THE UNIVERSITY OF READING

STAFFING COMMITTEE

23/17   A meeting of the Staffing Committee was held on Tuesday 21 November 2023 at 10.00 am in Committee Room 2, Whiteknights House

Present:

Dr K Henderson (Chair)
Professor A Charlton-Perez
Professor F Hwang
Professor T Reid
Mrs C Rolstone
Mrs J Rowe
Mrs S Thornton
Dr A-M van Dodeweerd
Mr A J Twyford (Secretary)

Also in attendance:

Mr J Russell, HR Operations Lead

Apologies were received from Dr R Messer, Mr E Gregory, Mr S Hunt, Dr A Laville and Mrs S Thornton.

The Committee welcomed Dr A-M van Dodeweerd, Director of Research Services.

23/18   Membership, Terms of Reference and Disclosure of Interests

The Committee received a copy of its membership and Terms of Reference and a copy of a memorandum from the University Secretary in respect of Disclosure of Interests and the Committee's obligations in respect of the University's Risk Register.

The Committee noted the comments contained in the memorandum from the University Secretary in respect of disclosure of interests.

The Committee considered the risks on the register relating to the Committee and identified those relevant to the Terms of Reference.

The Committee discussed the University's decision to pause the reward processes during the 2023/24 academic year and the impact this may have in respect of Risk 1 - *Failure to recruit, retain, and develop both Professional Services and Academic staff due to competitiveness of recruitment market alongside challenges of sector pay and benefits package and rising workloads.*

It was agreed that the Secretary to the Committee would raise these concerns with the University's Risk Management and Business Continuity Officer.

Action: the Secretary to the Committee to inform the University's Risk Management and Business Continuity Officer of the Committee's concerns following the University's decision to pause the reward processes during the 2023/24 academic year and the impact this may have in respect of Risk 1.

Professor Reid indicated that a number of Universities had produced a one page overview of their University's Committee Structure, to help colleagues better understand and have transparency of the Committee structure, and asked if this was something the University of Reading could develop.

Action: the Secretary to the Committee to raise this matter with the Head of Governance Services

23/19 The minutes of the meeting held on 19 July 2023 were approved.

Arising from the minutes:

Minute 23/08 (23/02, 22/19 22/14): HR System

The Director of Human Resources reported that following careful consideration and with the agreement of the Project Committee it had been decided to extend the HRMS project go-live date into 2024. She stressed that the University remained committed to delivering a solution that meets our organisational needs.

She stated that the Project Committee had taken the opportunity to review the scope of the project and to re-plan what needs to be done, to ensure that it continues to be in line with institution-wide priorities including other projects across the University.

She expressed her appreciation to the many colleagues who had put in a huge amount of time and effort on the project including those colleagues who had put themselves forward as "champions" and engaged with colleagues and tested the new system. The new go live had now been set for Spring / early Summer 2024.

Given this is a significant digital strategy project the Committee sought reassurance that the HRMS project was being adequately monitored. The Director of Human Resources reported that strategic oversight of the HRMS project was with the Digital Project Committee, chaired by Dr Richard Messer, and that the Digital Governance Group oversaw the whole digital strategy and prioritisation, also chaired by Dr Richard Messer.

The Committee thanked the Director of Human Resources for the update.

23/20   Professional Services Progression

The Director of Human Resources reported that further developing Professional Services progression is one of the HR Strategy's key projects.

She stated that one of the challenges faced by the project team was the difficulty in obtaining good quality data held by the University on career progression for professional services staff, as the data held in iTrent is not reportable in this way.

As well as conducting a review of the available data, the project group i) arranged focus groups to gather qualitative data from Professional Services staff from across the University, ii) identified case studies of successful progression made by Professional Services staff, and iii) reviewed the current support mechanisms in place to support Professional Services staff development.

The Director of Human Resources highlighted some themes arising from the focus groups, namely that not all employees were aware of the wealth of support available for professional services progression, and more work was needed to embed a culture that enabled colleagues to be proactive in shaping their career development. As a result the following actions were agreed:

- The development of a Career Development webpage that will pull together links to existing resources and highlight cases studies;

- Further work in respect of Line Management training including:

    o a review of the New Line Manager induction – recognising that line managers need to be encouraged to be open to developing the careers of their team members;

    o the development of a new programme about conducting good one to one meetings, where discussions about encouraging career development is included.

- A review of the written guidance in respect of internal advertising to improve consistency as to when vacant posts should be advertised internally only.

The Committee made the following comments:

There is value in looking at what our competitors are doing by way of Professional Services progression – in case they are doing anything that would increase their competitive advantage over the University of Reading;

The University's Professional Services comprise a diverse and broad range of professional colleagues – they are not a homogenous group and have distinct professional progression routes;

A recognition that for some roles there is no obvious progression, and that the role holder may need to leave the University in order to progress / gain promotion, and this should not be viewed negatively;

Progression means different things to different people – for some individuals it's being able to access learning and development opportunities, and developing new skills and knowledge; for other individuals it's about moving to a higher grade (either following a recruitment & selection process or via re-grading). The Committee agreed that progression didn't always have to be about moving upwards – it can be about moving sideways (gaining new skills by working in a different team, Department etc);

Being able to access and obtain relevant data is important, not least to ensure our practices are fair and non-discriminatory – the new HRMS will help with this;

Some (non-academic) colleagues still expect to have the same opportunities for progression through a promotion process as applies to academic staff (via the Personal Titles process) – this expectation should be directly addressed;

The Director of Human Resources thanked the Committee for their comments and said this would be fed back to the project group tasked with reviewing Professional Services progression.

23/21 <u>Review of Interview Expenses</u>

The HR Operations Lead presented a paper setting out the University's approach to meeting costs / expenses when conducting interviews. The paper was intended to prompt discussion.

Currently, interview expenses are funded centrally by HR and where candidates are invited to in-person interviews/selection processes (where they live over 10 miles from the University) they can claim:

- The cost of economy / standard class rail or aeroplane tickets (airfares only applicable to Grade 6+ posts);
- Accommodation costs paid for one night up to £110 with candidates travelling overseas entitled to claim for two nights (following discussion with the HR Coordinator)
- Mileage for use of a personal vehicle;
- Subsistence costs – within specified parameters.

He stated that the cost of providing interview expenses had returned to pre-pandemic levels, and this indicated an increase in the level of in-person interviews. He acknowledged that there was a place for conducting interviews in-person and via Microsoft Teams.

He sought the Committee's views on:

- The use of video interviews (Microsoft Teams) where large numbers of candidates from outside Reading are being invited to interview, and where one or more candidates would be required to travel to Reading from outside of the south east of England;

- Conducting a two-stage interview process where only the second stage is conducted in-person. This would ensure that interview processes are considered both in the light of effective selection for a particular role and in the context of financial and environmental sustainability;

- The cost of interview expenses is no longer met centrally (by HR) and is picked up by the individual School or Function – to incentivise suitable choices and to support the principles of distributed leadership.

The following comments were made:

There was widespread support on the Committee that Schools and Functions should meet the cost of interview expenses;

Hiring managers should (and do) think about sustainability issues when making decisions about the most appropriate interview process – however, it was agreed that hiring managers should not make decisions about the interview process based solely on reducing interview expenses;

The general view from the Committee was that the most appropriate interview process would depend on a variety of factors including the specific nature of the role, the level / seniority, the number of candidates invited to interview – examples were given where the interview process had been solely in-person, or had been solely via Teams, or had been a combination of the two;

A request to generate guidance (for hiring managers) on when it might be appropriate to conduct the interview process in-person or remotely or a combination of the two;

We shouldn't underestimate the value of the University's lovely campuses when attracting candidates to roles at the University of Reading – it also easier to conduct practical tests / presentations in-person;

An acknowledgement that the advice and support from HR and in particular the HR Coordinators was important;

The Committee debated whether the University should pay interview expenses to candidates, and whether candidates should expect to meet these costs – it was recognised that this would deter some candidates from applying on the grounds of affordability. It was also noted that this would make us less competitive;

The HR Operations Lead thanked the Committee for its views.

23/22   Immigration update

The HR Operations Lead presented a paper outlining:

- The main routes for international staff to obtain a visa;
- Details in relation to the visa and immigration service provided by HR Services;
- The latest visa costs for the individual and the University (currently picked up by HR) including worked examples;
- The support provided by the University to reduce the financial impact on individuals with visa costs (specifically the visa loan scheme and visa expenses policy).

The Committee agreed that the visa costs to individuals and their families were considerable and could be prohibitive for prospective staff wanting to join the University. There was also an acknowledgement that not all recruiting managers will be aware of these costs.

The Committee discussed the increased visa costs and the potential impact on recruitment and retention of staff at the University, especially when factoring in other costs such as accommodation.

It was noted that some Universities, notably Russell Group Universities, pay all or some of the visa fees for their staff and their families, and this increased the competitive advantage over the University of Reading.

The Committee was reminded that the University's position is that only colleagues in externally funded roles and where specified in the grant are permitted to claim back the cost of their visa expenses (including the Immigration Health Surcharge). The HR Operations Lead said this sometimes presented a challenge as some Schools are keen to pay the visa costs on behalf of the individual. He pointed out that doing this would potentially create disparity between Schools and between individuals and would bring potential discrimination risks.

The Committee noted the resource within HR to provide a visa and immigration service was limited, and the current priority is to ensure that knowledge of the visa legislation and processes is shared amongst the HR Services team. The Committee also noted that the role of HR Services/the University was to provide information to managers/applicants on the visa process, and not to provide advice.

The Committee thanked the HR Operations Lead for the presentation.

23/23 Pay and Pensions update

The Director of Human Resources reported that following the tri-ennial valuation process, proposals were currently being consulted upon which would decrease both the employee / employer contributions required to fund the benefits structure of USS. The proposed contribution rates to the scheme would be lower than those being paid today (currently 9.8% and 21.6% respectively) and reflects the significant changes in market conditions at the time of the valuation. The anticipated implementation date for this change was in January 2024. She noted that this would have a beneficial impact on take home pay for colleagues in USS.

The Director of Human Resources mentioned that the 2024 pay bargaining round is scheduled to commence in January 2024. She also reported that the UCEA was working with the trades unions to review the national pay spine and agreed to report back to the Committee any outcomes arising from these discussions.

23/24   Annual Report – tackling sexual harassment and sexual misconduct

The Committee noted a report outlining the University's compliance with the Office for Students (OfS) Statement of Expectations to tackle harassment and sexual misconduct in 2022/23.

The Committee noted the many examples of good practice in relation to the reporting on data in this area, and the need to continue to communicate and raise awareness of the University's expectations and standards in relation to dealing with cases of harassment and sexual misconduct.

The Committee also noted the launch of the new platform for reporting sexual misconduct and harassment entitled "Report and Support". The Director of Human Resources said it was too early to provide the Committee with a report, and anticipated a report being available in the Spring / Summer term.

23/25   Pausing of reward processes

Professor Charlton-Perez asked for an update following the University's decision to review some of the reward processes during 2023/24.

The Director of Human Resources reminded colleagues that a number of reward and promotions processes at the University had been suspended for 2023/24. She also confirmed that the one-year suspension has provided the University with an opportunity to undertake work to improve the processes and systems used to run some of the reward schemes.

This included a full review of the current Reward Committee process that was considered by this Committee at its meeting in July 2023. It had been agreed that the Committee's comments would be fed back to the working group (comprising a number of Heads of School and Function) and a revised process would be brought back to a future meeting of this Committee (likely to be in the Spring / Summer 2024). She indicated that a revised process was scheduled to be launched for 2024/25.

She confirmed that the communications sent to all staff in August 2023 made it clear that all these reward schemes would return in 2024/25.

Professor Charlton-Perez asked that any review of processes and systems should be consultative.

23/26 Remaining dates of meetings for the 2023/24 Academic Session:

Tuesday 6 February 2024   2.00 pm to 4.00 pm
Wednesday 24 April 2024   11.30 am to 1.30 pm (reserve)
Wednesday 12 June 2024   2.00 pm to 4.00 pm