

## 4 Recognising & Evaluating Support for Researcher Development in Academic Progression & Promotions

*Action: To comment on this report and its recommendations before its submission to PVC-IIR and Head of HR in support of the forthcoming agreed work by HR to develop and implement the new Academic Careers Pathway model.*

### Summary

The recent consultation on the proposed Academic Career Pathways (ACP) model included proposals for the recognition of early-career researcher development in the University's system for academic progression and promotion. This is a welcome and innovative indication of its commitment to the development of the next generation of academic and research talent and the support of its postdoctoral research staff.

The consultation highlighted, however, the need for more detailed guidance and other steps to realise this commitment effectively. HR Committee has recently agreed (HRC 01/03/18/HR 644) the adoption of the principles of the ACP and directed HR to undertake further policy work and the development of guidance to achieve its implementation.

This paper therefore presents findings and recommendations to support this implementation work arising from consultation with the postdoc community through the Postdocs of Cambridge Society and Departmental Postdoc Committees Chairs Network.

### Background

Proposals for the revision of Senior Academic Promotions and the new ACP model include the addition of early-career researcher development to the evaluative criteria for promotion to senior offices. This is a very welcome and innovative indication of the University's commitment to the development of the next generation of academic and research talent, and to supporting its postdoctoral research staff.

The [proposed guidance](#) about the evaluation of this new criterion is, however, somewhat limited and to a certain extent confusing: we are not aware, for example, of any mechanism by "feedback from postdoctoral researchers" (Annexe 1, 2.3) is currently collected.

The novelty of introducing evaluation in this area makes some initial uncertainty inevitable, of course, but this also underlines the need both for clear guidance to promotions committees and for other steps to embed support for researcher development within the University's overall framework of academic progression and excellence.

This paper, therefore, reviews some of the issues relating to evaluating researcher development and makes specific recommendations about possible measures in both these areas in order to support the realisation of the positive intent behind the introduction of this new criterion and its consistent application.

### Work undertaken

Initial consultation work on ACP was carried out in ET 2017 as part of the People Strategy. This was revised and [sent out for consultation in MT 2017](#).

The Office of Postdoctoral Affairs submitted feedback during the consultation supporting the proposals in general and the introduction of this new evaluative criterion specifically, but noting that guidance about its implementation is currently lacking in detail.

In light of the need for further input on this specific point, the Postdocs of Cambridge Society and Departmental Postdoc Committees Chairs Network undertook a consultation among postdoctoral research staff in the early part of LT 2018, followed by discussion at the LT meeting of the DPCCN on 21 February. The results of this consultation and discussion form the basis of the findings and recommendations presented here.

### **Findings/options**

The introduction of this new criterion is strongly welcomed among postdoctoral staff, and is an indicator of the University's sector leadership in embedding support for early career researchers in its overall culture of academic and research excellence. There are, however, two main questions about whether and how this new criterion will be used.

Firstly, the consultation highlighted the fact that candidates for promotion are only required to demonstrate an effective contribution in one of the three evaluative criteria for the assessment of teaching and researcher development (Annexe 1, 2.3). While it is certainly the case that "applicants may contribute in different points in their career and that effective contributions may differ between disciplines", it seems strongly against the spirit and intent of the proposed changes not to differentiate more clearly between the teaching and training of students and the management and development of postdoctoral researchers.

As the proposals stand, for example, an academic who manages postdoctoral staff could apply for promotion without any evidence regarding his or her performance in this sphere at all. This would inhibit the achievement of excellence in developing the next generation of academic and research talent to which the University is in other ways strongly committed.

Secondly, assuming that it is used by candidates and promotions committees, there are a number of challenges in developing robust guidance about the evaluation of this criterion.

Most significantly, the current guidance suggests "consistently positive feedback" from postdoctoral staff as an indicator of excellence. However, there is currently no mechanism by which such feedback relating to a particular academic is collected as it is, for example, with relation to teaching. It is also unclear whether this would refer to the postdocs managed directly by the candidate only, or a wider group.

As with any appraisal of a manager/supervisor by staff, there would be clear concerns relating to anonymity and the credibility of feedback about how any such feedback were to be collected. These concerns are likely to be exacerbated in the case of postdoc staff where future career opportunities depend to an often very high degree on the goodwill and/or recommendation of a Principal Investigator/Line Manager.

Reference to "consistent engagement with researcher training and development processes" is also somewhat vague. It could refer to good practice in understanding and directing research staff toward available opportunities, to the appropriate and constructive use of SRD and take up of training to support good management of research staff, or to making more active contributions to the provision or delivery of training and other career development activity.

The principle behind both these indicators of excellence is, however, sound, in that they require direct evidence of the candidate's performance. It was noted in the consultation that there are a number of possible indicators where the correlation with the behaviour of the candidates themselves would be less clear, for example, the subsequent career paths of their research staff, their records in publishing independent research or undertaking professional development or impact activity etc.

Although often the success of the researcher will be to whatever degree thanks to the support of their PI/LM, this will not always be the case. In general, it will be important that promotions committees are aware of the fact that some of these indirect indicators, while potentially useful in context, may also create unintentional pressure on postdocs to undertake additional activities that will support the immediate or eventual promotion of their PI/LM.

It was noted during the consultation that some funders already include or are considering the inclusion of similar evaluation of support for the development of early-career researchers among the criteria for the award of research funding. This further underlines the positive significance of its introduction in the University, its value as an indicator of sector leadership and also provides an additional basis on which to develop good practice in this regard.

Finally, it was also noted that the current proposal for an Exceptional Teaching Promotion Strand does not make reference to researcher development, despite its inclusion in the expanded criteria for Teaching and Researcher Development in the general scheme. The current proposals, therefore, do not give full weight to the potential recognition of outstanding contributions to researcher development as a valuable dimension of the overall research and academic excellence of the University.

## Recommendations

The consultation produced a number of suggestions about how to both develop the guidance to promotions committees and to embed awareness among and support for academics in achieving excellence in supporting the development of early career researchers. We recommend that:

- 1) **Annexe 1, 2.3 of the ACP guidance be amended to require that candidates submit evidence with reference to Criterion 3** if they manage research staff at the time of application or have managed them since the time of their last promotion;
- 2) **Guidance be issued to Departments/Faculties about effective and appropriate ways to collect feedback from research staff about PI/LMs** (e.g. at exit interviews and/or through some form of 360° appraisal) with due recognition of and guidance on how to manage anonymity, ensuring credible feedback, avoidance of conflict of interest etc.;
- 3) **Candidates for promotion be requested to include in their submission a statement (up to 500 words) on how they have supported the development of postdoctoral researchers they have managed and/mentored** (e.g. similar to the evidence required by the [Wellcome Trust Investigators Award in Science](#));
- 4) **Promotions committees be encouraged to include among their members a representative of the postdoctoral community and/or an academic or academic-related member of staff with relevant experience and a specific remit to support effective evaluation of researcher development** - this is particularly important at this early stage while good practice in evaluating excellence in this area is being developed;
- 5) **Promotions committees be specifically encouraged in the short-term to consider evidence of the positive use of SRD in managing research staff and the take up of relevant trainings**

- (e.g. [Staff Review and Development for Reviewers](#)), even if in the longer-term these should be standard expectations rather than indicators of excellence;
- 6) **Promotions committees be specifically encouraged in considering evidence relevant to 2.3 Criterion 3 to give most weight to demonstrable activity by the candidate him or herself**, and to understand the limits and potential problems of using indirect indicators related to the success and/or activity of research staff themselves;
  - 7) **The University create or support any scheme that recognises excellence among academics in the management, development and support of research staff**, a “PI Prize” similar to awards for teaching excellence, which would also provide a useful context to establish and test criteria for evaluating good practice in this area;
  - 8) **Guidance on the induction, probation and review of academic staff be revised to reflect the importance specifically of supporting researcher development** alongside other measures to improve communication with PI/LMs about the support and resources available for the career development of their research staff;
  - 9) **Consideration be given to the creation of an Exceptional Researcher Development Promotion Strand** to parallel the Exceptional Teaching Strand (annexe 1, 3) – this would be a significant indication to academic staff of the increased importance the University attaches to researcher development, and even more importantly an effective way to ensure that the University attracts and retains staff committed and able to sustain its position as a world-leading research institution;
  - 10) **Guidance and other steps taken to support greater recognition of researcher development in academic progression be kept under review** both to allow for evolving expectations over time and also for continued engagement with funders and other HEIs about good practice in evaluating excellence in this area.

### Next Steps

With the feedback of this Committee, a final version of these findings and recommendations will be presented to PCV-IIR and the Head of HR in order to support the forthcoming work of HR in developing and implementing the policies and guidance underpinning the new ACP model.

**Authors:**        **Dr. Lori Turner, President, Postdocs of Cambridge Society**  
**Dr. Tariq Masood, Chair, Departmental Postdoc Committees**  
**Dr. James Brown, Acting Secretary, PdOC, Secretary, DPCCN & Postdoc Staff**  
**Strategy Coordinator, OPdA**