European Commission HR Excellence in Research Award: 6-year internal review

Context
The University gained the European Commission's HR Excellence in Research Award in May 2012. Following the 4-year external review, retention of the award was confirmed to the University in August 2017. The present report summarises the 6-year internal review of the action plan, which was submitted in July 2017 as part of the revised documentation for the 4-year external review, together with an outlook over the action plan for the coming two years.

Internal review
The review process was coordinated by the Head of Research Support Services, who is the contact point for the award at the University. The review report and action plan were approved by the University Research and Enterprise Committee on 22nd May 2019. The Committee was named as the monitoring body for the implementation of the action plan back in 2012 and has retained this function ever since. Representatives from the researcher staff group were appointed to the Committee in order to give that staff group a voice in the monitoring and review process. At present, the Committee includes 4 researcher representatives from different disciplines.

The review and the action plan cross-reference work from other initiatives within the University. This is seen as vital to anchor the implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers within the institution given the comparatively small size of the researcher community. Around 5% of staff are research-only staff covered by the Concordat and most of them stay less than 5 years at the University, which makes it difficult to set-up and maintain a body like a researcher forum. Review and action plan also draw on the City Level Staff Survey Action Plan 2017, the ATHENA Swan Action Plan, the Vision and Strategy 2026 Implementation Plan and Research and Enterprise Strategy Implementation Action Plan. Those initiatives comprise a much wider remit than support for the career development of researchers. The review and action plan for the HR Excellence in Research Award act as a mapping exercise to draw a coherent picture of the activity across the institution. The voice of researchers also gets heard through some of those initiatives, most notably through the annual staff survey, which captures researchers as a distinct group, but also trade union representation in initiatives led by Human Resources (HR).

Overview of progress

Actions on Concordat Principle 1 & 2
The key achievement was the review of the use of temporary contracts for the appointment of researchers (Action 12). This action was not originally in the action plan. The majority of researcher appointments are made on externally funded research projects. As part of the project set-up, guidance is issued to Principal Investigators, which directs appointments through the standard Human Resources process (see also Action 2). Less obvious was the use of smaller often internal funds to recruit temporary staff for conducting research work. Researchers and trade union representatives raised the issue with Human Resources. Human Resources conducted a review and issued clear guidance across the University to stop this practice as it contravened University policy. The discussions around the problem brought the distinction between research work, as intellectual contribution, and administrative assistance of research to the attention of Research Support Services staff, who in costing small grant applications may inadvertently set a future researcher appointment on the wrong
recruitment path. The continuing exercise of enhancing guidance to Principal Investigators around HR matters will encompass further dissemination of the newly introduced guidance.

Action on improving Principal Investigator knowledge of HR guidance has continued (Action 1 and 2). The first approach of using briefing sessions proved less successful. Engagement of attendees was strong, but attendance overall was low. Instead of relying on briefing sessions, dissemination of guidance was rolled into the process of setting up projects, when most of the recruitment of researchers takes place and Principal Investigators are most engaged with line management matters. The HR team in the School of Mathematics, Computing Services and Engineering, which has the biggest community of research-only staff, has also issued a comprehensive guidance on HR matters to engage better with staff. It is recognised that the area of support for and dissemination of guidance to Principal Investigators is an issue that needs a variety of approaches and that one-off sessions could only be part of the solution.

**Actions on Concordat Principle 3, 4 & 5**

The Research & Enterprise Development Programme (see Action 3 and 4) has continued to grow in strength. A full programme was run in the past two years with around 15-20 sessions. The programme is focussed on topics very specific to the research and enterprise agenda as it is seen as an enabler in the implementation of the Research and Enterprise Strategy Implementation Action Plan. The programme is currently delivered through contact sessions. Evaluation of attendance has shown that hands-on grant writing sessions, impact workshops and funder presentations are of most interest to researchers and academics alike with consistently positive reviews and attendance levels matching the expected measure of success. Other sessions are less well attended and future work on the programme will look at complementing the current programme with online resources as a more effective way to deliver information. We did not continue with the Researcher Forum in the way envisaged two years ago. While the first one was well attended, the percentage of researcher staff among attendees was low. Other more general events are held, such as an event ‘Women in Research’ or a GCRF research showcase event.

The Research & Enterprise Development Programme is managed by the Research and Enterprise Directorate. The Directorate works with Associate Deans in the School to capture the training needs of the academic and researcher community. The Research & Enterprise Development Programme is linked into the Organisational Development Policy. Over the past two years Organisational Development has created the brand Develop@City supporting development in a broad range of areas covering wider generic skills development for all staff including researchers such leadership and management, use of social media and presentation skills. Organisational Development pursue work on the area of appraisal experience (Action 6). A workshop in the 2017-18 Research & Enterprise Development Programme on career development was attended by early career researchers as well as staff from the University’s careers service and academic staff developing researchers with a good turnout and generally positive feedback. Some of the outcome of the workshop touched on appraisal and was shared with members from Organisational Development. It aligned well with feedback from a separate survey among academic staff undertaken by Organisational Development in 2017 and endorsed the general course of action taken in relation to the improvement of appraisal experience and some of the skills training provided by Organisational Development.

As staff members, researchers also benefit from staff discounts to the University’s Short Courses programme (https://www.city.ac.uk/study/courses/short-courses) with courses in business & management, computing, modern languages, law and creative writing.

Diversity and Equality issues are now covered through the ATHENA Swan Action Plan. The Research and Enterprise Director reports to the ATHENA Swan Implementation Group on research related actions. Attendance figures show that the Research & Enterprise Development Programme is well
received by female researchers. On average, about 60% of staff on training sessions are female. One of the upcoming events is devoted to the topic of ‘Women in research’.
Focus for the next two years and measures of success

Work on improving the appraisal experience and development of researcher role profiles will continue. These are more complex tasks and it is difficult to press them into a narrow timeframe. The pending publication of a revised version of the Concordat may also provide further stimulus and direction for these actions.

Delivery of the Research and Enterprise Development Programme will continue. As indicated above, delivery will include action to enhance the web presence and making use of the web portal to create more online material to reach more of the intended audience in different ways. This will also incorporate new guidance as the need arises, for example in relation to researcher recruitment. Creating material demands extra effort to the normal workload. Past experience has shown that this important task is easily neglected. For this reason, the Action Plan was not overloaded with a multitude of small actions. It was felt important to ensure that this task does not get pushed back further. Success will be measured in the availability of material and, in due course, collating and evaluating feedback on the material.

Another important point will be a review of the way the Action Plan is monitored. This follows from the experience of the internal review. In the current set-up, the Research and Enterprise Committee monitors progress. For that reason, researcher staff were appointed to the Committee. However, the remit of the HR Excellence in Research award is HR excellence, not research excellence, which does not align that well with the remit of the Research & Enterprise Committee. While the Research & Enterprise Committee has researcher staff representation it does not have HR representation. Within the University, observation of the Concordat is in the remit of the HR department. The Research & Enterprise Committee is also going through a phase of change. It seems to be the right moment in time to pose that question.

The current Action Plan does not list a separate action in relation to the pending publication of a revised Concordat. As the publication is not yet out it is difficult to be precise on actions. The need to review the Action Plan in light of a revised Concordat is implied.