

1. Nature of the Institution

Northumbria has held an HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiR) since 2013 and is a signatory to the **Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (RDC)**. Investment in our research ecosystem has brought significant results: REF2021 recorded Northumbria's biggest rise in research power ranking of any UK university, with 1,095 academic staff submitted, triple the 343 FTE in 2014.

The RDC supports our [University Strategy \(2024–2030\)](#), built around 3 interconnected Strategic Ambitions: Powering an Inclusive Economy, Creating New Knowledge, and Driving Social Mobility. The [Research SDP](#) and the [People SDP](#) are most directly relevant to the RDC, recognising that our ambitions require a stimulating, fair, and inclusive culture where staff have the skills to thrive, leaders inspire high-quality research conducted with integrity, and [Northumbria's Behaviours](#) guide everything we do.

Beyond the RDC, Northumbria is aligned to sector-wide initiatives including the Concordats on Researcher Development, Research Integrity, and Knowledge Exchange; the Technician Commitment; Race Equality Charter (Bronze, 2024); Athena Swan (Silver, 2025); Disability Confident Leader; Stonewall Proud Employer; and DORA.

2. Researchers the Institution Aims to Support

As of May 2026, Northumbria has 1,622 academic and research staff, 217 research-only staff, 212 technical staff, and 1,141 PGR students. This plan principally supports researchers on research-only contracts, particularly Research Assistants, Research Fellows, Senior Research Fellows, and postdoc ECRs, many on fixed-term contracts with distinct career development challenges. They are represented across School, Faculty, and institutional governance.

Progress across the three Concordat pillars will generate broader benefits for academic staff with significant research responsibilities, **Research Group Leads (RGLs)**, PGRs, and professional and technical staff. Northumbria takes an inclusive approach to ECR support: as the University transitions to a research-intensive institution, our provision reflects the full spectrum of need, from those beginning their research journey to established academics moving into research at a later career stage.

3. Evidence, Evaluation and Gap Analysis

The gap analysis combined a systematic desk-based audit of policies mapped against all 16 Obligations with a multi-strand qualitative consultation. Mechanisms included: CEDARS survey data; ECR Forum Menti surveys; Faculty and School SWOT analyses; two **Research Culture Committee (RCC)** workshops; an open consultation on the **Research Culture Action Plan (RCAP)**; and RGL workshops on high-performing, inclusive research communities.

Key findings that directly shaped the 2026–2029 Plan:

- **Career Development:** focus groups (n=10) in a research-heavy department highlighted barriers for researchers on short-term contracts, informing Action 12A: Career Readiness and Growth Programme for ECRs.

- **Concordat Awareness:** all activities identified uneven awareness among researchers and managers, and the need for embedded career development conversations, informing Action 1A: Embed Concordat Principles into Institutional Practice.
- **Mentoring:** CEDARS and Faculty SWOTs showed patchy provision, informing Action 16B: Diversifying our Mentoring Offer.
- **Leadership:** engagement with RGLs revealed many stepping into leadership for the first time, lacking structured support, informing actions around coaching, upskilling, and sharing good practice.

4. Governance Structures

Research Development Concordat (RDC) reporting is a standing agenda item on **Research Culture Committee (RCC)** which supports the broader research environment and culture at Northumbria, ensuring that the research strategy is delivered not only with a focus on outcomes, but with due consideration for the processes by which those outcomes are achieved and the maintenance of a fair, transparent and positive culture for all involved, including academic staff, research support, participants, partners, collaborators and other stakeholders.

The RCC meets at least four times a year, chaired by the **Dean of Research Culture (DRC)**. Membership includes representatives from all three Faculties (including Interdisciplinary and Peaks of Excellence voices), an ECR Representative, the Graduate School, HR, the Research Group Steering Group Chair, technical staff, members with lived experience (LGBTQ+, Global Majority, disability), Student & Library Services, the Chair of the Working Group for Responsible Research Assessment, and Research & Innovation Services (including the HR Excellence in Research and Responsible Research Assessment representatives). The RCC also operates a Shadow Chair scheme, giving colleagues experience of university committee processes; roles are held for one academic year.

RCC reports annually to **Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RAKE)**, which includes two ECR representatives (one research-only). RAKE reports to Academic Board in the first instance and then the **Board of Governors (BoG)**, which provides final approval of the annual progress statement, ensuring Concordat work is visible and accountable at the highest institutional level. Day-to-day monitoring and reporting are led by the **Researcher Development and Culture Manager (RDCM)**, who tracks progress against actions and reports to both the RCC and the wider ECR community through the ECR Forum. Many actions in the RDC Plan are aligned to the **Research Culture Action Plan (RCAP)** and are the direct responsibility of the broader Research Culture Team (DRC, **Head of Research Development and Culture (HoDC)**, and RDCM).

In Sept 2025, the University restructured from 4 to 3 Faculties. The new structure is still embedding, with Faculty Research Group reviews underway, expected to be complete across all Faculties by Sept 2026. Within the new structure, **Associate Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellors for Research and Knowledge Exchange (AFPVCs)** and **Assistant Heads of School for Research and Knowledge Exchange (AHoSs)** now have Research Culture explicitly embedded in their role descriptions, enabling a more consistent institutional approach to research culture governance. The Research Culture Team meets regularly with AFPVCs and AHoSs to discuss and review Faculty Research Culture Plans, with RDC actions central to developing fair and inclusive leadership, mentoring, and Responsible Research

Assessment principles. Advocating for and monitoring progress on the Concordat is embedded in Faculty Research Culture Annual Plans.

5. Past Progress and Achievements

Pillar 1: Environment and Culture: Our [Research Culture Action Plan \(RCAP\)](#) for 2024–2027 sets out our Research Culture Principles, Initiatives, and cross-cutting activity to grow a more vibrant, fair, and inclusive research culture. The RCAP is a living document, developed through iterative consultation and designed to evolve in response to emerging issues. It builds on existing work while bringing together Research Culture activity and external obligations (RDC, Technician Commitment, Responsible Research Assessment) under clear governance and leadership. Culture change takes time; our actions are deliberate steps in that direction.

A significant area of work has been our engagement with Research Group Leads (RGLs). Research groups are inclusive communities of academics, technicians, and postgraduate researchers with broadly aligned interests, operating at a scale that fosters mutual support, collaboration, and shared purpose, key ingredients for high-quality, impactful research.

A Research Group Steering Group has been established to shape events and resources for this community. It has developed a set of Principles for High Performing, Inclusive Research Communities, designed to embed open, inclusive, and reflective practice through empowering leadership and community-building. The Principles cover: **Psychological Safety:** encouraging open discussion and respectful feedback; **Inclusive Engagement:** enabling participation from PGRs and ECRs in Research Culture; **Collaborative Leadership:** sharing leadership roles with ECRs; **Engaged Collaboration:** co-creating research questions with community partners; **Championing Researcher Career Development:** ensuring ECRs, PGRs, and technical staff can attend relevant events; **Adaptability and Improvement:** regular reflection on group practices and culture

Other achievements include the Rejection and Resilience initiative, which has supported researchers with one of the most common but least-discussed challenges in academic life, and the development of Responsible Research Assessment principles, including the removal of quantitative metrics such as H-Index from academic recruitment and progression.

EDI is a major area of progress. A new Disability Action Plan launched in late 2025. The Vice-Chancellor's Diversity Fund has supported 58 projects since 2019, focused on disclosure barriers, inclusion barriers, and diversifying leadership. Four new Equality Forums (Gender, LGBTQ+, Disability, Race) each have a senior institutional sponsor. An EDI self-assessment tool and toolkit are available in the Researcher Development Hub, and refreshed EDI training, incorporating harassment and sexual misconduct content in response to OfS regulatory condition E6 and the Worker Protection Act, has been rolled out institution wide.

Pillar 2: Employment: The **Academic Development Review (ADR)** has been refreshed for 2025/26, with a new Contextual Factors process, enhanced guidance, and the removal of metrics from progression and recruitment. Library Goals for Research Colleagues have been introduced in NU People and Finance, providing pre-populated goals aligned to core research roles from probation through to PDA. The Sabbatical Procedure has also been refreshed to support academic colleagues at every career stage.

Pillar 3: Professional and Career Development: In 2024 we began a review of our Researcher Development offer, aligning it to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF). In 2025, a RIS Working Group conducted a gap analysis and developed new content

to address identified gaps. The refreshed offer is now structured around six pillars (webpages are in development to improve discoverability): **Professional and Skills Development:** due diligence, impact & engagement, ethics, IP commercialisation, PhD supervisor training, project management; **Online Resources:** Principal Investigator Hub, Research Development Hub, and ECR Hub; **Cohort Programmes:** Vice-Chancellor's Fellows Development and Networking Programme, a Project Development and Application Planning offer for UKRI, and the Research Group Leads Programme; **Research Careers:** ECR Forum (career development and networking), Research Strategy building, PROSPER Researcher Hub (postdoc career development), and delivery partnership with the North-East Northern Ireland (NENI) British Academy ECR Network; **Research Systems Support:** Ethics, PURE, Worktribe, Research Connect, and the Research Quality Review System; **Culture and Wellbeing:** writing retreats, rejection and resilience, and broader Research Culture activities including EDI and Responsible Research Assessment.

Moving to 2026/27, priorities include embedding efficiencies across the RIS offer, piloting new provision, deepening collaboration with Professional Services, and undertaking systematic content reviews to keep the offer current and responsive and strengthening our evaluation feedback loops.

In 2025, we established the Leadership Retreat and Leadership and Management Foundations Cohort Programmes, recognising the need for managers who are self-aware, build trust, lead with clarity and compassion, and embody Northumbria Behaviours. These programmes created psychologically safe spaces for meaningful development, with participants describing the experience as transformational.

The 2025 PGR Conference (attended by over 100 participants) featured well-received career panels and sessions on careers beyond academia; feedback will inform the Career Readiness and Growth Programme for ECRs.

6. Strategic Objectives 2026–2029

The 2026-29 Plan embeds Concordat activities within Faculty structures and planning, marking a transition from review to active engagement and evidence-based evaluation. Our actions are designed to move the University from compliance to sustained cultural change, working closely with research-only staff, Faculties, Schools, and Research Groups to meaningfully improve the lived experience of our research community.

Pillar 1 - Environment and Culture: From Awareness to Advocacy: To address uneven Concordat awareness across the University, evidenced through the CEDARS survey and ECR Forum feedback, we will embed Concordat principles across all researcher-facing and leadership touchpoints. Our ambition goes beyond closing a knowledge gap: we aim to shift institutional culture from awareness to advocacy, where researchers, managers, and leaders actively champion Concordat principles as drivers of a better research environment.

We will begin with a "What can the Concordat do for you?" session for postdoctoral and early-career researchers, reframing the Concordat as a practical tool for securing better conditions, fairer employment practices, and meaningful career development. Concordat principles will be integrated structurally into Research Group Lead role descriptions, Research Group Steering Committee activity, and PI and project management training; ensuring those with direct responsibility for researchers understand their obligations as leadership commitments, not administrative requirements. Dedicated marketing collateral, developed under the Research Culture brand, will be deployed across all relevant researcher-facing touchpoints.

Pillar 2 - Employment: Stability and Structured Progression: This pillar addresses two persistent challenges: career pathway clarity and employment insecurity. The line and project management offer for managers of researchers will be strengthened, with particular focus on postdoctoral transitions, through targeted postdoc-specific training, a managing researchers module within the Project Management Essentials Programme. EDI will continue to be embedded across research processes, with a dedicated session at the 2027 Annual EDI Conference. Data from CEDARS, the Staff Engagement Survey, and the EDI Annual Report will drive evidence-based action, and ECR representation on RaKE and Research Culture Committee will ensure research-only staff remain central to governance.

Pillar 3 - Professional and Career Development: Confidence, Skills, and Movement: This pillar reflects the University's commitment to supporting researchers in building resilient, purposeful careers across sectors and trajectories. An integrated Career Readiness and Growth Programme for ECRs will be co-created with research-only staff and piloted by December 2027, incorporating a Researcher Career Toolkit anchored in resilience, strategy, and ideation, and an upskilling pathway drawing on the Vitae RDF 2025 and the PROSPER toolkit. The programme will be fully self-sustaining and evaluated by July 2029.

A distinctive action this cycle is the Ambition and Adaptability Coaching Conversation Framework, piloted at the June 2026 Research Groups Conference, equipping managers and leaders with tools to normalise rejection and failure as structural features of ambitious academic careers. A biannual external funding and sector careers event series will also target ECRs and postdocs.

The Diversified Mentoring and Coaching Scheme will deliver structured peer-to-peer and group mentoring using the 'Time to Think' (Nancy Klein) methodology, piloted with two ECR cohorts by July 2027, with at least 80% of participants reporting increased confidence or career clarity, and extended to a cross-institutional matching scheme from 2029. A Research Strategy and Planning Programme will equip leaders to articulate their research identity, align with funding agendas, and cascade strategic thinking across their groups.

7. Conclusion: What Change We Want to See:

Over the next three years, we will advocate for the Concordat's benefits and develop managers who are confident and equipped to support researcher careers and wellbeing. Through our RCAP, we aim to build a visibly inclusive and equitable research culture where all researchers, and all who support the research endeavour, feel valued and able to thrive. Aligning our RDC commitment with our Research Culture Principles, we will challenge inequalities in the research ecosystem so that every researcher can pursue and produce high-quality research in all its forms, and everyone who contributes is recognised for doing so we will:

- 1:** respect and value the contribution of all who support, engage in, and enable research
- 2:** support researchers to build the capacity and confidence to produce high-quality research and develop their careers
- 3:** conduct, share, and evaluate research with integrity, openness, and fairness, promoting trust in research and recognising that quality takes many forms
- 4:** foster a creative, curious, and collaborative environment that enables ambitious, high-quality, and impactful research.

This statement has been approved by Prof Louise Bracken, PVC Research and KE