

# The University of Portsmouth Internal Evaluation Report for the Human Resources Excellence in Research Award at the Eight Year stage

The University of Portsmouth is a modern University with a growing research base and a reputation for excellence, recognised by its strong placing in various league tables. In 2020, following a period of consultation with all staff and many stakeholders, we launched our new University Vision 2030, and University Strategy 2020-25. Our recent entry into REF 2021 evidences significant growth in the number of research active staff, research income and further development of our research environment. At any given time, the University employs 120-140 Research Staff, depending largely on the number and type of externally funded research grants and contracts.

We have retained the HR Excellence in Research award since 2013, and have continued to document and monitor progress against the Concordat principles. We successfully renewed the award at the two-year (2015), four-year (2017) and six-year stages (2019).

In the 2019-21 Action Plan, we placed a particular emphasis on support for Research Staff whilst recognising that such staff are part of the wider research community that extended to include academic staff at different career stages. In the 2021-23 Action Plan we have further sharpened the focus on Research Staff.

## Internal evaluation process

Operational oversight for the HR Excellence Award falls under the aegis of the Researcher Development Group (RDG) (previously known as the Concordat Implementation Group), a formally constituted sub-group of the University Research and Innovation Committee which is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation). As part of the transition from Concordat Implementation Group to Researcher Development Group in 2019 greater emphasis was placed on researcher development across all career stages, rather than purely administrative oversight of the Concordat. Representation is now vertically integrated through the career lifecycle, with the convenors of the Research Staff Forum (who are Research Staff), Researchers' Network (early- to mid-career academic staff), Readers' Forum and Professors' Forum (herein referred to as RSF, RN, RF, PF or 'career-stage fora') all formally represented in the membership. The Graduate School is also represented in the RDG membership. Furthermore, there is representation from the Athena Swan core group, and the University's Equality and Diversity Unit, ensuring good communication between those groups and their respective action plans.

In creating the action plan, we have drawn heavily on feedback received from the career-stage fora via various routes including fora discussions, focus groups and surveys. We have undertaken a gap analysis which identified areas in which the University is working towards the obligations of the Concordat (e.g. annual review, and induction), and areas where there was already provision (e.g. opportunities for researchers and their managers to engage with policy development). We triangulated this gap analysis with the University's strategic imperatives, and the feedback received through consultation. Lastly, we cross-checked our gap analysis and forward looking action plan with the outcome of the recently completed 2021 CEDARS survey (May 2021). Our institutional CEDARS response rate was 15% for Research Staff, and 7% for academic staff. Our CEDARS

results are augmented by other engagement activities including pulse surveys, focus groups and forum meetings where the Research Staff voice, and the voice of academic colleagues was heard and responded to. Interestingly, some of the CEDARS findings are in tension with findings of this wider engagement, for example, our Research Staff have asked us for further careers support, and a recent careers webinar for Research Staff attracted ~30 people (about 20% of our cohort). In contrast, the CEDARS results indicated that Research Staff felt that they were well supported by their line-managers in terms of careers advice. In these circumstances, where we have substantial evidence that outweighs the feedback received by a small proportion of the community through CEDARS, we have retained relevant actions to develop and improve the activity and support that may already be in place for some, and aim to make experiences more consistent.

The action plan and gap analysis has been considered at RDG. The final documentation, including the action plan, and 8 yr review report have been discussed and agreed by the University Research and Innovation Committee.

## Key achievements

There have been some significant successes, in particular:

- **Launch of Principal Investigators (PI) guide website.** The original action was to produce a PDF style guide focusing on how PIs could support the career development of Research Staff, however, following consultation with stakeholders the scope expanded beyond career development to include induction, wellbeing, access to support networks, university systems and processes and resulted in a website;
- **Relaunch of the Research Staff Forum**, coupled with a new Researcher Development Group with enhanced remit, and representation through the full researcher career lifecycle. The RSF has been very active since this relaunch, between Feb 2020 and end of April 2021 they have delivered 9 events (most jointly with the Researchers Network) with 196 attendees. Furthermore, the Researcher Development Group has supported the Forum with activities to help understand the experience of research staff during the pandemic;
- **Inclusion of a specific strand for researcher development into the Themes initiative** through the Themes Research and Innovation Fellows programme for academic staff. The programme was disrupted by COVID-19 and has not yet completed, however, an interim survey indicated that Fellows were making good progress towards objectives, and the majority had, to date, received coaching and/or mentoring;
- **Increased public presence of our research staff through media work**, for example through encouragement and support for research staff to write articles for Conversation. In 2019/20 a total of 6 'The Conversation' articles were written by Research Staff (against a target of 3), 10 research staff accessed Media training, and 19 items featuring Research Staff were published on the University website (against a target of 10);
- **Addition of Grade 9 job specification for research-only staff** where previously the job family templates extended only to grade 8 (senior lecturer equivalent). In addition, detailed analysis of progression data indicated that the majority of contract staff gaining a permanent role had progressed from lower grades.

Additional actions, not in the original Action Plan, but led by, or contributed to, by members of the Researcher Development Group in line with our Concordat activity:

- **We have launched two new cohort based researcher development programmes** for Research Leadership, one targeting current or aspiring research centre/institute leads and the other Readers. These programmes include a day entitled 'Working with and developing

others', where specific reference is made to the Concordat and its requirements around support for Research Staff;

- **The University launched its mentoring programme for all staff** including Research Staff, comprising new software (Qooper) and online resources. The system is now used to facilitate mentoring within our Aurora, Navigator and Delivering Excellence programmes. Around 10% of Research Staff have signed up to date, and we will build on this in our new Action Plan;
- Following an extensive review and period of consultation the Director of CPD **led the launch of a revised and refreshed Research and Innovation Staff Development Programme (RISDP)**. This in part addressed issues that we faced of low attendance and cancellation. We made sure to make sessions available to Research Staff and in 2019/20 10% of attendees at RISDP training events were Research Staff, representing over one third of the Research Staff cohort at the University. This was a good improvement on the 2018/19 attendance date which showed that one third less of attendees at RISDP events were Research Staff (21% of cohort). Moreover, a pulse survey Dec 2020 with a 15% response rate showed 85% of respondents had accessed some form of development activity during 2019/20.

## Next steps and focus of the strategy for the next two years (incl. Success measures)

Following on from the gap analysis and consultation (see above) we identified five priority areas that are centred on Research Staff, and the support provided to Research Staff by academic Principal Investigators (PI) and the Institution. These five areas make a contribution to one or more of the requirements which we do not fully meet, as identified within the gap analysis. Where this is the case we have provided a cross-reference in the action plan to the relevant obligation and row. The Research Development Group will periodically review all obligations within the Concordat to ensure continuing alignment, and where possible, enhancement.

### Priority areas:

The five interrelated priority areas are provided below, mapped to the strand of the Concordat most resonant with the priority area, together with an indicator of the principal success measure:

1. **Embed 10 days of development time in our research culture and practices**  
(Professional and Career Development) [CEDARS Q14, Q30]
2. **Effective Performance and Development Reviews (PDRs) for all Research Staff, and for managers of Research Staff. The latter to include specific reference to their responsibilities for researchers in respect of the Concordat**  
(Professional and Career Development) [CEDARS Q21, Q25]
3. **Effective inductions for our Research Staff**  
(Employment) [Induction attendance, CEDARS Q20]
4. **Prepare our Research Staff for future careers**  
(Professional and Career Development) [CEDARS Q25, Q28, Q30, Q31,32]
5. **Foster effective engagement (in the issues of the concordat) across all stakeholders/levels: Institution, senior staff, PIs/managers of Research Staff, Research Staff**  
(Environment and Culture) [CEDARS Q43, Q45].

CEDARS questions will be used as our primary means of monitoring progress and measuring success, these are detailed in our forward-looking Action Plan. We will also continue the regular consultation with the four career stage fora and will work with these fora to hold focus groups and other similar means to capture qualitative feedback on progress towards the objectives of the action plan. Cutting across all of these areas are other institutional priorities relating to equality and diversity, in particular race and ethnicity, and gender. The University has identified race and ethnicity as a strategic focus in all areas of its business, and we will view each action through a race and ethnicity lens as we implement our Concordat Action Plan and put measures in place as required. Where there are overlapping objectives we are liaising closely with our Race Equality Charter working group, and, for gender, with our Athena Swan working group. In particular we have identified a suite of actions that specifically address race equality, including creating safe psychological spaces to have conversations about race & the research staff experience in the researcher community, and proactively improving the number/proportion of BAME staff either on RDG and/or working groups. Lastly, we are going to maintain our recent focus on researcher wellbeing that has been brought into sharp relief during the current pandemic.

**Addendum:**

The global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted upon the University's operations across all its activities including researcher development. At times resources have been diverted to other activities in response to COVID-19 and/or lockdown, therefore progress against some objectives is not as advanced as we would have hoped, particularly where actions required significant input from HR colleagues, as this is an area where pressure has increased significantly during the pandemic. On the positive side, the working from home arrangements, and the move to a more virtual working environment have provided opportunities for engaging with researchers in different ways.