### HR Excellence in Research Award, May 2016 Progress Report – 4 Year Evaluation and Review

### Introduction

SOAS, University of London has established itself as a world-class research institution. Our staff (and student) community is extremely diverse and international, and that this is a key characteristic of working at SOAS. The personal and career development of our research staff is of central importance to achieving excellent research as outlined in the ‘[SOAS Vision and Strategy 2016-2020](https://www.soas.ac.uk/directorate/visionandstrategy/file114989.pdf)’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Our vision for research and the support of research staff is outlined in the paper by the Pro-Director (Research and Enterprise) ‘[Research Excellence at SOAS](https://www.soas.ac.uk/directorate/visionandstrategy/file115030.pdf)’ (2016),[[2]](#footnote-2) and our focus on Equality and Diversity outlined in the institutional Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2016-2020).[[3]](#footnote-3) We additionally welcome the opportunity for our support to be benchmarked against the [Concordat to Support the Career Development of Research Staff](https://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy/concordat-to-support-the-career-development-of-researchers). SOAS received the [HR Excellence in Research Award](https://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy/hr-excellence-in-research) from the European Commission in October 2012 and retained it in 2014. This document and the associated action plan outline our internal evaluation process and provide information for the external four year review to consider progress in supporting the principles detailed in the Concordat.

**Background**Although still a relatively small institution (with currently approximately 35 research only staff), SOAS is growing including both numbers of research staff and research income, and will continue to do so. We will therefore need to provide much more guidance and support for research staff, their PIs and mentors. Work has already begun on providing a higher level of proactive research support. We have improved the quality and quantity of support in the research office, introducing universal access to [Research Professional](https://www.soas.ac.uk/researchoffice/applying-for-external-research-funding/how-do-i-find-funding-for-my-research-ideas/) with tailored profiles, hosting more funder visits, [impact lunches](https://www.soas.ac.uk/researchoffice/events/?showprevious=1), academic staff training, research coffee mornings and drop in sessions, and through attendance at Department and Faculty meetings. A next key step is the introduction of a Research Management System scheduled for roll out in September 2017.

A number of functional areas have restructured their services and now provide an enhanced service for researchers. The Research Office restructure includes dedicated pre-award and post-award support, a Research Excellence Manager and a Research Systems Manager; the HR restructure is improving recruitment processes and the Careers Consultant for early career researchers post has been made permanent. There is now a comprehensive action plan to prioritise key [equality, diversity and inclusion (E,D&I) objectives](https://www.soas.ac.uk/news/newsitem113517.html) for 2016-20 relating to our student services, our role as an employer and our central functions. As well as the institutional level Research Excellence at SOAS paper, each department has produced a research strategy, all research active staff have a personal research plan and research income has risen ahead of target for 2014-15 with a forecast growth of 12.5% for 2014-15 - 2015-16 (8.33% in 2012-13 – 2013-14; 9.7% 2013-14 – 2014-15).

**The Review Process**From the outset, strategy and progress have been agreed, supported and monitored by both [Research and Enterprise Committee](https://www.soas.ac.uk/committees/research/) (REC) chaired by the Pro-Director (Research and Enterprise) and including Associate Deans for Research, Director of Research and Enterprise, research and support staff; and [HR Committee](https://www.soas.ac.uk/committees/humanresources/) (HRC), chaired by the Registrar and including the Director of HR, and members of academic and professional services.

In May 2015 REC also agreed to convene the [HR Excellence in Research working group](https://www.soas.ac.uk/staffdevelopment/research/file112001.docx) comprising academic and research staff and key members of professional services, to evaluate progress and develop the next two year action plan. This group has met six times in 2015-16, producing an update paper to REC in February 2016 (approved) and full documentation in May 2016 (approved). To ensure substantial input from research staff in the 4 year review process the Working group also arranged four focus groups, held a number of structured interviews and received written feedback from funded researchers, non-funded researchers and PIs. This feedback from a wide range of staff was collated and helped both evaluate progress to date and indicate areas for further development.

**Evaluation of Achievements and Progress since 2012**Considerable progress has been made in our support for research staff over the past four years with an increase in the number of posts in the Research Office from 6 to 10, a permanent post in the [Careers Service](http://www.soas.ac.uk/careers/earlycareerresearchers/advice/), and substantial developments in the area of research ethics including an [Ethics Policy and Procedure](https://www.soas.ac.uk/researchoffice/ethics/), with the Research Ethics Panel containing a range of staff including an external member. Some things we do well because we are still small, such as the new staff orientation programme which brings together staff from across the institution and allows research staff to feel a part of the institution, but in other ways our size means it’s more difficult to develop initiatives on a scale which larger institutions can manage. It is difficult, for example, to be able offer effective redeployment opportunities when the pool of research positions is limited. Evidence from our institutionally-convened focus groups indicated that many felt included in their departments and were routinely invited to department meetings and seminars, but that work was needed to ensure that they were included in institutional schemes like probation and Staff Development Review (SDR). The focus groups were themselves appreciated as a way to meet other researchers from different departments and faculties, and more such meetings were requested (and incorporated into the next action plan).

Full details of progress against the original action plan are provided in the updated document available to view online. A summary of highlights from the last four years is provided here:  
 *Progress against Principle 1 Recruitment & Selection*The School has an ongoing commitment to clear and transparent routes to recruitment and progression and has clear policies and processes in place to support this. Since August 2015 monitoring has ensured that 100% of interview panel members have completed recruitment training. Mandatory training for all those on interview panels was introduced but it did not significantly close the identified gap between numbers of white and BME post applicants and final post offers. Thus the training has been further reviewed to include substantial discussion of equality issues and unconscious bias to address this, and actions to reduce the gap have been identified in the E,D & I objectives 2016-2020 and will be monitored by EDC.   
*Progress against Principle 2 Recognition & Value*Additional posts in the Research Office mean that staff now receive more support in the process of applying for grants, and successful grants have an initial ‘kick off’ meeting to ensure a better understanding of roles and responsibilities. Discussion about redeployment and career discussions take place as part of the end of fixed term contract process, with managers reminded of this by an automated system. PIs have been invited to sessions run by the Research Office on the practical management of research grants.   
*Progress against Principle 3 Support & Career Development*In 2015-16, 40% of research staff attended at least one centrally organised event, up from 34% in 2014-15. This is due to more targeted training being provided. In 2015-16 there were 19 workshops on the newly designed [Research Development series](http://www.soas.ac.uk/staffdevelopment/coursecalendar/index.php?nd=2016-01-01&view=year&past=1) with 116 participants. Feedback from these sessions has been collated and shows the sessions were very well received. Responses from this and the end of year survey will inform both the content of the programme and the content of individual sessions. Coffee mornings, impact lunches and funder visits provided further support for research staff. In addition individual careers advice was available from the dedicated early career researcher Careers Consultant, a post made permanent in 2015. Applications to both the Marie Sklowdowska Curie Fellowships and the British Academy International Partnership mobility (IPM) schemes have been encouraged and have led to high quality submissions (for the former all with scores in excess of 80%) and a number of successful awards.  
*Progress against Principle 4 Researchers’ Responsibilities*A new Ethics Policy and procedure was agreed by REC and implemented in 2015, and the Epigeum online [Research Integrity course](https://www.soas.ac.uk/researchoffice/ethics/research-integrity-online-programme/) was purchased and is being rolled out from March 2016. It is intended that this is embedded in undergraduate and postgraduate course structures from 2017-18, but is already available to all staff and students, and all researchers applying for externally funded projects will need to have successfully completed the programme prior to making an application.  
*Progress against Principle 5 Diversity & Equality*Equality and diversity continues to be of strategic importance to the School. This Is highlighted through the development and agreement of a new Equality Strategy agreed in 2016, the work of the Model Equality and Diversity Employer (MEDE) group, the achievement of the [Gender Equality Charter Mark](https://www.soas.ac.uk/news/newsitem98960.html) in 2015 (now Athena SWAN). The ED&I objectives 2016-20 are now identified in one action plan, monitored by the Equlity and Diversity Committee (which itself reports to the Board of Trustees). All new staff must attend the Equality and Diversity Overview course and systems are in place to ensure this is complied with.   
*Progress against Principle 6 Implementation & Review*Regular formal reporting on activities and deciding on new actions is achieved by the work of REC and HRC. Evaluation of progress has been led by the [Award Working Group](file:///\\Admin\shared\Admin\Personnel\Training%20&%20Development\Serena\Research%20Issues\Research%20Excellence%20Badge\2015-16%20working%20group\Terms%20of%20Reference.docx) with further discussion at the committees.

**Strategy 2016-20 by Concordat Principle**We have developed an updated action plan that sets out the focus of our strategy for the next four years. Identifying specific actions up to 2020 will continue to be considered via REC and HRC, focus groups and wider consultation with research staff. The updated action plan incorporates continuing actions from the original plans, extending current initiatives where appropriate, and added new actions that build on our progress and align with the School’s current and developing Strategic Plan.

*Principle 1: Recruitment & Selection*Progress in these areas will focus on ensuring we attract and retain the best researchers from a diverse range of backgrounds. The School has an ongoing commitment to clear and transparent routes to recruitment and progression which will be led by the newly constituted Recruitment and Operations team in HR. Reviewing the recruitment policy and procedure, the development of a research staff policy and reviewing researcher roles will drive changes. Additionally all research staff who teach will need to complete the same training ([3 day core units](http://www.soas.ac.uk/ltd/academicteachingdev/pdhep-courses/)) as applies to our Graduate Teaching Assistants and a monitoring system will be developed to track this. Successful completion of the full course will qualify the researcher for Higher Education Academy Associate Fellow status.  
*Principle 2: Recognition & Value*Research staff should receive equal treatment to that of other staff groups. We will focus on the continued roll out and development of the recently revised and enhanced Researchers workshop programme. We will ensure all researchers are included in the School’s probation and redeployment processes by including managers of researchers as recipients of the automated emails for these systems. A clarification of the roles of researcher and that of their line manager will ensure that both sides are more aware of key HR processes. Vitae resources for PIs and research staff will be better promoted, as will the [SOAS Desktop Mentor](https://app.goodpractice.net/#/soas-desktopmentor/s/47541235) (for management and leadership issues).  
*Principle 3: Support & Career Development*Researchers have always had equal access to development opportunities provided across the School but feedback has shown a need for more specific initiatives. By developing a researcher specific mentoring scheme to support all research staff, including mentoring training, a research staff forum and new web pages for this group, this need can be addressed. Researcher lunches will help to build a network of researchers from different departments, with better online information for new research staff through the development of specific pages bringing together information from HR, Finance, Research Office etc.  
*Principle 4: Researchers’ Responsibilities*Encouraging researchers to proactively engage in their own development continues to be a challenge, although this area has seen much improvement in the past four years thanks to extensive work by the Research Office and the Careers Service in providing workshops and advice/guidance. Making the Epigeum [online Research Integrity course](https://www.soas.ac.uk/researchoffice/ethics/research-integrity-online-programme/) mandatory will mean that all staff will have to engage with best practice in this important area and the School can expend its duty of care.   
*Principle 5: Diversity & Equality*  
A broad range of actions are outlined in the ED&I action plan which will be monitored by Equality and Diversity Committee. Having been awarded the Gender Equality Charter mark (now Athena Swan) we will seek to retain this and will be making an application for the Race Equality Charter Mark to show our commitment to the equality agenda. We will continue with positive action for identified staff groups, ensure the REF submission selection process is non-discriminatory through close engagement with the institutional REF Steering Group, and increase our number of anti-harassment contacts.  
*Principle 6: Implementation and Review*To enable us to measure progress against our action plans, focus groups and a questionnaire will be used annually, with the outcomes reported to REC. This will allow us to engage with our research staff and amend/develop the action plan as necessary.

**Broad Success Measures**  
Our success will be measured in terms of timely achievement of the actions set out in the Action Plan 2016-18 (and subsequently agreed actions up to 2020), many of which include specific deliverables. Additionally, our success measures include the following:

* Evidence of progress/improvement of general support for research staff through annual focus groups and questionnaires
* Data and feedback from Researcher development programme, coffee mornings, impact lunches, ECR forum and funder visits
* Data on engagement with learning and development courses
* Data on engagement with institutional HR processes including staff with mentors, probation, quality of induction
* Data on usage of web pages for researcher support
* Roll out of Research Integrity online programme according to schedule and data on engagement of indicated staff groups accordingly
* Data from annual staff survey in 2016, and subsequent Pulse Surveys
* Successful renewal of the Athena Swan bronze award; application for Race Equality Charter Mark bronze award.

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1. https://www.soas.ac.uk/directorate/visionandstrategy/file114989.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.soas.ac.uk/directorate/visionandstrategy/file115030.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/news/2016/file113520.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)