

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

Award Date: 27th January 2012; Review Date: 7th September 2018

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 internal assessment of progress against our Concordat implementation strategy is undertaken biannually. Here we report the findings of the six-year internal review, highlight progress against the 2016-19 action plan and provide our strategy for 2018-20.

Outline of the internal review process

The internal review process was overseen by the Research Concordat Working Group (RCWG) comprising: Vice-Principal - Research & Innovation, Deputy Director of Human Resources, Head of the Graduate School, Staff Development Manager, the Researcher Association (RA) President, Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and Principal Investigators (PIs).

The group reviewed progress and achievements against the 2016-19 action plan, and critically evaluated where further work is required. Researchers' views were considered through CROS (Careers in Research On-line Survey) and PIRLS (Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey) results, and feedback from an additional survey carried out in Feb 2018 (referred to as the RA survey). This was implemented because of the low response rate in the CROS (17.5%; 14/80). The data and feedback have informed this report and the formulation of an updated action plan for 2018-20.

Key achievements and reflections on progress

Principle 1: Recruitment and Selection

- Our RA survey indicated that the RVC is appealing as a place to apply to work (82% agreement).
- The recruitment process has been reviewed with a view to minimising bias. Unconscious bias training is now being provided for recruitment managers, including refresher sessions. Many PIs are yet to attend this training so we have work to do before meeting our success measure of having a trained member on each recruitment panel.
- Training in awareness of diversity topics is ongoing. Our range of courses has expanded by 50% (target achieved). New examples include training in mental health, trans-awareness, flexible working and managing diversity.
- Our recruitment statistics do not indicate any significant bias in the recruitment of researchers. Due to low numbers, the statistical analysis are interpreted with caution and we will continue to monitor trends. However, no trends in recruitment according to gender, disability or ethnicity were observed between 2014-17. The effects of continued training and the impact of the Athena Swan Action Plan will be assessed by trend analysis.
- We have continued to select and retain successful researchers. This included the creation of posts for three researchers on fixed term contracts at the RVC and recruitment to four internally funded fellowships for ECRs; one appointment was from RVC contract research staff. In addition, two researchers on fixed term contracts have been provided with permanent posts at the end of their fellowships. These budget decisions are made for the purposes of succession planning and capacity building within our research strategy.

An area for improvement is our induction process. Our last report showed a significant improvement in the perceived usefulness of College induction from 40% to 80% but, disappointingly, this reduced again to 44% in the last CROS.

Principle 2: Recognition and Value

- To recognise researcher ability in teaching and supervision, a 'Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' course has been developed with input from the RA. The course can be used as evidence in applications for Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy membership. So far, 15 contract researchers have completed or are currently enrolled on this course, and 8 more have completed the more in depth PgCert in Education. In the RA survey, 70% were positive about the support and training for excellence in teaching. This training provides evidence of teaching credentials for future employers as well as preparing researchers for teaching opportunities at the RVC. Further recognition of researcher 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. In the 2017-18 academic year, 10 researchers on a fixed term contract were named as supervisors of PhD students; we will continue to monitor these data.
- Contract researchers also contribute significantly to research grant applications, recognition of which should result in them being named as applicants. Information on how researchers on fixed terms contracts can achieve this has been posted on the RA website. In 2017, 16 contract researchers and 2 PhD students were either PI or co-I on grants (Research Office data). Four of these applications were for external independent research fellowships.
- Representation of contract researchers on College committees has expanded. Researchers are now represented in

six committees. The most recent is the staff engagement survey working group. This has led to increased % of CROS respondents agreeing they have opportunities to participate in decision making (55% in 2015, 64% in 2017). Despite these positive measures to support contract researchers and value their contribution, 41% of respondents to the RA survey felt undervalued by the College. Their suggestions for improvement were diverse although most are being addressed in our action plan. One area that emerged was a desire for greater understanding of researcher-specific issues within professional support departments and the need for better cross-linking between such departments to provide appropriate support for specific issues.

Principle 3: Equipping and supporting researchers (Support and Career Development)

- The annual Research Highlights event 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 enhanced year on year.
- Human Resources (HR) and the RA have enthusiastically collaborated over the past 2 years to refresh training and development provision for contract researchers in face of declining participation. A conference-style event 'shaping successful scientists' was piloted, consisting of workshops, a careers marketplace and networking. It was designed around researchers' requests (e.g. becoming REF returnable, gaining a fellowship), and the desire to raise awareness of the rich variety of careers opportunities that researcher training leads to. There were 53 delegates and 28 speakers/marketplace contributors, 50% of which were external to academia. Both contributors and delegates commented on the energised atmosphere. Other highlights were a careers round table and an event on reaching beyond academia, examining employability skills, knowledge transfer, and engaging non-academic partners.
- In our PIRLS, Principal Investigators rated their confidence as high with respect to various areas of research team leadership (e.g. 89% rating themselves a 3 or 4 on a scale of 1 to 4 in leading your 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'.

The previous section on recognition and support outlined support for researchers in making funding applications. This is also supported by the RA survey in which 44% said they were named co-investigator - we consider this an area of strength. However, the RA survey perception was that support could be stronger so this is still an area for our attention.

Principle 4: Recognising and promoting personal and career development (Support and Career Development)

- Communication about career and development opportunities with our researcher community has been enhanced by the Researcher Association publicising information on development opportunities via an intranet site, email lists and a recently set up twitter account. We will continue to work on this.
- Developing an alumnus network was a goal of our last plan and we have made a start on this with 12 alumni enthusiastically willing to engage. The next step is to encourage its use by researchers in their career planning.

An area we have been working on to improve is engagement in appraisal. The appraisal system was simplified in 2016-17 and emphasised development and career aspirations; a change that we expected to be positive for contract researchers and would address the need for a development record (in our action plan). However, researcher completion of appraisals decreased from 55% to 38%. The RA survey indicated that of those who did not have an appraisal, most indicated a lack of PI support. Following feedback from the RCWG several changes were recently made which we expect will help PIs to feel the process has more value for contract researchers. This is an area of urgent attention.

Principle 5: Researcher responsibilities

- The RA structure has been formalised and now has a constitution that enhances succession planning. The recent RA survey shows that 97% of contract researchers are aware of this structure. There is a new post whose holder is responsible for communications and suitable people have come forward as previous leads moved on.
- The RA has increased in activity and has strong committed leadership, organising the Research Highlights event annually (since 2015), as well as researcher development events with the HR staff development team (smaller training sessions and 2 major dedicated events in 2017 and 2018). There are also dedicated socials (spring and winter) to increase networking and promote RA achievements.
- The RA survey showed that 71% of the researchers have a career plan (up from 52%; 2015 CROS) and, of those with a plan, 66% want to remain in Academia (Research, Teaching and Support). The National CROS identified an unrealistic expectation of researchers that they will pursue an academic career (80%) and our 2015 CROS indicated that 86% aspired to remain in academia. Our recent results indicate that a higher proportion of our researchers have aims beyond academia, which suggests that our revised careers awareness provision has been beneficial.

Principle 6: Equality and diversity

- RVC has now achieved the Athena Swan Bronze award. Researchers are represented on the College Equality and Diversity committee and are actively involved with HR in the implementation of actions. Our departments are developing local action plans to address issues highlighted from across the College and from departmental statistics.

- Family leave policies are more widely publicised and training in assessing flexible working requests is part of our Management Development Programme. The impact of this on applications will be monitored, recognising that many flexible working arrangements are informal. Family leave has been taken by 7 contract researchers since Jan 2017.
- Contract researchers are entitled to the same working conditions and benefits that the College provides to all its employees regardless of funders' policies. This has been publicised to PIs and contract researchers, as has the availability of internal funding allocated to facilitate family leave for researchers.

An area for attention identified by the RA committee is to highlight the various sources of support for their wellbeing.

Principle 7: Implementation and review

- The additional 2018 RA survey was designed and led by the RA with the support of the RCWG and is a clear demonstration of the level of commitment to enhance our action plan. The survey was requested because RCWG were not satisfied with the low participation rate (17.5%) in the CROS. The RA survey led to an encouraging increase in participation (44%), providing valuable data on which to move forward.
- The RCWG continues to meet formally biannually to review progress against the Action plan and informally to keep momentum going. We have a history of working collaboratively and productively and a strong collective commitment to continue to enhance the researcher experience at the RVC.

Enhancing the response rates for future CROS will be a clear area for attention.

Strategy for the next two years:

- Sustain our attention to recruitment and induction. This includes monitoring for bias in the recruitment process, and continued training in recruitment, unconscious bias and equality and diversity awareness. We will enhance our induction processes by holding bi-monthly 'meet the RA and College Research leads' sessions and by changing our induction with the line manager to an on-line form.
- Work to ensure our researchers feel better recognised and valued by our professional support teams, and to promote the support and services available to researchers. Actions include publicising contract researcher champions; ensuring support and advice is integrated between in HR and the Research Office. A comprehensive list of FAQs will be developed with clear signposting as to where to go to for appropriate advice.
- Enhance the awareness of support for researchers writing funding applications. Actions include promoting a workshop specifically for contract researchers interested in writing fellowships.
- Enhance support for PIs in management skills. We will revisit our support to PIs to ensure themes coming through from Researcher surveys are better highlighted and review our development offering to them.
- Continue to improve career development communication and to build our alumnus network. Trial a quarterly newsletter to reach contract researchers to cover career development and funding opportunities, points of contact within HR, Research Office and RA. We are implementing a new process for capturing next destinations of alumni.
- 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 on-line to enable monitoring, and linking to the on-line appraisal process; creation of a guidance document for PIs and researchers covering induction, probation, appraisal and end of contract feedback.
- Continue working on our Athena Swan actions across the College. The RA will set up a series of female and BAME STEM talks in liaison with research seminar organisers, to enhance confidence and awareness of role models.
- Ensure researchers are aware of support for their welfare by publicising the availability of departmental and support staff leads, the employee assistance programme, the employee relations lead, dignity at work advisors, and the RA.
- Work to increase engagement in future CROS and PIRLS, learning from how the RA survey was promoted.

Measures of Success:

- A trained panel member on each recruitment board and 70% of recruitment panels to be trained by July 2019
- 60% positive response regarding College induction in future surveys (CROS / RA survey)
- 65% of survey respondents feel valued by the RVC (CROS/RA survey)
- >50% of survey respondents feel supported in grant writing (CROS/RA survey)
- **80% of PIs who participate in development interventions would recommend it to colleagues**
- Increasing engagement with the RA newsletter - more than 50% of survey respondents finding the newsletter useful
- The alumnus network will grow to 25 researchers by 2020 and be seen as a useful resource by contract researchers.
- Appraisal rates improve; 2017-18 target 60% and sustained or improved in future years.
- Completion rates of on-line induction/probation forms 75% by Summer 2020.
- Monitoring of Athena Swan action plan and achievement of the Silver award by 2021.
- 65% of respondents to the CROS/RA survey are aware of support for their welfare (an additional question)
- Gaining a >40% response rate in our next CROS.