

## Careers in Research Online Survey 2013 (CROS) University of Sussex Responses – Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

### 1. Background

The Careers in Research Online Survey was designed to help Higher Education Institutions across the UK to enhance the quality of provision for research staff. CROS was delivered as an online questionnaire to Sussex research staff using Bristol Online Survey (BOS) between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> May 2013. At the time that CROS was administered, there were an estimated 258 members of research staff at Sussex.

For the purposes of CROS, the term ‘Research Staff’ is used to describe any member of staff employed by the University whose main role is to conduct research. As such, the sample includes staff with job titles such as ‘Research Assistant’; ‘Research Fellow’; and ‘Visiting Researcher’. The Research Staff population does not include members of faculty such as Lecturers, Readers, and Professors. Typically, Research Staff work full- or part-time on fixed-term contracts under the supervision of a Principal Investigator (PI), though in a few instances research staff are in receipt of their own funding grants, making them the PI of their own research project.

There were 103 completed surveys, making the Sussex CROS response rate 40% (against a national average of 27%). The response rate was the best yet, this being the third time for Sussex to conduct CROS. In 2009 Sussex received 40 completed surveys, and 71 in 2010.

The CROS questionnaire was structured into six sections:

1. About your research career
2. Recognition and value
3. Recruitment and selection
4. Support and career development
5. Equality and Diversity
6. About you (demographics)

This paper sets out the key findings from the survey and some initial recommendations based on the Sussex outcomes of the survey.

## **2. Key Findings**

### *2.1 Research Careers*

The majority of the respondents (53.4%) were on their first contract of employment at Sussex, with 86% having 3 or fewer contracts. 8.7% of respondents had had 5 or more contracts at Sussex, this is 4% less than the national aggregate response for 5 or more contracts at the same institution.

The majority of respondents were on fixed term contracts 86% and most were full time 84%. Fixed term contracts were mostly between 1-3 years in length (66%), although 17.6% were shorter than one year.

The majority of funding for positions came from Research Councils (41.6%) followed by charities (18.8%). MRC and ESRC were the main research council funders for researcher positions at Sussex and the percentage of respondents funded by these two councils at Sussex is well above the national aggregate for these funders (nationally MRC fund 17.8% and ESRC 7.8% of respondents).

Interestingly only 13.2% of Sussex respondents were funded by EPSRC, which across the rest of the UK is the main funder of research positions (38% of respondents nationally). The proportion of research staff funded directly by Sussex (10.9%) is just over half the national aggregate proportion of 21.2% respondents funded by their own institution.

### *2.2 Recognition and Value*

Results indicated that respondents felt that the University most valued their contributions to publishing, followed by public engagement and grant/funding applications (all activities that contribute to the REF exercise). Peer reviewing was deemed to be the least valued activity, followed by supervision of research students.

Three quarters or more of the respondents feel they are treated equally with other (non-research staff) in respect of opportunities for development, conferences, flexible working, and visibility on the University website and staff directories. However, half of research staff respondents perceived themselves as being unequally treated with regard to decision-making (e.g. representation on committees) and opportunities for promotion and progression.

The majority of respondents feel integrated into their department's research community, and into the wider disciplinary community. Although most feel a part of the institutional research community, there remains work to be done in this area, as greater than a third of respondents answered that they did not feel part of this community.

Over half of Sussex research staff had not participated in a staff appraisal in the last two years. A total of 29.6% of those were either on probation or recently appointed (and therefore not expecting an appraisal). A proportion of 42.6% of those who had not participated in the appraisal process have not been invited to do so. This indicates a clear area where the university could make improvements to appraisal systems for research staff, with better opportunities for appraisal, and improving research staff (and probably principal investigator) awareness of these opportunities.

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Of the respondents that had received an appraisal in the last two years, between 62 and 68% thought the process useful to highlight issues, focus on career aspirations, identify strengths and achievements, and review personal progress. Again, there is scope for improvement here, in order to ensure that the remaining 32 to 38% find the process useful. Of particular concern is that the majority of researchers (over 65%) found the appraisal process to be of little or no use in regard to leading to changes in work practices or training and other development opportunities.

### *2.3 Recruitment and Selection*

The majority of respondents (40%) found out about their current post by seeing it advertised, although a quarter of respondents heard about their role through word of mouth. During the application process the vast majority (over 75%) of researchers were provided with detailed job descriptions and details of the skills and qualifications required of the post.

Results from CROS indicate that research staff induction is an area for concern and there is significant opportunity for improvements to be made in this respect. The percentage of respondents that had been offered institutional/departmental/local inductions at Sussex were below the national aggregate responses. The majority of respondents (43%) reported that they had not been offered an institutional-wide induction. Similarly half of respondents had not been offered an induction at school/departmental level, however of those that had attended a school/departmental induction almost all found this to be useful. Over a third of respondents had not been offered a local induction to their role, however, again almost all that had received a local induction found it to be useful. It is recommended that improvements to induction processes for research staff become a priority for the university.

### *2.4 Support and Career Development*

Responses indicate that most Sussex research staff feel encouraged to develop and to take ownership of their development. Interestingly though, only just over half of them have a clear development plan or record their professional development and fewer than 10% engage with the Researcher Development Framework as a model for their development. An increase in access to staff appraisals, and raising awareness of the researcher development programme and services offered by the Careers and Employability Centre for research staff could go some way towards an increase in research staff having a career development plan and recording of their development activities.

The areas in which over half of respondents indicated that they would like to undertake professional development (either as specific training or in relation to their own work) included: career management, equality and diversity, leadership and management, public engagement, research impact, research skills and techniques, supervision of doctoral/masters students, budget management, engagement with policy makers/end users, knowledge exchange.

Despite largely feeling encouraged to engage in development, responses indicate that this is not being reflected in actual engagement with professional development. More than 43% of respondents have invested in less than a day on their professional development in the last twelve months, 30% have invested between one and three days, and the remaining 27% more than three days.

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Over three quarters of respondents aspire to continue working in higher education, with the majority (42.7%) aspiring to career in research and teaching and 34% aspiring to a career primarily in research. The proportions actually expecting to achieve their goal is slightly lower with 36% expecting a career in research and teaching and 27% expecting a research career in higher education. Due to the shortage of permanent academic positions, many of these researchers are likely to struggle to sustain a long term career in higher education and there is an important role for the University in providing support for researchers in deciding the future directions for their careers and giving information about alternative careers outside of higher education research. In relation to this, only 5.9% of respondents had undertaken an internship/placement outside higher education research, however 46% indicated that they would like to do so.

### *2.5 Equality and Diversity*

The vast majority of respondents believed that Sussex is committed to equality and diversity, although the proportion that disagreed with this statement (13.9%) was above the national level (9%). The majority of respondents agreed that staff at Sussex are treated fairly regardless of personal characteristics in all aspects of work. The areas where there were the highest proportion of respondents that disagreed were career progression/promotion (18.7%) and participation in decision making (22.6%).

Over 10% of respondents perceived that staff were not treated fairly on the basis of age (12.7%), gender (15.9%) and pregnancy and maternity (11.7%). In all cases these proportions are a few percent above the national aggregated responses but in line with the national trends.

### *2.6 Demographics*

The majority of respondents (43.7%) were in the age bracket of 31-35 with over three quarters of respondents aged 40 or below. There was a greater proportion of female responders (54%) than male and the majority of respondents were UK nationals (57.8%). Of those that were not UK nationals, over half were from another EU member state.

### *2.7 General Comments from Respondents*

There were a number of opportunities in the survey for respondents to enter general comments about a specific issues. To give an overview of these comments a word cloud has been produced for each set of comments under a theme (Annex 1). The larger the word, the more frequently it was used, the positioning of the words in the cloud is random.

### **3. Recommendations**

- (i) Work with research staff representatives/focus groups to understand the issues/perceptions of unequal treatment with respect to (a) decision making and (b) promotion and progression.
- (ii) Increase opportunities for research staff to engage with each other and the wider institution to improve sense of integration within the institutional research community (e.g. through Research Staff Forum, cross school seminars/events etc)
- (iii) Work with appropriate representative groups and HR colleagues to review appraisal processes for research staff and increase levels of uptake and perceived usefulness of the appraisal process.
- (iv) Ensure that research staff appraisal builds in career development and training requirements and leads to clear professional development actions for the researcher.
- (v) Review institutional/School/Local induction procedures for research staff and work with appropriate groups to implement improvements to the induction processes for research staff across the university.
- (vi) Working with research staff representatives/focus groups explore the issues and barriers preventing researchers from dedicating time to their professional development. Where possible implement measures to help overcome these barriers.
- (vii) As part of a wider training review look at current opportunities for research staff training and development and increase awareness amongst research staff and their managers of what is currently available. When developing plans for future research staff training/development programmes look for specific opportunities to cover the development areas identified as most desirable by the CROS survey.
- (viii) Explore the possibility of an alternative careers event/workshop to give researchers support in looking at alternative career possibilities outside of higher education research. In addition, research schemes/funding etc for secondments into organisations outside of academia and publicise opportunities to research staff where appropriate.
- (ix) Organise a focus group to further explore the equality and diversity issues raised in the survey.
- (x) Run CROS again in 2015 to evaluate progress against key issues highlighted by the 2013 survey.

