullying, harassment and discrimination effectively. The RA COVD-19 survey also showed that 82% of respondents felt that their PI supports their mental health and wellbeing during this difficult time.

- ECRs (79%) feel appreciated and valued at the RVC (CROS 2019 survey results). We developed and published FAQs to ensure that these groups clearly know where to go to for advice. We continue to raise awareness of the concordat and support for ECRs in events we are running. Furthermore, focus groups were established to determine the issues ECRs have in their informal role in supervision of undergraduate research projects. As a result, we have clarified responsibilities and expectations of PIs regarding this and are now communicating these to PIs via training. This process seems to have already had an effect. Whereas, within the CROS survey, 23% of those who expressed an opinion felt valued for their contribution to teaching (with 37% disagreeing and 40% felt that this was not applicable to them or they didn't know), the pre-COVID results in our RA COVID-19 survey showed that ECRs felt more valued for informal supervision (71%), for their contribution to teaching/formal supervision (61%) and for wider contributions (63%).
- Finally, Equality and Diversity is a standing item in the RCWG meetings and Equality Impact assessments are widely used across the College to ensure that any decisions made do not have an adverse impact on any protected characteristic. The College has made progress in the overarching Equality Objective and Action Plan, and on our Athena Swan action plan and Departments have localised plans to help action and embed these. The College also responded to the "Black Lives matter" campaign by setting up a task force that reports to the Equality and Diversity Committee (EDC). The Research Association is represented on this committee by Dr Elizabeth Finding, an ECR.

Principle 2: Employment, recognition and value

- We monitor our recruitment statistics- at application to shortlisting then at shortlisting to offer stages- by ethnicity, gender, age and disability- specifically for ERCs. Data are published in our Annual Equality Report. We identified that the number of BAME research post applicants (national and international ECRs) has risen from 2017 to 2019. There has been a consistent trend over the last few years showing proportionally less BAME applicants are shortlisted than white applicants. A possible contributory factor is that initial analysis show BAME candidates do not satisfy the essential criteria provided, such as having the appropriate professional qualification or being eligible based on funder terms and conditions. A BAME project group has been set up investigate further.
- The effects of the College's work toward Athena Swan Silver Award and the objectives of our Equality and Diversity Action Plan have begun to impact. There is still a significant under-representation of women in the professorial grade. Nevertheless, there has been a 4xfold increase in women at associate professor /reader grade since 2014. We have recently revised our promotion procedure for those in reader to Professor posts (SAP). Overall, our staffing strategy has led to more women academics being appointed such that the male to female ratio in REF 2021 is 1.06:1 compared to 1.67:1 in REF2014. Promoting flexible working has been a key activity and the effect has been seen in the number of requests for flexible working increasing (2018: 31, 2019: 41). These trends are important to inspire our female ECRs.
- A panel member trained in good practice in recruitment, including how to minimise unconscious bias, is now attending every appointment board for ECRs as well as academic staff members. Seventy percent of panel members had been trained by July 2019 and we have now trained 323 staff members. Our policy has been adopted and now includes that all panel members need to be trained to further reduce unconscious bias.
- We have enhanced our induction and probation processes, which has resulted in an improvement in the perceived usefulness of College induction (44% in the last CROS replied HR induction is useful/very useful and 69% said that local induction is useful). In the ECRs' "RA COVID-19 survey", 60% felt that the HR induction was useful and 88% and 74% respectively felt that their local induction by the Department and by PI-group was useful.
- We have also started (for the last 12 months) bi-monthly coffee sessions for new ECR starters, hosted by the VPRI, ADR and 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 intend to align these coffee sessions with campus tours lead by RA/HR to provide new starters a better oversight of activities/premises. However, due to the lockdown, these have not happened yet.
- We have further developed our "Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' (TLiHE) course for ECRs, which we reported on 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.

- Within the PIRLS 2019 survey, 61% of responding PIs had attended training to enhance their supervisory, managerial or leadership skills and 92% of these would recommend the courses to other PIs. As part of these courses, themes coming through the CROS survey are highlighted, resulting in a greater understanding of the needs of ECRs. Based on the results obtained by a RA-led focus group on the wider issues of recognition for teaching/supervision, we modified our training for PIs to state, more explicitly, what is expected of a PI with regards to ECR supervision.
- Representation of ECRs on College committees has expanded. Researchers are now represented in six committees. Sixty percent of ECRs feel that there is now good representation of their involvement regarding decision making (CROS survey), and the RA is publicising upcoming committee meeting dates. Feedback from the RA community is a standing item on every committee meeting.

Principle 3: Professional and Career Development

- The annual Research Highlights event (co-organised by Resarch Association and ECRs) continues to be a popular, lively, interactive event. Each year we have had 12 researcher stands and 80-100 visitors. The quality and friendly (but competitive) spirit has increased over the last year. Data for this year are not available as the event had to be cancelled due to the lockdown.
- Human Resources (HR) and the RA have enthusiastically collaborated over the past 2 years to refresh training and development provision for ECR in face of declining participation. A conference-style event 'Shaping Successful Scientists' was run in 2018 and 2019 but had to be postponed in 2020 due to Covid-19. This event consisted of workshops, a careers marketplace and networking opportunities. It was designed around ECR requests (e.g. becoming REF returnable, gaining a fellowship), and the desire to raise awareness of the rich variety of career opportunities that researcher training leads to. A quarter of our ECRs attended (along with other research staff and PhD students). Both contributors and delegates commented on the energised atmosphere. We had an encouraging attendance at the launch of the ECR mentoring scheme (17 potential mentees).
- In our PIRLS, 89% of PIs rated their confidence as high with respect to leading their people/group. This confidence has been sustained from the last PIRLS. More than 50% were interested in further development in 'leading your group', 'managing finances' 'managing staff performance' and 'providing advice on careers'. Training is now available on resolving issues- covering how to informally approach issues in performance and behaviours. A set of questions was promoted as part of the appraisal training for PIs regarding asking questions on careers.' Leading your group' is covered as part of the Supervision workshop in a research context and more generally in the management and leadership training offer.
- As set out in our last report, we have established our on-line appraisal process. The appraisal rate targets achieved are above 70% now (2018-19 period), up from 68% in the period before. Of the participating ECR, 71% said it was useful/very useful.
- We also developed approaches to support ECR in making funding applications. This is also supported by the CROS survey in which 44% said they were named co-investigator - we consider this an area of strength. However, the CROS survey perception was that support could be stronger, so this is still an area for our continued attention.

In the next section, we will present our Strategy for the next two years as well as measures for success allocated to these. The RCWG will continue to meet formally biannually to review progress against the new Action plan and informally to keep momentum going. Indeed, the new 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.

Strategy of the next two years	Measures for success
Principle 1: Environment and Culture	
• We are working to increase awareness of the Concordat. All PIs and ECRs will be issued with a list of their responsibilities under the concordat so that they are aware of what we expect from them and what they can expect from the College. This will include manager's actions in this action plan and will be recirculated each time the action plan is amended.	• 70% of ECRs and PIs have heard of 'concordat to support the career development of researchers in the next CEDARS survey
• Despite the fact that 87% of ECR feel that the RVC is a fair, caring and inclusive place to work (RA COVID-19 survey), isolated incidents of harassment/bullying/discrimination occur. We will develop an Active Bystander culture, implement a 'report and support' system, and use the recently awarded AUA mark of excellence for our behaviours framework to promote the expectation that unacceptable behaviour is called out. Together with the RA, we will specifically ensure that female and BAME scientist will be invited as speakers for our seminar series to provide access to role-models. In addition, we continue to work towards Athena Swan action plan and are developing an action plan for the Race Equality Charter (by Summer 2021).	• 90% researchers agree that the RVC is an inclusive workplace in next CEDARS. • Enhancing awareness of Dignity at Work Ambassadors to 75% (evaluated in the next CEDARS). • 50% of the seminar speakers will be female and 15% will be of BAME background
• We will continue working to enhance ECR and PI understanding of research reproducibility/research integrity through maintaining the Institute lead, the local UKRN network lead and the RA Research integrity/reproducibility champion as well as promoting research integrity/reproducibility through setting up the "ReproducibiliTea" meetings, enabling discussion between PIs and ECR. We will also encourage researchers to report on factors that impact negatively on research integrity and the research environment and suggest ways in which these can be discouraged/ prevented. These will be discussed at the Research Strategy Committee.	• Clear awareness of ECR regarding Research Integrity Concordat, which will be assessed through CEDARS where 75% of ECR are aware of this concordat • Introduction of a system for anonymous reporting and suggestions for change to RSC regarding reporting of poor practice / poor behaviors. This will be coupled with a 'You said we did' feature providing feedback on how these suggestions have been acted upon.

Principle 2: Employment, (and recognition and value)	
• Sustain our attention to recruitment and induction. This includes monitoring for any bias in the recruitment process, which may occur, and continued training in recruitment, unconscious bias and equality and diversity awareness. We will enhance our induction processes by changing our induction with the line manager to be recorded within an online form. This will allow for the monitoring that these inductions have happened and that required activities been undertaken. We will also evaluate feasibility of suggestions for a stronger departmental induction and induction for those changing position within the RVC.	• 100% of panel trained in recruitment. • Completion rates of online induction/probation forms 75% by Summer 2021 • 80% of survey responses are positive about induction at local, departmental and Hr/College level
• Enhance support for PIs in management skills. We will revisit our support to PIs to ensure themes coming through from subsequent CEDARS surveys and the specific expectations in the revised Concordat are better highlighted and we will continue to review our development offering to them. This will be integrated with training on Worktribe, the College's new research information management system	• 80% would recommend the training /development to others • Qualitative feedback in CEDARS
Principle 3: Professional and Career Development	
• In line with the new Concordat, we have set out the RVC expectations regarding ECR engagement in a minimum of 10 days of professional development. This new action point was introduced after the CROS survey. However, it became clear that during the COVID-19 lockdown period, it has been difficult for us as well as ECRs to fulfil this expectation, and only 15.6% of ECRs had undertaken 10 days of professional development in the past 12 months. We are currently consulting on the introduction of a College-wide scheme that provides for dedicated ECR training time every month.	• The introduction of a training afternoon each month would result in each ECR having at least 6 days of the annual suggested 10 days, leaving other time for 'timetabled' training courses and development. We expect 60% engagement with this initiative within the first academic year • Substantial enhancement of uptake of in-house professional development and training courses to above 50% by 2021.
• To foster the understanding of ECR needs and subsequently the development of ECRs, we have recently launched a mentoring scheme, whereby ERCs are linked up with academics or professional staff outside their own research area. In addition, we will promote access to the existing internal coaching network.	• One of our key measures will be that ECRs feel more supported in career development, which will be assessed in the next CEDARS. • >70% of ECRs who were mentored would recommend it to others. 10% of ECRs have a mentor at any one time.

• Enhance career progression and employability of ECR by offering one-to-one mentoring support to ECR wanting to apply for the Gill Malone Memorial Award in September 2021 in a "learning how to write Fellowships while writing one" approach". • Promote applications from ECR to host the LIDo DTP summer research experience placement scheme which is targeted at undergraduates from non-traditional backgrounds and would not normally aspire to undertake a PhD.	• An 25% increase in the number of applications for the Gill Malone funding and the summer studentships applications made through the LIDo DTP by getting those that have hosted students to write about their experience and publish that in a blog / Facebook page or on the RA website, resulting in project with own research ideas within the ECR community.
• Ensure robust consideration of support for development and career aspirations by continual review and improvement of probation and appraisal systems and communications. Actions include: bringing the induction/probation system online to enable monitoring and linkage with the appraisal process; amending the appraisal system to ask for more details of past development activity; and creation of a guidance document and framework on career reviews.	• Probation system implemented on-line and proportion of ECRs completing the probationary training and objectives increased to >75% • As a result, completion rate for probation forms and appraisals increased to >75% and ECRs report that they have a career development plan upon appraisal
• The activities introduced after the CROS survey are supported by the release of a quarterly RA newsletter on career development. However, it became clear that the production of this newsletter by members of the RA to the ECR community required a huge time commitment. Thus, the newsletter was replaced by a Facebook group maintained by the RA which is both easier to maintain and are more often accessed. RA, in collaboration with the IT Department, will monitor engagement with this Facebook page.	• Adjustment to the alumni network by its promotion on the RA Facebook page to be seen as a useful resource by ECR. This will be monitored through feedback of engagement provided by RA. • Increased number of hits/postings on the webpage, in conjunction with feedback provided by RA in committees regarding topics raised by ECR on this page.
• The development of an alumni network has engaged with 12 alumni so far. The contact with alumni has also been moved to the Facebook group, and all ECRs are invited to join it, and will therefore still be a member of the group when they leave the RVC, unless they specifically remove themselves from the group.	• Increased interaction of ECR with alumni, such as lab-placements, collaborative proposals and publications with >40% of respondents to the CEDARS having found contacts with Alumni useful
• Enhance awareness in ECR of entrepreneurship/intellectual property through seminars, discussion groups and one-to-one consultations offered by the newly employed Entrepreneur in Residence.	• Interaction of entrepreneur in residence with ECR will lead to developing their network and skills, exploring and testing their business idea, and obtaining the backing for a market-ready or trading business. This will be measured through engagement with the entrepreneur in residence (>50% in first year) and mock-business plan creations.
• Work to increase engagement in upcoming CEDARs	• Increase engagement rate to >65%