

Report for the HR Excellence in Research Award panel September 2016

Purpose

This report summarises the ongoing activity, strategy and evaluation of our continuous efforts to offer an inclusive, supportive and nurturing environment for research staff. This summary report is constructed based on a detailed 2014-2016 Action Plan Review and new 2016-2018 Action Plan.

Background

The University of Sheffield (TUoS) achieved the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2012 and has since worked creatively and passionately to improve the research environment. Areas of focus for the HR Excellence in Research Award period up to 2016 were influenced by the University's Strategic Plan and the associated 'Talent First' HR Strategy in parallel to external action plans including Athena SWAN.

The University's strategic vision from 2016, 'Our University, Our Future, Our plan', specifies five key themes, one of those focusing on 'our research and its impact'. Within this, early career researchers feature explicitly, demonstrating the value the institution places on their contribution.

Context and position

As of August 2016, TUoS has 1351 staff employed on 'research only' contracts:

Faculty of Engineering – 365

Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry & Health – 364

Faculty of Science – 325

Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre – 139

Faculty of Social Sciences – 126

Faculty of Arts & Humanities – 32

Strategically, ensuring the environment for research staff is inclusive, supportive and nurturing comes under the purview of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research & Innovation (PVCR&I) through Research and Innovation Committee (RIC) and supported by the five Faculty Directors of Research & Innovation (FDR&I).

Operationally, ensuring the environment for research staff is inclusive, supportive and nurturing is a collective responsibility influenced by the researchers themselves, Departmental structures, Faculty committees and Professional Services partners.

The Research Staff Development Committee (RSDC), which reports to RIC has ultimate responsibility for the HR Excellence process and for ensuring continuous improvement in achieving the values of the UK 'Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers' and therefore the principles of 'The European Charter for Researchers' and 'The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers'.

How the internal evaluation was undertaken

Evaluation of The University of Sheffield's (TUoS) progress against its HR Excellence in Research Award action plan has been continuous over the last two years, through ongoing communication with research staff fora, colleagues supporting the plan and meetings of the RSDC.

The RSDC comprises of academics from all faculties, representatives from Human Resources (HR) and Research & Innovation Services (R&IS) and now two research staff representatives. The committee's role is to, "take a strategic perspective on how best to enhance The University of Sheffield's development provision and research environment for Research Staff."

Since reviewing the HR Excellence in Research Award in September 2014, 6 formal committee meetings have taken place (May 2016 / February 2016 / September 2015 / June 2015 / February 2015 / October 2014). In that time, the committee has developed to include an additional research staff representative and has successfully recruited to the position of Chair through open recruitment. The committee has been repositioned to report direct to RIC, utilising opportunities to consult with leads for R&I at their monthly breakfast meetings. This has embedded cross-university senior level investment in change.

The primary formal source of data underpinning this review is the conversational tour of departments that took place in 2014-2015. This directly canvassed the voices of 129 researchers and supporters of research who in turn had consulted in their departments before the conversation. The university-wide staff survey data has also been fed in as well as consultation findings for the Athena SWAN action plan.

Informally, Early Career Researcher (ECRs) (encompassing the target contracted researchers as well as PGRs, those on open ended contracts and some early academics) are engaged in change through a variety of mechanisms, key ones being the existence of researcher steering groups embedded in governance within the faculties (ECR Associations, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry & Health Early Career Group, Faculty of Science Researcher Development Group). Their collective voice is used to actively shape the Think Ahead framework for professional development as well as to contribute to improvements for ECRs more widely across the institution. The Researcher Professional Development team, who lead the Think Ahead framework routinely seek the feedback of ECRs through methods including formal evaluation tools, the team email account and casual conversations.

Key achievements

Over the last four years there have been significant cultural shifts within the institution regarding the environment for researchers. Where previously there were pockets of innovation, most commonly driven by the Researcher Professional Development team, now approaches are joined up across the institution and are increasingly contributed to by a broad spread of Academic and Professional Services colleagues. Additionally, the Concordat implementation has helped give weight to business cases to improve university-wide systems e.g. the redeployment process and conversely, university-wide systems e.g. SRDS appraisal have been fully adopted and improved for this community.

(For the full 2014-2016 action plan review see: <http://tinyurl.com/hnjmign>)

Highlights (related Concordat Principle number in brackets)

Conversational tour – Between December 2014 and May 2015, 26 conversations took place across the university, involving 129 individuals with from across all departments. A summary was produced for each meeting and all of these were used to create five Faculty level reports to enable a Faculty-tailored response to the ideas shared. In November 2015 a university-level set of recommendations of core practice aligned to the Concordat was agreed by the PVC R&I & FDR&Is. This was probably one of the most significant pieces of work undertaken to canvass researcher voice, further raise awareness of the Concordat, ensure Senior level buy in to culture change and to create a baseline for good practice. (7.)

Thesis mentor support – Formally launched in July 2014, the thesis mentoring programme has supported 188 'stuck' thesis writers and developed more than 200 members of research staff (the mentors) in the skills of mentoring. (4.)

Redeployment process – After consultation with a variety of redeployees (of which research staff are the greatest number due to contract variation) a team in HR enabled the development of the system to enable candidate-led vacancy selection. This was significant as it improved research staff's chance of finding an appropriate job and recruiters an improved likelihood of recruiting talent from a broad pool. (1. 2.)

Thirty30 celebration of staff development – In November 2015, the University held a month long celebration of learning and development. Part of the drive was to establish a University-wide philosophy around CPD (three big ideas were identified; development is everywhere, my development is my responsibility and thinking is the beginning), to highlight the vast array of development available and to engage all staff in learning conversations. (3.)

Kroto Research Inspiration – This new strand of activity conceived by Professor Sir Harry Kroto and delivered by a pan-university working group, celebrates the creative communication of research, especially by our doctoral researchers and research staff. In 2015-2016, six formal opportunities for creative communication were offered and the events and competitions attracted entries or input from a wide range of doctoral researchers and research staff, culminating in a researcher showcase, "*it's a great event to promote the wider communication of your important research to the world in honour of an inspirational scientist and communicator. Get involved and get inspired.*" (2. 3.)

vis ta seminar series – Over the last two years, the seminar series which invites alumni and friends with a PhD to talk about their career experiences to our researchers has been expanded. We feel strongly that is important to raise awareness of the wonderful breadth of careers available beyond academia and so delivered 26 sessions over the last two years, involving 75 speakers, with an average attendance of 40 researchers per session (reaching c800 people allowing for multiple attendances). (3. 4. 5.)

SRDS form – The tailored SRDS form piloted in 2014 was made available across the institution and recommended as the form for all research staff. It focuses the appraisal discussion to encompass research, teaching, supervision, administration and careers/CPD. In 2015, no departments were classed as 'action required' in terms of staff participation. (4.)

Athena SWAN silver – The University exceeded its target of retaining its Bronze award by successfully obtaining Silver status in 2015. (6.)

Additionally, the University has achieved key strategic implementation in areas not directly noted within the 2014-2016 action plan but nevertheless critical to the environment for research:

- Recruitment of a research data management professional and the roll out of policies and learning and development resources to ensure compliance with the open access agenda
- Launch of an internal recognition scheme, endorsed by the Higher Education Academy, to enable researchers and academics to be recognised as teaching Fellows of the HEA
- The University's ethical approval of research process has been made online, vastly improving the speed and accuracy with which research ethics applications are assessed
- A new Learning & Teaching strategy
- A new 'Our University' strategy

Future focus

We commit to continuing to build on the excellent progress made over the last four years with focus in the following four key areas aligned to the strategic priorities of the University - to 'promote new initiatives for early career researchers' whilst recognising the 'challenge of resources' and the 'power of people' (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ourplan):

- *The employment journey*

Success measures

1. *Standard use of recruitment checklists across all faculties*
2. *Increase in female applicants to research roles*
3. *Raised awareness of Unconscious Bias across faculties and its impact*
4. *A process in place for ongoing access to email and Library resources for departing researchers*

- *Development & well-being*

Success measures

1. *A clear and central strand of learning and development resources for PIs/Supervisors*
2. *A report on the demographics of the researcher community with a focus on length of service to ensure CPD opportunities are fit for purpose*
3. *A pan-university #researchwell campaign to support well-being and positive mental health in research*
4. *A university-wide review of the development culture and access to development opportunities and recommendations for improvements where the researcher voice can be clearly identified*

- *Researcher voice*

Success measures

1. *The existence of an academic champion for researchers in every STEMM department*
2. *Increase in the research staff representation on the RSDC from two to five members*
3. *The existence of a university-wide research staff association*
4. *The existence of centrally resourced funds for groups of researchers to lead on their own networking and development activity*

- *Common & equitable practices*

Success measures

1. *An audit of all Departments in the institution to measure their progress in implementing the Concordat aligned recommendations of good practice launched in 2015.*
([Recommendations document](#))

Exchanges with other organisations

University of Sheffield staff will participate in National fora for practice sharing and policy making relating to Researchers to gain additional ideas for progression and to make a contribution to wider improvements in the sector.