HR Excellence in Research Award: Cardiff University’s ten-year review

Cardiff University Researcher Pathways Working Group
(September 2020)
1 Internal Evaluation

The evaluation of progress was conducted by our Researcher Pathways Working Group (RPWG), a University group set up by our PVC for Research, Innovation and Enterprise (PVC-R) and chaired by our Dean for Research Environment and Culture. Its membership encompasses the co-chairs of the Cardiff University Research Staff Association (CURSA), a CURSA representative from each of our three Colleges, a senior researcher representative for each College, Professional Service representatives from Organisational and Staff Development, Human Resources, Research and Innovation Services and the three Colleges. The Group has monitored progress against the action plan since its establishment in July 2019. The formal two-year review was informed by data from the Careers in Research Online Survey (2019) (29% response rate); the Cardiff University Staff Survey (2019), filtered for data pertaining to research staff (46% researcher participation rate); and from a CURSA Research Staff Experience Survey (2020) (12% response rate). Cross-reference has been made to the following University strategic initiatives: The Strategic Equality Plan, 2020-2024, Staff Well-being Strategy and Mentally Healthy University Strategy (2020), REF Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group and institutional COVID-19 guidelines on working practices and staff support.

2 Key Achievements and Progress

Leadership: The University created a new senior leadership position in May 2019: Dean for Research Culture and Environment. The remit of this role is to support the PVC-R to develop a more inclusive, collaborative, and creative research environment. The role was created with three priority areas, one of which was to implement and extend University action plans to improve the research environment for staff on research-only contracts and early career researchers on the teaching and research pathway. This has led to partnership working with CURSA to understand the lived experience of researchers at Cardiff (see the CURSA Research Staff Experience Survey, undertaken in 2020 for the first time); training on responsible research assessment with researcher colleagues and advocacy for researcher perspectives and experiences with institutional senior research leaders. The Dean is also working in partnership with the Wellcome Trust (WT) around their work on ‘reimagining research cultures’ following the January 2020 WT survey and report. Cardiff hosted the WT’s first regional e-townhall event on 18 September 2020 on research cultures. The findings from this event and ongoing partnership will inform a scoping of research culture across the University, 2020-21, aligned to developing interventions to address identified barriers to an inclusive research culture.

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: The working lives of our researchers have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. One impact has been to delay our signing up to the revised Concordat, agreed by the University Executive Board in February 2020. This will now take place in November 2020. The pandemic has called for major adjustments to the way we support all staff and for consideration of the differential impact on staff groups, including staff involved in research. The PVC-R wrote to research-only staff with information on support available and advice on research funding. We have endeavoured to provide online development for research staff since the outset of the crisis. We focussed initially on well-being support but, by July 2020, our online provision included skills development sessions. We have also continued to offer careers counselling, via video conferencing. We anticipate extensive use of digital environments to build online researcher communities; combat researcher isolation; and ensure continuity of support.

Progress against the Action Plan. The submitted action plan contains full details of our progress in the period under review. In the following sections, we give indicative examples:
A. RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION: The University signed up to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment in November 2019 and appointed a WT funded Responsible Research Assessment Officer. We are committed to research assessment based on quality and not proxy indicators of value, such as outlet. We have a strategic action plan for responsible research culture change centred on senior leadership and advocacy; training and awareness raising; review of recruitment and selection policy and practices; more inclusive probation and PDR documentation and guidance; responsible use of database and informatics and improved monitoring and reporting including identifying poor practice and non-compliance. A suite of interview question, underpinned by the principles of responsible research assessment, is now in circulation with Cardiff academic recruiters. This was successfully piloted with a research leave scheme (2019-21) which recruited early career academics to support current colleagues undertaking University-funded research leave (Disglair scheme). We will continue to promote fair, equitable and transparent recruitment and selection processes and experience for researchers.

B. RECOGNITION OF THE VALUE OF RESEARCHERS: In 2018/19, the University opened its promotions scheme for research-only staff for the first time. The scheme supports promotion from Grade 7 Research Fellow to Grade 8 Senior Research Fellow and beyond. In the first year, 5% of the eligible pool made applications for promotion (with a 100% success rate). This rate has increased to 9% in its second year (outcomes due in October 2020). A session on ‘reward and recognition: grading review and academic promotion’, first held at the CURSA annual symposium in 2018, has been developed into a stand-alone session offered through the Cardiff Researcher Programme.

In 2019, a new award was introduced to our annual staff ‘Celebrating Excellence’ awards scheme ‘Rising Star – Early Career Academic’. This recognises excellent researchers from both research-only and teaching and research career pathways. Further, one of the three finalists in the ‘Excellence in Leadership’ category 2019 was nominated because of his championing of early career researchers. Both the promotions route and these new awards demonstrate our commitment to recognising and rewarding researchers for their support and achievements. We intend to develop further such recognition schemes and community awards in 2020-22.

C. SUPPORT AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT: 87% of eligible staff on the research-only career pathway completed their Performance Development Review in 2019. A session on ‘Getting the Most from your PDR’, developed for researchers in 2019, is now offered through the Cardiff Researcher Programme, with an online resource ‘PDR for Researchers’ available for all staff. The Researcher Pathways Working Group has fed into the improvements in the PDR process by reviewing and revising the PDR documentation for research staff so that they more clearly reflect the needs of research staff and their line managers.

The Cardiff Researcher Programme has piloted partnership with LinkedIn Learning (May 2019-September 2020) with internally curated collections of modules in key areas for researchers. 138 members of research staff had activated licences by August 2020. We have also piloted a blended learning MOOC on career planning, as well as a peer coaching session, and we developed and ran new sessions on insights into a lecturing career and stress and resilience. 44 researchers completed our new programme for aspiring Principal Investigators, ‘Moving into Research Leadership’. Line manager training is mandatory in two of our three Colleges, and strongly encouraged in the third, with written guides on managing fixed-term contracts to be adopted the University 2020/21.

Over a third of mentees registered on the Academic Staff Mentoring Programme in 2019 were research staff. The CURSA Research Staff Experience Survey 2020 recommends further promotion and development of mentoring programmes. In response to feedback from users, the Academic
Staff mentoring programme will focus on support for research careers; grant and fellowship applications; and preparing for academic promotion. From September 2020, the University is participating in the WT’s pilot ‘Broadening Horizons’ mentoring programme for researchers in the health sciences. This provides mentoring across employment sectors and provides a model for further development at Cardiff.

Co-working with CURSA has been an important dimension of the work of the Researcher Pathways Working Group, listening and responding to researcher views and feedback. In 2019, CURSA reviewed the structure and operation of both the Steering Committee and the wider Association. This led to the quarterly CURSA representative meetings being opened to all research staff; better links between CURSA representatives and research staff members of School-level committees; and the CURSA Committee having two co-chairs to support succession planning and continuity. Throughout the period the visibility of CURSA has been raised through regular email communications; the CURSA Yammer group; and CURSA Symposium, open to all research staff.

D. RESEARCHERS’ RESPONSIBILITIES: All members of academic staff are expected to complete training modules on research integrity and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion every three years. In collaboration with the Doctoral Academy, a new web resource, ‘Career Journeys for Researchers’ will launch in October 2020 and includes resources on exploring career options; developing strengths, skills, and experience; succeeding in academia or beyond.

E. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY: As a University, we are fully committed to increasing inclusion and support for under-represented groups and those with protected characteristics. This is evidenced by our retention of the University’s Athena SWAN Bronze award in 2018, with twelve schools having bronze awards and two silver. Our School of Physics and Astronomy has achieved Juno Champion status. There remain areas for improvement, such as our network of Dignity and Wellbeing champions. Currently, there are only 9 researchers amongst out 84 Well Being Champions.

We are working hard to ensure that researcher voices are heard across University networks, committees, and initiatives and that they have opportunities to develop as strategic leaders. We have research staff representatives on 21 of our 24 School Research Committees and Early Career Researcher representatives in the remaining three. We have no researchers currently on our Gender Equality Steering Committee. Developing further opportunities for strategic leadership for our researchers is a key action for 2020-22.

3 Next Steps

Cardiff University will sign the revised Concordat in November 2020, aligning future reporting requirements of Concordat and HR Excellence in Research awards. We will conduct a gap analysis and publish our Concordat Action Plan (2021-2022) in Autumn 2021. The two-year action plan here is a ‘live’ document, to be updated in September 2021. It is divided into 6 strategic areas.

Success measures will be evaluated against:

1. Greater awareness of the Concordat commitments across the institution
2. Improvement in researcher development opportunities.
3. Greater integration of researchers into the decision-making structures of the University.
4. Greater diversity of researchers, supporting the full range of researcher contributions
5. Generating new ways of working, responding creatively to the contexts of COVID-19.
6. Improved communication and reporting around progress towards a more inclusive and supportive research culture at Cardiff University.