Background

In response to the 2008 Concordat for the Career Development of Researchers, the University commissioned the Research School, (now Research, Scholarship and Quality Office) to undertake a review the University’s implementation of the key principles of the Concordat. This reported to Research Committee (RC) in April and October 2012, and The University’s Concordat Implementation Plan 2012-16 (CIP) was introduced in October 2012. This identifies good practice in provision for the welfare and support of The University’s research staff and doctoral research students as well as actions to address perceived gaps. In recognition of its Implementation Plan, the University was awarded the European Commission’s HR Excellence in Research Award in January 2013.

Concordat Compliance is reviewed regularly by the Concordat Steering Group and is monitored at the highest level within the University. Concordat audit milestones are included within the Research and Scholarship Strategic Priority - a portfolio of the University’s highest priority Research management projects – which is reviewed regularly by the Vice-Chancellor’s Executive. The following report reviews the key achievements and progress against the CIP over the past two years.

Key achievements and progress against the Implementation Plan

In support of Principles 1 and 2, during 2013 a revised Code of Practice for Research was disseminated to the Open University community through relevant committees and faculty meetings. Recruitment guidance and procedures have been revised to ensure full compliance with the QAA Quality Code and the Equality Act 2010.

A consultation on the Academic & Research Promotions process was carried out across the University during 2013 and 2014 with a revised promotions scheme being approved by Senate in October 2014. According to the revised process, there is greater diversity of opportunity for research staff to build a promotion case than under the previous scheme.

During 2014 we began work to develop an Academic Professional Development (APD) Framework for the University. This framework is aligned with sector competency frameworks (VITAE RDF, JISC AURIL BCE, HEA UKPSF). The University's revised promotions criteria and annual appraisal processes for academic and research staff now include the following key domains: Research, Knowledge Exchange, Leadership Development and Learning and Teaching. This introduces new pathways for progression for research staff (Knowledge Exchange and Leadership). Due for release in February 2015, the APD framework will further consolidate our academic professional development landscape and will support research staff to make informed career choices independently and in discussion with line managers.

The University has continued to improve its policies and processes for fixed term contract research staff: we have developed and published detailed guidance on how to seek to redeploy fixed term contract women whose contracts are scheduled to end during their maternity leave; we have rolled out a detailed policy called Agile working which allows all staff, including fixed term research staff, to request flexible working to support their home life balance; our bridging policy has been reconfirmed and made more visible; we have implemented a more rigorous process for assessing whether colleagues on fixed term contracts should have their contracts extended beyond four years or made permanent (which involves VC/University Secretary authorisation); we have reviewed our approach to named researchers on fixed term contracts bidding to external funding bodies. Fixed term contracts can be extended to cover the full period of the project if a bid is successful (where the terms of the external funding body allow this) and it has been agreed that research staff can submit funding applications as principal investigator where funding bodies allow.

We continue to develop our Researcher Career and Research Professional Development Programmes in support of Principles 3, 4, and 5. Programmes are benchmarked annually against the VITAE Researcher Development Framework (RDF). Specialist career development workshops are available for early and mid-career researchers. We have introduced a service offering career development advice to research staff on an individual basis. VITAE’s RDF planner tool is now available to all research staff and PGRs.

We have extended professional development activities in the area of Knowledge Transfer. We introduced an annual commercial challenge enterprise competition and Knowledge Transfer Partnership workshops in 2013, and Entrepreneurial Skills and Commercial Partnership workshops in 2012.

In response to gaps in provision for staff and PGRs (particularly those working part-time and at a distance in our Affiliated Research Centres) we launched in 2013 a dedicated website, the Virtual Research Environment (VRE), to support and promote career development and transferable skills training. The VRE hosts the online courses ‘Professional Skills for Research Leaders’ (introduced in 2013) and ‘Supervising Doctoral Studies’ (introduced in 2014).

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1 RC is responsible to the Senate for strategy, policy and standards relating to research, research degrees and higher doctorates in the University and is chaired by the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research, Scholarship and Quality). Membership is drawn from Faculties, Institutes, Research Centres and Senate. RC also has two research staff representatives elected by and from such staff.

2 Epigeum developed these courses. The University, alongside other HEIs, participated in the Development Groups that invested in and reviewed the courses in development.
To address gaps in teaching experience for our PGRs and postdoctoral researchers we entered a partnership arrangement with ‘The Brilliant Club’ in 2013/14. In collaboration with the Santander Universities Group, an internship programme, an Entrepreneurship Award scheme, Research and Scholarship awards and Mobility awards offer employability and professional development. We also launched an Engaging Research Awards Scheme for Public Engagement this year. Awards were presented in April 2014 in the categories of Research Leader, Early Career Researcher and Postgraduate Research Student.

Progress against Principle 6 includes achievement of an institutional bronze award and four, departmental bronze awards under the Athena SWAN charter⁴ and two further submissions will be put forward in 2015. The Department of Physical Sciences was also awarded Project Juno⁵ Practitioner status.

To monitor progress (Principle 7) we have established the Concordat Steering Group (CSG) that meets three times a year. The Director of The Institute of Educational Technology chairs this group. Its membership includes representatives from Research staff and students, the AUT, faculty leadership and senior managers from the units responsible for delivering the action plan⁵. Key CSG responsibilities include: reviewing progress against the CIP plan; managing the escalation of any non-conformances identified; reviewing the results of the CROS, PIRLS, PRES and internal Research Environment Surveys to consider any implications for the action plan. Concordat activities are reported to the Research Committee annually.

Internal evaluation process

The University has a number of mechanisms that allow researchers’ views to inform internal evaluation of the CIP. Firstly, research staff and doctoral research students are represented on all key University and Faculty committees and working groups concerned with strategy, policy and standards relating to research, research degrees and research career development. Secondly, during 2013/14, representative research and academic staff were invited to participate in a strategic review (Research Roadmap 2020) of all aspects of research activity across the University, including recruitment and selection, equal opportunities and career progression, support services, environment and infrastructure. The review was undertaken to inform The University’s research direction over the next six plus years. Its recommendations have also informed this evaluation. Finally, all members of research staff are invited to respond to the annual Research Environment Survey (RES), and to the biannual CROS survey. The views of principal investigators and supervisors were canvassed through the PIRLS 2013 survey and those of Doctoral Research Students through the PRES 2013 survey. Reports of these surveys were discussed at 2013/14 meetings of the Concordat Steering Group, a Research Scholarship and Quality Unit workshop, Research Degrees Committee, Research Committee and the Research Career Development Advisory Group. The CIP has been revised and updated according to new actions identified in these meetings and workshops. Progress against actions is captured through an Action Tracker. This is updated quarterly with completed and new actions.

Next steps

We have revised and updated our Concordat Implementation Plan as of October 2014. The Concordat Steering Group will continue to be responsible for monitoring progress against the revised plan through to the 2017 external review. Key objectives and activities for the next two-year period are as follows:

Retention and progression of fixed-term contract research staff

We will continue to monitor and make improvements to the management of Fixed Term Contract Researchers as well as monitoring the impact of the revised Academic and Research Staff Promotions criteria. In support of Principle 4, recognising the importance of researchers’ personal and career development and lifelong learning, we have developed a ‘Progressing in Academia’ programme to support staff seeking promotion which will be introduced in spring 2015. In addition to face-to-face events, this programme will provide additional support to staff through mentoring and networking activities. We will continue to work with the Learning and Organisational Development unit in 2015 to improve the central and faculty induction processes for new members of research staff. Using 2013 CROS results as a baseline (e.g. 44% satisfaction with opportunities for progression), we aim to increase in staff satisfaction on measures relating to career progression in CROS 2015 and 2017.

Implementation of the Academic Professional Development Framework (APD) and integration of this within the University’s staff appraisal process begins in January 2015. Integration will be carried out in consultation with key stakeholders, including research staff and their line managers. With Human Resources, we have reviewed the requirement for an institutional Academic Professional Development Policy, and this will be introduced this in February 2015. During 2015-16, regular reports detailing progress against APD key performance indicators, new actions and recommendations will be circulated to relevant university committees and groups including the Research and Scholarship Strategic Priority Management Group, the Concordat Steering Group, Research Committee and the Vice Chancellors Executive. There will be further opportunity to test researchers’ reception of these initiatives through CROS 2015, and to measure any change in perceptions since CROS 2013. Specifically, we aim to increase research staff

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3 http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charter-marks/athena-swan/
5 Head of Human Resources (Central Academic Units); the Director of the Research Scholarship and Quality Unit, two members representing Deans, Directors and Associate Deans/Directors of Research; Chair of the Research Degrees Committee, the Head of Equality and Diversity, and the Academic Coordinator – Research Career Development
satisfaction in the usefulness of the appraisal process (currently 74%, CROS 2013), and to increases the confidence of research managers in their ability to appraise and manage the career development and performance of research staff (baseline 79%, PIRLS 2013).

Research Career Development

In relation to Principles 3, 4 and 5 we have taken institutional membership of Vitae and a subscription for a RDF planner over the next two years. We will continue to promote the RDF planner to research staff, early career researchers, principal investigators and research supervisors and will monitor its uptake on an annual basis. CROS 2013 and the OU 2013 and 2014 Research Environment Surveys show positive movement: in 2014, 58% of research staff surveyed knew of the RDF compared with only 29% in 2013 and, using CROS 2013 as the baseline, we would hope to see an increase in research staff's active engagement with the RDF for personal career planning.

Following consultation members, the constitution and membership of the Research Career Development Advisory Group (RCDAG) has been revised so that this group can provide a forum for and increased representation of the research staff group. As of February 2015, the group will report three-times a year to the Concordat Steering Group and Research Committee. Its main purpose is to coordinate provision of a university wide research career development programme and to provide a forum to enable the views and development needs of research staff to be voiced and disseminated more widely. CROS 2013 indicates that there is a need to encourage greater engagement of research staff with knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer activities (currently 79% of research staff have experience of collaboration with external organisations), and the supervision of undergraduate and postgraduate research projects, (49% of researchers would like to gain experience here).

Graduate School

Following a review of a review of PGR provision in 2012, the University plans to introduce a Graduate School in October 2015. This will provide academic leadership through a Director post, along with academics from each Faculty/Unit, and senior research administrators. The Graduate School will provide strategic leadership for policy and practice; raise the profile and visibility of doctoral provision, both internally and externally; co-ordinate generic PhD skills training and development, including transferable skills and professional development (in partnership with the Academic Professional Development unit); provide centralised and strategic support for developments involving public, private and third sector opportunities for research students; provide the administrative infrastructure for the management of research degrees.

Capacity building and research leadership development

In relation to Principles 5 and 6, the recent surveys and consultations detailed above indicate a need for the University to address research leadership capacity and the representation of academic and research staff under the age of 35. Under the University’s equality objectives6, therefore, projects are in place to address under-representation of female professors, especially at senior bands, and the under-representation of younger staff (currently only 42% of research staff are under the age of 35). The Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research, Scholarship and Quality and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) are sponsoring these objectives respectively. Activities planned and in progress related to the former objective include the development of the Progressing in Academia programme, the launch of a women@OU network, participation in the sector Aurora7 programme and the development of associated mentorship schemes. Currently, 30% of research staff are employed on the higher salary grades. We would hope to encourage research managers to improve this figure. Progress against the equality objectives’ key performance indicators will be reported in December 2015 and again in June 2016.

Following equality analysis on the profile of staff put forward under the Research Excellence Framework, the small numbers of Black staff eligible and the small proportion finally put forward was identified as a significant concern. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research, Scholarship and Quality sponsored qualitative research, which reported findings in January 2014. An action plan was developed and agreed in March 2014. The Equality and Diversity Management Group will coordinate a review of progress against the Black Academic Researchers action plan in March 2015.

A new post has been created in the Equality, Diversity and Information Rights team to drive forward further benchmarking, including participation in two new sector charters on gender in the humanities and on race equality, and additional benchmarking in disability and sexual orientation equality. Further institutional bronze applications will also be made to the Athena SWAN charter.

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7 http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/programmes-events/you/aurora/