

**HR Research Excellence Award**

**Review Report– September 2012**

**Process for internal evaluation**

The implementation of the initial Action Plan for the Award has been monitored through Research Committee. Actions on the plan were tracked, and progress reported, by an Associate Director in Human Resources (ADHR). (See below for progress report). This review of our progress was initiated by the ADHR, who completed a remapping of the key principles and areas of best practice as detailed in the Concordat, with the processes and practices applied at Aston, and this led to the production of a new action plan. This approach was considered to be the preferred option, rather than continuing to update the original Action Plan, as, since the Award was received, there have been improvements, enhancements and changes to a wide range of policies, and major programmes of culture change and leadership and management across the institution. The updated Mapping Document and Action Plan was disseminated for comment and feedback to the Deans, Associate Deans Research, all research staff (currently 125), any other members of Research Committee not included above, all Associate Directors HR and HR Advisors, the Director of HR and the Chief Operating Officer. After incorporating their suggestions and comments, the Mapping Document and Action Plan, and this Review Report, were received by Research Committee for approval. Both documents can be found at [www.aston.ac.uk/staff/staffdev/researcherplus/research-staff/concordat](http://www.aston.ac.uk/staff/staffdev/researcherplus/research-staff/concordat) .

The existing arrangements for tracking the implementation of the Action Plan and for monitoring progress will remain.

**Key achievements and progress against the original Action Plan**

Since October 2009 Aston University has had in place an Action Plan for implementation of the Concordat, and we were in the first tranche of institutions to receive the HR Research Excellence Award in September 2010. The initial Action Plan has been updated overtime, and completed actions noted. Significant and positive progress has been made on those areas where we had identified opportunities for improvement; of the 29 actions detailed in the original plan, 23 have been completed in full of which 16 were completed by November 2010. The remainder have been partially addressed but these will be discussed in more detail below.

Some positive outcomes have been evident for research staff which were not consequent on the implementation of specific actions detailed on the Action Plan. This in itself reflects a very positive consequence of the work done under the Concordat banner; people have a greater understanding of their responsibilities with respect to the management of researchers, and progress and enhancements are made without being driven by ‘top-down’ actions.

**Key achievements:**

* The Athena Swan Bronze Award has been achieved.
* Role profiles for researchers are now used consistently during the recruitment stage, and a specific role profile is now available for Knowledge Transfer Partnerships. Short profiles for grading research posts at the application stage are now in place.
* Performance Development Review paperwork was amended to remove any ambiguity that research staff should have appraisals. The revised Performance Related Pay framework introduced in 2010 applies to all staff. In the latest PRP round, against a benchmark of 10% of staff across the institution receiving PRP, 19% of awards in Engineering & Applied Science, and 15% of awards in Life and Health Sciences, went to research staff (these two Schools employ 77% of all research staff at Aston).
* The HR Advisor Business Partnership model in the Schools has been very effective in providing support to both Principal Investigators and Researchers and, in particular, this has contributed to significant improvement in practice when recruiting research staff, and in managing staff as they come towards the end of their contracts.
* All research staff on fixed-term appointments now attend a contract review meeting a minimum of 3 months before expiry of their contract. This meeting, with an HR Advisor, discusses the potential for redeployment within the University and looks at career skills
* The University’s Careers Service now gives careers advice to research staff, the only staff group to whom this applies.
* The School of Life and Health Sciences provides us with an excellent model of good practice in supporting researchers. A postdoctoral society has been given funds to support their career development, and the School also hosts a “social” event postdoctoral staff where there is more career support input and encouragement to apply for fellowships, ideally to stay with the School. The School is continuing to support an externally funded Dorothy Hodgkin fellow beyond the end of the funding, and also provides continuation funding for two ARCHA research fellows. This sort of direct support is now being taken up in the other Schools, and will be an ongoing area for further development across the University.
* Recruitment & Selection training was made a requirement for Chair’s of all Panels recruiting research staff.
* A cross-institutional mentoring scheme is now in place; research staff re invited to participate.
* After a very low response rate in the sector-wide CROS survey of 2009, in January 2010 the University was able to get a 28% response rate (above the national average for the May 09 survey) for an identical internal survey.

**Other items**

Progress on the consideration of statistical data related to recruitment and retention of research staff, and figures for items such as uptake of work-life balance, has been severely limited by the HR computer systems that have been in place, particularly with regard to historical data. Also, we have relatively low numbers of research staff (currently 125) and consequently there are only small numbers of new staff or leavers, for example, and statistical significance or looking for patterns in the data is simply not possible. This is an area of further work. Having said all of this, the data we do have does not give us any cause for concern with regard to equality of opportunity or fair treatment within a relatively diverse research staff group.

The plans for implementation of a training programme for Principal Investigators have not been implemented, despite Research Committee agreeing that it would be compulsory. This was partly because of the introduction of the HR business partnership model, discussed above, but also because the University invested in major cross-institutional programmes of leadership and management development, involving almost 300 staff, in which Principal Investigators and other research leaders would have participated. Again, it is the way data is held and the different systems in which it is held that makes it difficult to give an accurate percentage for those PIs who have attended these programmes, but is probably no more than 40%. This will need to be addressed. It will also be important to review exactly what PIs and research leaders have done, and the impact of this on their management and leadership approaches, and participating in the PIRLS will assist us with benchmarking with the sector. Appropriate actions will then be developed consequent on the findings.

**Next steps and focus going forward**

The remapping of the key principles and areas of best practice in the Concordat with the processes and practices applied at Aston, has proved to be an effective way of repositioning ourselves and giving us a renewed focus. The review suggests that there are no areas of real weakness in the way that we support research staff, but we are committed to continued improvement. Aston 2020, our institutional strategy, gives very clear research ambitions to be achieved within a high performance culture; research staff have an important contribution to make. Our Aston Values of trust, empowerment, engagement, innovation, ambition, learning and scholarship will be applied to the work we do with, and for, the research staff community. Central to our approach will be engagement of research staff to assist us with our activities for improvement.

The detailed Action Plan associated with this review gives our initial thinking on where we wish to focus our efforts over the next twelve months, and much of this relates to increased clarity of information, better sharing of, and access to, information, and work to be done on aspects of data collection and recording. There is also work to be done on reviewing the efficacy of the leadership and management development training already received by our PIs and research leaders as it relates to the support of the career development of researchers. Similarly, the provision of training for the research staff themselves needs to be mapped against the Researcher Development Framework, and changes made as appropriate.

It will, however, be the CROS and the PIRLS, both to be completed in spring 2013, which will give us a rich source of information on how our research staff and PIs and research leaders view the environment in which they work. Outputs from these two surveys will be presented at Research Committee in summer 2013, and the information will help write an Action Plan for areas of work that we will need to progress in the 2013/2014 academic year.

But perhaps the most important, and overarching, piece of work is the development of a coherent, specific, researcher development strategy. We recognise that, although we have a lot of excellent practice, well supported by good policies and processes, it is not always straightforward for a new member of research staff , or a new research leader, to discern how to make the most of what is available. A researcher development strategy will provide the degree of clarity that is required.

September 2012

Approved by Research Committee.