

The Open University Concordat Implementation Plan: 6-Year Vitae Interim Review

Background and Approach to Evaluation

The Open University (OU) conducted a 2-year review in 2014 and a 4-year review in 2016 to assess progress against the University's Concordat Implementation Plan (CIP) 2012-2016. The CIP 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 CIP, the University was awarded the European Commission's HR Excellence in Research Award in 2013, which was renewed in 2017, highlighting continued commitment to research career development. Although not mandated through the Concordat, the CIP includes consideration of the research development of its Post Graduate Research Students (PGRS).

In receiving the 2017 award the CIP 2017-2020 was revised to adopt a set of 18 success measures to support reporting and monitoring of the plan as a whole and to demonstrate the University's commitment to the seven Concordat principles, working towards meeting the measures over the period 2017-2020. This 6-year review highlights progress made, key achievements and areas where further effort needs to be directed in the next two years.

The CIP is monitored on behalf of Pro-Vice Chancellor Research, Enterprise and Scholarship (PVC-RES) by the Concordat Steering Group (CSG) that meets three times a year and reports annually to the Research Committee. The CSG are tasked with monitoring the CIP and its implementation and evaluation. During the 2017 and 2018 period covered by this report, The Open University has undergone considerable governance, strategic and organisational changes. This report will highlight where these changes have had an impact on progress against success measures and describe actions taken.

For this review an additional series of actions were put in place in order to ensure that researchers' views were taken into account. After reviewing the CIP and the data from the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2017 and Principal Investigators and Researchers Survey (PIRLS) 2017, we conducted a series of focus groups to discuss issues that arose. The focus groups involved gathering data from senior academics, and research staff. Findings from the focus group have also fed into this review report.

Key Achievements and Progress Against the Concordat Implementation Plan

In support of Principle 1, the CIP set a goal to reduce the number of research staff employed on multiple fixed term contracts (FTC) to below September 2017 levels by 2020. The number of research staff who moved from one FTC to another **decreased** by 21% when compared to 2017. There was also a 10% decrease in the number of research staff that have been on a FTC for more than four years, when compared to 2017 (from 20 down to 18). These figures show that as of 2018, the OU is on target.

The issue of multiple FTCs was also highlighted by the staff focus groups with early to mid-career researchers, conducted in January 2019. All participants shared worries on redundancies after four-year FTC. Improvements in monitoring these figures were an achievement of the previous period CIP. The CSG will continue to monitor numbers of staff on FTC to ensure that this trend continues to 2020.

The 4-year review identified a perception among researchers of unequal promotions opportunities when compared to permanent staff. The CIP committed to undertake an annual review of promotions to senior lecturer and professor through the research pathway this data is received from the Academic Staff Promotions Committee which is responsible for monitoring and reviewing institutional performance, is Chaired by the Vice Chancellor and reports promotion data to Senate annually with the last report in January 2019. A review of the operation of promotions reported to Senate in April 2019 and approved for implementation recommendations that include review of the promotion criteria.

In support of Principle 2, regular Research Career Development (RCD) training has taken place and the Academic Professional Development (APD) team have used the feedback from these, together with the outcomes of CROS and PIRLS 2017 surveys to inform improvements to two existing sessions and to identify four new sessions for 2018/19 academic year. Examples of revised sessions include 'Induction to research degree supervision', and 'Research design and analysis using NVIVO'; and examples of new sessions include "Working with others, mentoring" for Principal Investigators (PIs) May 2019, and three new career & employability "Inside/Beyond Academia" sessions for Early Career Researchers (ECRs), December 2018 and May 2019. Careers and Employability sessions, especially for beyond academia, were over-subscribed and had full house attendance (19 face to face and 9 online participants). Over 75% participants found the session useful and requested further training on beyond academia, written feedback included:

"Really good [session]. [I] Think it has a lot of value. I attended the morning and afternoon sessions. The amount of people who attended the non-academic session was far more. Our supervisors are quite limited in the advice they can give on careers outside academia as most of them have never had one. So, I think these industry-oriented sessions are essential."

"This was a really great session, and I genuinely feel empowered to find the right career path(s) for myself going forward! The activities both within the session and given as homework have been very useful in evaluating my own needs and desires and planning how to approach finding my ideal opportunities."

Two beyond academia training sessions are planned to respond to this demand in 2019/20, including “Career Development for Researchers Beyond Academia” and “Meet the Alumni Panel” with the OU doctorate graduates who work in industry. This success measure is on target with APD team continuing to review the RCD programme in each academic year and report to the CSG for any changes.

The APD framework and web environment have been developed and evaluated. The CIP had put in place two measures to capture and assess levels of positive engagement with the APD Framework website and resources: 1) Revised analytics on the APD website Summer 2019; and 2) Feedback collection from APD researcher focus groups.

The CIP aimed to see a 3% improvement in the CROS results relating to recognition and value for Principle 2. This measure is on target for recognition and value to the contributions in *public engagement* (+7%), *peer reviewing* (+11%), *managing budgets and resources* (+13%), *knowledge transfer commercialisation activities* (+5%), and *grant/funding application* (+6%). Yet, it is not on target for *teaching and lecturing* (-20%), *supervising research students* (+1%), *supervising/managing research staff* (-11%), and *publications* (-7%). In conjunction with other input, such as from the focus groups, this helps to highlight areas of concern, in particular around offering greater opportunities for experience in areas such as teaching and lead into additional action planning. The CROS survey response rate however was low (36% response rate in 2017), leading to a need for caution in use of these results. Actions are planned to look to increase response rate in the next round of surveys, building on suggested approaches from recent focus groups. The CSG will continue to monitor the progress of these figures following the CROS & PIRLS 2019 surveys taking place in May 2019, in which the OU is participating.

An important factor in career progression of researchers is participation in the annual Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA). After the 4-year review, success measures for engagement and value of annual appraisal were added to the CIP. The OU has an excellent record of carrying out appraisals with reported levels in staff surveys of 89% in 2016 and 96% in 2017. Based on the CROS 2017 data, there is also a good record for those staff with 73% of OU respondents having taken part in staff appraisal/review within the last 2 years. The percentage of respondents who found the appraisal/review useful has increased from 59% in 2015 to 63% in 2017, meeting the success measure target with an increase of 4%. CDSA engagement will continue to be monitored via the CROS 2019 survey to ensure that this trend continues.

In support of principles 3 and 4, the university has continued to put resource into developing mentorship support for researchers. New mentor guidance has been prepared and published on the APD intranet website in May 2018. An online module outlining academic and research mentoring resources has been developed and a block on the APD’s Main Resource VLE Site dedicated to mentoring. One area in which mentoring is expected to benefit early to mid-career research staff, who have indicated in CROS 2017 that they do not always have a clear career development plan. This view was endorsed by focus group work with early to mid-career research staff in fixed term contracts across the University. Focus groups with the senior academics suggested encouraging senior academics and emeritus staff to volunteer in mentoring early to mid-career researchers. Training for mentors will be built into the 2019/20 APD staff development programme with both face to face and online training sessions being offered.

In May 2018 a new initiative was launched to offer greater engagement and awareness of RCD events through social media (Twitter @OU_APD), monthly flyers and the new APD website. The Twitter account has gained over 290 followers, and the Twitter analytics data shows that top tweets have been those about training events, with over 1500 impressions. Engagement rates with the Twitter page peak when event announcement tweets are sent out, leading to an increase in link clicks to the event registration page. Focus groups with both early to mid-career research staff and senior academics revealed “information bombardment” through emails, supporting use of alternative communication. The CSG will continue to monitor the effectiveness of these initiatives and evaluate the impact of changes.

To support career development of those engaged primarily in research the CIP set a target of at least three Advance HE HEA Fellowships through Supervision of Research Students awarded per year by 2019. The target has been met with four HEA Fellowships through supervision of research students awarded in 2018. Of these, three were Senior Fellowships (SFHEA), and one was a Principal Fellowship (PFHEA). To ensure the target will also be met in 2019, the APD team will continue to deliver sessions to supervisors on how to gain HEA Fellowship through supervision and progress will be monitored in CSG meetings. Two Faculties (WELS and FASS) have set 100% targets for HEA accreditation for central and nations academics, emphasising the need for an approach that is inclusive of researchers.

A further success measure, to increase the number of teaching hours delivered through the Brilliant Club from 408 in 2015/16 to > 600 by 2019/20 was put in place. This success measure is on track; however, it is proposed to take a broader approach to meet the need to provide teaching experience and build from other approaches adopted within faculties. The University also set a target to increase the number of PGRS undertaking placements and success in specific programmes that are no longer relevant. Success measures will be adjusted to reflect the focus on development areas in agreement with the Graduate School.

Overall satisfaction rates via Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) dropped from 87% (2015) to 84% (2017), 2% below target. A PRES action plan has been produced by the Director of Graduate School and Research Degrees

Committee oversees the implementation of the plan. The action plan includes providing greater support to develop teaching experience for PGRS. A pilot initiative within one faculty (FASS) has taken place and discussions led by the Director of the Graduate School are exploring how to support teaching initiatives across the university including ECR. This will be monitored by the CSG, to evaluate the effectiveness of the action plan with reference to the University's performance in PRES 2019 and CROS 2019 results in relation to recognition and value for teaching and lecturing.

In support of Principle 5, the CSG put a measure to increase the usage and awareness of the RDF Framework by researchers. The measure of an increase of at least 3% from CROS 2017 will be assessed in CROS 2019 (taking place in May 2019). However, the University now has a broader approach to use of the RDF. This will include continued training on RDF provided to all PGRS as part of induction and in a stand-alone session, and a revised information management system, Doctoral Online Research Information System (DORIS) for 2019. A revised measure is suggested to ensure that these development aspects are highlighted in support of principle 5 and the outcome of these changes in relation to the increased awareness of the RDF framework will be monitored by the CSG in terms of CROS survey results, and outcomes of these initiatives.

In support of Principle 6, the CIP set a target to increase the proportion of academic and research staff aged under 36 from 13% in 2014 to 15% by 2020 and to 17% by 22 (University Equality Objective 3a). Discussion within the CSG has considered that this approach has tended to highlight one of the equality objectives and that this is no longer fully aligned to the Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) approach adopted at a university level. The CSG will therefore work more directly to consider the impact of Concordat issues across the range of equality objectives.

To extend from success in Athena Swan within STEM, a target was set for a first non-STEM submission for a Bronze Athena Swan Award. The Knowledge Media Institute (KMi), achieved the Bronze Athena Swan Award in November 2017. Restructuring in the University has relocated KMi within the STEM Faculty. There is now work underway to develop two non-STEM submissions (within FBL and WELS) for Autumn 2019.

Principle 7 is monitored by the CSG that meets three times per year. The Director of The Institute of Educational Technology chairs this group on behalf of PVC-RES. Its membership includes representatives from research staff and students, the University and College Union (UCU), faculty leadership, People Services, the Graduate School Director and senior managers from units responsible for delivering the action plan. CSG responsibilities include: reviewing progress against the CIP; managing escalation of any non-conformances identified; reviewing results of the CROS, PIRLS, PRES and internal Research Support Surveys to consider any implications for the action plan. Concordat activities are reported to the Research Committee annually. The most recent report was November 2018. The Research Committee also provides approval for the review process and reporting in support of the HR Excellence in Research Award.

Conclusion and Future Steps

The CIP has acted to support and retain a focus on researcher career development during a time of change for the University. Achievements have built on the basis of improved management of fixed-term contracts that were developed over the previous 2012-2016 CIP. In addition, specific advances have been made in providing stronger mentoring support, developing action plans from review of survey responses, and revising and strengthening the academic professional development programme. As part of the review process, the CSG has considered the impact of monitoring the CIP through success measures. There have been benefits in creating a greater focus and encouraging an action plan approach to addressing lower performance in survey results. This has been balanced by over concern with some specific measures that were felt not to be in the control of those involved, or not the direct concern of CSG, and a perception that the principles have had less visibility. We are also aware of discussed changes in the Concordat and the survey approach to encourage greater inclusivity and a broader view of career development.

The overall CIP is proposed to continue, with some revisions to reflect changed structures and progress made. The accompanying success measures are being revisited to provide more direct connection with the principles, reduce reliance on survey elements, and reframe student focussed measures on to training and development areas. This also takes the opportunity to highlight three areas of particular interest to the researcher community: continued use of fixed term contracts, mentoring support for progression, and the provision of teaching opportunities for both post graduate research students and early career researchers.

For the next two year period, CSG plans to keep success measures 2, 6, 7, and 11 as is with no change; remove success measure 10 (ref. the national Santander Universities Entrepreneurship Award by 2019/20). Success measure 13 is completed and it will be incorporated with 16 in order to "embed development of mentoring into academic and research development programmes". The specific target for success measure 15 will be removed but the CSG will continue to monitor impact of relevant Equality, Diversity and Inclusion objectives. The details of the suggested changes to the success measures can be found in the updated 2017-20 CIP document and the summary of success measures.