

The RA voice - Heriot-Watt University Postdoc Engagement Case Study

Context

Over the past two years the opportunities for support, development and consultation with the Early Career Researcher (ECR) community at HWU have increased. It was recognised that, while part of a wider academic and research community, there were some differences in the employee experience for this group of staff.

Formal consultation processes

Employee Experience Survey

All staff are already included in the HWU Employee Engagement Surveys which run every 18 months to 2 years. Results are analysed and reported for RA's as part of the standard reporting process. Any issues specific to this staff group can then be addressed at institutional or local level accordingly.

Careers in Research Operational Survey

ECRs are also encouraged to participate in the national Careers in Research Operational Survey (CROS) run by Vitae every two years. In 2017 HWU participation increased slightly to 34%. HWU results from the survey are analysed and reported to key internal committees alongside previous HWU CROS survey results and national results. Identified actions are taken forward either through the Committee route or as part of the Institute's HR Excellence in Research submission.

Athena SWAN

HWU holds Athena SWAN Bronze Award at Institutional level and for three of our five Schools. Action Teams are in place at School and Institutional level with RA representation on all Action Teams. Renewal submissions are currently in progress for reaccreditation in 2020.

Postdoc Consultation session

Focus groups are run on specific subjects with many staff groups across HWU. An example of this for RAs is the session run in June 2018 on the HR Excellence in Research initiative. HWU has held this award since 2010 with action plans being formally reviewed every 2 years to achieve reaccreditation. This session outlined the aims of the initiative, why we do it, what we do and what HWU hopes to achieve. RAs provided valuable opinions on their HWU career including what has worked well over the past two years and suggestions for improvements. In addition to the formal and quantitative measurements that are reported, this provides qualitative feedback to enhance the understanding of the HWU RA experience.

Research Staff Forum

A Research Staff Forum (RSF), formerly the Research Staff Working Group, operates within Heriot-Watt. The group operates with representation from across the University's Schools and Services to provide support to the University's research staff population. Its aims include acting as a forum for discussion of research staff issues, reporting and disseminating the outcomes of these discussions and providing a forum for direct input to University policy.

Recent changes

In 2017 the RSF terms of reference were updated to reflect the change in focus of the group. Originally created to work on small projects, the majority of discussion over the last few years was

more about being a place for discussion of issues. Membership of the Forum was increased to up to two representatives from each School. As the nature of the majority of issues identified was HR focused, the Chair was also changed from the Deputy Principal (Research and Innovation) to the Human Resources Director.

After observing a gap in support for RAs at HWU, Dr Stephanie Zihms, an RA within the School of Energy, Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society (EGIS), approached fellow RAs with a proposal for a School forum to provide development and networking opportunities at a local level.

The EGIS Postdoc Forum was founded in 2016 by RAs Drs S Zihms and F Watson with financial support from the School. Events were scheduled once a month, alternating between lunchtime talks and informal networking events held in the evening. The financial support from EGIS allowed for catering to be provided at these events thereby increasing the attractiveness of events for participants. Talks included grant applications, REF research, contract updates and mental health and wellbeing. Events were well supported by the RA community with fifteen to twenty attendees at most sessions.

The success of the EGIS model was noted by other Schools and discussed in an RSF meeting in November 2017. While it was agreed that a duplication of the forum would not be feasible since the topics covered are broad and applicable across research areas, it was proposed by Dr S Zihms to expand the existing EGIS Postdoc Forum to become the Heriot-Watt University wide Postdoc Forum. This aim of this peer-support network run by RAs is to provide peer-support, information and networking opportunities for RAs and ECRs at Heriot-Watt University and the British Geological Survey through a variety of events; e.g. informal networking, informative talks and discussion groups.

Participation at recent events has increased to more than forty for most sessions. Awareness of the Postdoc Forum is also increasing across HWU with senior staff volunteering to speak at the sessions.

The current Postdoc Forum team and roles can be found on the forum committee page:
<https://hwupostdocforum.wordpress.com/the-committee/>

Two of the Postdoc Forum committee are also members of the RSF. There is also a succession plan in place for committee members. The expanded activity has primarily been made possible due to extra financial support from the Academic Leadership and Development Team within HWU.

Summary

The Postdoc Forum has grown from an idea to an established university wide support network for RAs at Heriot-Watt University in the last 2 years and this has been thanks to the time and effort put in from the RAs themselves and the financial support from EGIS and now the University.

In conjunction with the changes to RSF and other established formal communication and consultation channels, HWU aims to further embed support for RAs to enhance their individual and collective employee experience.