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 view of research staff was weaved into the review process through discussion with the research staff representatives on the University Research and Enterprise Committee. 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. The number of research staff representatives was increased in an earlier action plan period to ensure more diversity in the views expressed. At present, the Committee includes 4 researcher representatives from different disciplines. The current representatives belong to a small group of researchers with long-standing ties to the institution. This benefits the review process as the representatives have a broader view of City as a whole and a deeper understanding of past efforts and failings.

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 annual staff survey captures research staff as a distinct voice. Its use for the internal review is limited as results are not consistently reported by staff group, even though the engagement score of research staff is above the institutional average and has been so for many years running. The survey questions are standardised to allow year-on-year tracking. However, discussion with experienced research staff has shown to be more instructive for the review as the survey is based on general statements. Unless these statements are broken down into follow-up points in discussion with staff, the information from the staff survey results lacks some depth and is not very informative on actions to take.

The review report and action plan were approved by the University Research and Enterprise Committee on 22nd May 2019. The revised version will be shared retrospectively as there is no committee meeting before the deadline for submitting the revised version.
Overview of progress

Actions on Concordat Principle 1 & 2
The key, but admittedly unplanned, 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 directly. 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 future researcher appointments on the wrong recruitment path. This new HR guidance caused a lot of controversy within the institution. Having been in operation for half a year, the issue needs more guidance and further discussion between the Research & Enterprise Directorate and the HR Directorate about short-term research work, which will be picked up in new action points (Action 13 and 14, see next section).

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 with good discussions. But attendance overall was low and below the attendance we had hoped for. This is a mixed result in terms of success. 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. This new process is now in operation. 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. There are some outstanding issues in Action 2 which will be completed in the coming 4 months. This has been noted on the Action Plan.

Little progress has been achieved in defining generic researcher role profiles (Action 7). Only a sub-task of updating guidance for the grant applications process has been completed. Lack of progress on the major task is disappointing and has been picked up by researchers in the review. The lack of such profiles limits the usefulness of the revised promotions policy which allows Senior Research Fellows to apply for promotion to Reader. However, without role profiles researchers have found it difficult to make a case for promotion. While moving at a slow pace this action point is seen as very important by researchers and will be continued in the next action plan period.

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 advertised through an online website accessible to all research staff. 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. From previous experience, we regard an attendance around 25-40 people as success. The grant writing workshops were attended by 30 people on average. Funder visits were attended on average by around 50 people. The events were popular with research staff. About 25% of attendees in the most popular programme were research staff. For comparison, only about 5% of staff at City are research staff.

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 and was praised in feedback as a good event, the percentage of researcher staff among attendees was well below the percentage of research staff attending our most popular events. This was not seen as a success.

The above-mentioned Researcher Forum did deliver some input to discussions with Organisational Development on the appraisal process. As a result, the original action point (see Action 6) on the appraisal form and guidance notes was refocussed to be more about supporting materials for appraiser and appraisees to understand the core skills referenced in the guidance and help with a better approach to the process. Organisational Development has increased its provision of online training material accessible to all staff in support for a better appraisal experience and team development. The material is mainly audio-visual. One set of clips, for example, expands on the meaning of the core skills which are mentioned on the appraisal form and should be part of the appraisal discussion. Basic workshops to prepare directly for the appraisal are now themed for different staff groups in line with differences in the appraisal process and expectations by different staff groups. Action 6 is completed through the delivery of more training material.

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. A report was delivered to the ATHENA Swan Implementation Group (Action 5).

Focus for the next two years and measures of success

Remaining work on Action 2 will be finished by January 2020. The refreshed material will be used in a staff development event to be held in October. The event will centre on researcher development and delivered by an experienced academic. The original briefing session will be a basic procedural framework for a wider discussion with examples of practice. The updated presentation on procedures will be made available and integrated into existing information distributed to Principal Investigators at set up of a new project with staff resource. The upcoming event provides a testing ground for a new format to engage staff on researcher development by moving away from basic procedural facts delivered by professional staff to a talk among peers. Success for Action 2 is delivery and
dissemination of the materials. Thinking further ahead, we will evaluate the new event by looking at attendance and feedback to see whether it is worth repeating.

Delivery of the Research and Enterprise Development Programme will continue. In the next action period, we will re-run a series of events focussed on early-stage researchers coinciding with a new intake of Marie-Curie ESR fellows starting with January 2020 (Action 16). The events will be open to all researchers. As these events or similar events have been run before, we will be interested in comparing the feedback. Success is not just delivery of the events but more so feedback confirming that the quality of the events has been judged as good or very good by the majority of attendants.

The most important, yet also most challenging task, will be continuing the development of generic researcher role profiles (Action 7a) as these profiles would support other pieces of guidance and procedure. Besides the mentioned promotion policy, another good example is recruitment and the preparation of job descriptions which would be much more efficient if based on existing grade profiles. True success would be the implementation of role profiles. The task has stalled for many years, but the revised Concordat is a good moment in time to get the attention of a stretched Human Resources department. As a start, it is suggested by the Deputy Director of Humans Resources to establish a working group (Action 15) with participation from the Research & Enterprise Directorate to review the revised Concordat in the light of existing institutional practice. This working group would be ideally positioned to look at researcher profiles. Success would be to establish the working group in the coming months and have an active work plan for the next year.

Another piece of work to align with this working group is a review of the treatment of short-term research work (Action 13 and 14). The introduction of revised HR guidance on the hire of researchers, or rather an enforcement of normal HR procedures, has highlighted a lack of understanding and definition of what constitutes research work as well as the need to consider how to tackle short-term work. Success would be to have better guidelines to accompany the process for costing and recruiting researchers. Feedback from staff directly involved in such processes, especially staff who have frequent hands-on experience of recruiting staff, on the clarity of the procedure would be an important part element in working towards success implementation.

A last point of action is a review of the monitoring mechanism of the present action plan (Action 9). Reports are sent to the Research & Enterprise Committee. Over the years, the agenda of that Committee has become crowded and it is time for a rethink. The Committee has representation from research staff but not HR which brought out questions in the internal review to the effectiveness of the monitoring and reporting. There is not an immediate link to another committee with enough strategic importance and a less crowded agenda within the organisational structure. One of the aims of the task is to utilise research staff representation better. Success would be to come up with better monitoring mechanisms suited to the size of the organisation and researcher community. This action point is aligned with work done within the Research & Enterprise Directorate to review the working of committees serviced by the Directorate to which the Research & Enterprise Committee belongs.

In summary, action in the coming two years will concentrate on essential pieces of guidance and policy with the aim to complete these policies successfully.