

Research Staff Forum 28th July 2020

Summary

On 28th July, there was a special Research Staff Forum which focused on the recent RAS Engagement Survey. 21 colleagues attended the forum at which Professor Pam Thomas, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), talked about the issues raised in the survey and the University's response to them. These notes are intended as a summary of the forum.

Background to the RAS Engagement Survey

In March 2020, Professor Thomas asked for a survey to be undertaken to find out how the research community was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, and what support it required in these difficult times.

The survey was communicated via the RAS newsletter during April and May. Although there were only 41 responses, they were very rich in the insight they provided into the effect of the pandemic on the research community at Warwick. The responses were collated by Organisational Development and shared with Professor Chris Ennew, Provost, and Professor Thomas, and were subsequently communicated in the RAS newsletter.

Professor Thomas thanked everyone for attending the forum and gave a presentation on the key concerns raised in the survey and the University's response. The key messages in the presentation are summarised here (please see accompanying slides):

You asked for: reassurance that research is valued and the University will not undermine its research-intensive character (slide 2). Professor Thomas emphasised that the University continues its commitment to Warwick's research environment.

You asked for: the development and communication of a plan for delayed research (slide 3).

Warwick has been at the centre of strategic level discussions with funding agencies and government, to secure a strong and fair compensation package for the impact of Covid-19 on research. A £5.3m UKRI grant extension allocation has been awarded to Warwick for costed extensions to grants ending up to March 2021. This funding will be used to provide support for research and technical staff, extending contracts of researchers, allowing them time to complete their research and providing extra time for those researchers nearing the end of their contract to look for their next post. This funding will be distributed within certain disciplinary constraints and ensuring ED&I principles are taken into consideration.

The Wellcome Trust and British Academy have also offered costed extensions for certain schemes. National academies will provide further details on funding support.

You asked for: the effect of the pandemic to be taken into account in relation to promotion (slide 4)

Professor Thomas confirmed that promotion and probation will be considered in the context of the effects of the pandemic. The academic promotion framework allows for high levels of excellence in one or more areas of activity, therefore if research has been affected, excellence in other areas can be demonstrated. Changes to workload and rebalanced workloads will be taken in account.

You asked for: the effect of the pandemic to be taken into account in relation to probation (slide 5)

Probationary period extensions will be given where needed due to the impact of the pandemic. Extensions to probation can be given with no penalty.

You asked for: more clarity on expectations about teaching vs research (slide 6)

Professor Thomas is acting as a champion across the institution, for all levels of researcher. It is expected that research contracts will be honoured and staff treated fairly. Professor Thomas stressed the importance of collegiality and advised having an open and honest conversation with your line manager/HOD if they are asking you to do something you would not normally do.

You asked for: recognition of the challenges of home working and balancing family/caring responsibilities (slide 6)

There is a recognition that home working is difficult and that, depending on home commitments, this can really affect productivity. Professor Thomas advised discussing this with your line manager, supervisor or head of department so that they are aware of your situation and commitments.

You asked for: reassurance concerning the inability to conduct essential research (slide 7)

There is a gradual phased reopening of the University in progress with prioritisation in consultation with academic departments. Researchers should discuss with their HoD if they feel facilities should be reopened. Comprehensive risk assessments will be done and health and safety is the main priority.

You asked for: internal research funding (such as RDF) to be available to researchers (slide 8)

Impact Acceleration Accounts have continued to operate during the lockdown period. The Institutional Research Support Fund has been launched to support researchers to access funding for 'business critical' spend, which demonstrates the University's commitment to research.

You asked for: concerns about match funding and applying for grants with low recovery to be acknowledged (slide 9)

Researchers are being supported to apply to different funding schemes with a variety of factors being taken into consideration (see slide).

You asked for: more certainty regarding the REF (slide 10)

The REF submission deadline is confirmed as 31 March 2021. Preparations are well advanced and well organised. Departments are being supported to ensure they are in a strong position.

You asked for: more communications for the RAS community (slide 11)

Professor Thomas outlined many different communications that have been taking place during the pandemic and lockdown period (see slide) and promised more regular communications between the RSF and the PVC (Research) going forward.

Q&A

Q: Can you provide clarification over the UKRI allocation of £5.3m funding and how this will be used to support post docs?

A: The calculation of funding is based on Warwick's UKRI current live grants with a planned end date between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. This funding will support the University's current research portfolio over the next few difficult months, taking into account research that has been halted or compromised during the pandemic. One of the key objectives of this funding is to secure the key talent pipeline of research and technical staff. R&IS, in consultation with the PVC (Research) are working on a method of distributing the funding across the university. This will involve a light touch process to determine which grants need support and there will be some flexibility regarding re-allocating funding across the portfolio and between different activities.

Q: Can we have guidance on academic research and teaching contracts that are close to the end of probation. What is the situation if someone is not meeting all probation criteria?

A: The Provost establishes the Probation process with approval from the Academic Resourcing Committee. Senior managers are doing all they can to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on probation and are taking individual circumstances into account. Extensions will be given where needed with no penalty. It is suggested that you have an open and honest dialogue with your department head/line manager about your circumstances, and also that you keep a diary as evidence of the effect of the pandemic on your situation.

Q: Can you clarify that the extension to probation is without penalty. At the end of the 5th year everyone is given one additional year if needed.

A: The extension would be in addition to that additional year. It is advised that you have a discussion with your department head/line manager as soon as possible if an additional extension is likely to be needed.

Q: The money from UKRI calls for PI's to have live grants at the moment. Are they time limited?

A: The guidelines from UKRI state that funding should be used to support grants that are ending between now and March 2021. The University is reviewing how best to distribute funding to support those grants most at risk of not completing their planned research activities. We don't have all the details yet and are working on the process to best help the researchers affected; this will be done in consultation with academic departments and PIs. We will ensure that research colleagues aren't left high and dry.

Q: Is there anything available for grants that have just finished?

A: Any grants which have struggled to complete research and have ended since April 2020, should have already applied for no-cost extensions. R&IS have processed 50-60 requests for no-cost extensions. If a request for a no-cost extension for a project has already been accepted by UKRI, that project may receive support from the additional funding allocation, if it is considered a priority.

Q: The internal funding for open access is very interesting and encouraging. Logistically how will this work? Will it be centrally controlled?

A: Requests for open access funding will be approved in consultation with the Library, who are the open access experts. Any researcher unable to use the open access block grant, should state this when applying to the Institutional Research Support Fund – queries can be directed to Hattie Hine H.Hine@warwick.ac.uk.

Q: Is the guidance on applying for research funding available for researchers? Uncertainty in the Research Staff Forum suggested that the guidance is interpreted differently. Where is the criteria and which criteria applied to which situation?

A: Guidance on applying for research funding was sent to HODs, departmental administrators and research directors. This encourages academic departments and researchers to apply to a variety of funding sources and to maintain a mixed portfolio of research funders – including charity, industry etc. It guides those applying for funding to include costs where possible and to achieve the best margins possible, working within funder rules. The University is keen to enable sustainable research. Carole Harris will follow up as to making these guidelines available to individual researchers.