

Introduction

Northumbria University received the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2013 and has achieved renewal at subsequent reviews in 2015, 2017, and 2019. During this time, Northumbria has been on a transformational journey to place research, alongside education, at the heart of all our activities. Our strategic investment in building our research capacity has changed the University's academic make-up and is exemplified by our REF 2021 submission of 1096 academic staff, triple the size of the submission in 2014 (REF 2014, 343 FTE submitted). We currently have a small (156 staff) but growing cohort of contract researchers (c.9% of our academic and research staff). We continue to take an inclusive approach to identifying our internal early career researcher (ECR) cohort, including Post-Doctoral Research Assistants (PDRAs) and contract research staff, final year Postgraduate researchers (PGRs), and Vice Chancellor Fellows (VCFs), but recognising that established academic staff may be moving — even at a later stage in their academic career — from teaching-focussed responsibilities to developing a research track record. As a result, we take a broad approach to support for researchers and implementation of the Concordat principles, recognising that the needs of those starting out on their research journey, may differ from those in established academic posts who are nevertheless new to research.

The evaluation of Northumbria's Action Plan 2019-20 (Appendix 2), and development of the future Action Plan 2021-23 is undertaken by the Researcher Development Strategy Group (RDSG), which replaced the Concordat Steering Group in 2019. The RDSG was established to ensure strategic alignment of key objectives around developing a supportive and inclusive research environment within which researchers are given opportunities to develop their skills and careers. The RDSG is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), who is the University Executive Sponsor for the Concordat; and this high-level leadership emphasises its strategic importance and the significant changes in the Concordat following its update. The RDSG has eight ECR members, two from each Faculty, which also includes contract research staff representation. RDSG is a sub-group of, and reports to RaKE (Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee), which also has ECR staff representation. The RDSG meets quarterly to review and evaluate progress against the action plan, monitor and update our GAP analysis, and discuss any areas requiring action. It also progresses initiatives linked to researcher development, institutional research culture, and the ED&I agenda. The ECR Forum Management Group (constituted of the RDSG ECR members) reports into RDSG on its activities and actions on the Concordat and meets at least quarterly. The Management Group gathers feedback via Faculties and Departmental networks and regular ECR forum events to ensure that researchers are given opportunities to contribute directly to the development and implementation of the action plan, and issues of research culture. Qualitative feedback on research staff concerns is also channelled via RaKE and the Scholarly Communications Group. The evaluation and forward plan have also drawn on a range of formal evaluation mechanisms including *Vitae's, Culture, Employment, Development and Research Survey*, staff surveys, and PRES (for PGR related actions). This is supplemented by advice and guidance from the BAME Network (members of which also sit on RDSG), and ECR forum meetings. This submission reports on progress against the old Concordat. Future priorities and the new Action Plan for 2021-23 are mapped on to the revised Concordat released in September 2019, of which Northumbria is a signatory.

The impact of Covid-19 can be seen throughout both action plans as we adapt to different ways of working and supporting our colleagues. Whilst this has provided challenges, many opportunities have also arisen, such as virtual coffee mornings for ECRs, increased attendance at online training courses (versus face to face), online grant writing workshops, and increased support from HR for researchers in managing their work from home and supporting their wellbeing. As we continue to adapt through the Covid-19 pandemic, we look in the forward action plan to embed the positive behaviours and activities that have emerged over the last year.

Key Achievements and Progress

Recruitment & Selection, Recognition & Value.

We remain committed to recruiting academic staff on open-ended contracts where these are not posts linked to the delivery of research projects funded by external sources; 90% of CEDARS 2020 respondents were on an open-ended contract. We have done this through sustained investment and improved support for researchers on both open-ended and fixed term contracts. During 2019/20 we invested over £2.2M – and have so far invested a further £2.5M during 2020/21 - in the VCF scheme which offers permanent appointments; over the last four years this has been a **significant** step change in our recruitment of ECRs and demonstrates Northumbria's recognition of the sector wide issue of secure job contracts for ECRs. Our competitive VCF scheme received 1,056 applications for 35 posts for the round which closed in 2019. Following this highly successful campaign we made a further round of appointments which doubled the total of VCFs to 70. Appointees are offered permanent posts, assigned experienced mentor(s) and allocated quality time to undertake and develop a strong research track record (for example many have little or no

teaching in year one), and subject to successful completion of probation and achievement of objectives, progress to Lecturer or Senior Lecturer roles after the first three years (sooner in some cases).

Northumbria's growth in research grant income (RGCI has more than doubled from £4.6M to £10.0M over the REF 2021 period) has led to a rise in the number of contract research staff (currently c.156 contract researchers, from c. 52 in 2013, indicating we still have relatively low numbers of contract researchers when compared to the sector). However, this does not mean we are complacent in our support for research staff on fixed term contracts. All contract research staff have annual appraisals with their line managers, where career management conversations are encouraged. We ensure that terms and conditions, employee rights, and benefits, are the same for comparable permanent staff, (our Staff Survey showed that contract researchers (77%) feel they are paid fairly and are satisfied with the non-salary benefits the University provides). In addition, colleagues who have longer service are given 'prior consideration' for any potentially suitable vacant roles. The impact of taking this pro-active approach to supporting staff on fixed-term contracts means we have successfully extended employment beyond the original end date in around a third of cases. Nevertheless, a gap identified by CEDARS is the confidence that line managers feel in discussing redeployment opportunities, and this is addressed in the future action plan (Action EI4).

Northumbria places great importance on probation, and a review of probation arrangements was completed in 2019, with the new system launched in September 2019. Moving our probation process online has enabled better monitoring around completion of this process, including for contract researchers (Action 5.2); a well-defined and supported probation process is a key theme of feedback from the ECR forum. We have developed a supportive and structured approach to help colleagues integrate quickly and become familiar with our culture, values, and policies. The new online probation system captures objectives, development needs, resources and support required, and progress reports, and is used to support both contract research staff, and permanent ECR staff, to develop their research profile. HR Managers can also access completion data which was not previously available enabling any concerns to be highlighted and addressed early. The Performance and Development Appraisal (PDA) process is completed annually and encourages colleagues to reflect on their achievements over the year, and plan for the year ahead, by identifying their individual development needs. Results from CEDARS 2020 showed that 72% of respondents had completed an appraisal, compared with 63% for the sector.

To support career progression and ensure that promotion pathways are transparent, Northumbria has implemented an award-winning (UHR National Awards 2018) Academic Career Framework. It standardises and clarifies roles and expectations and includes clear career pathways and progression routes up to Professor (Appendix One). Academic career progression is open to all based on merit and is not limited by quotas (results from CEDARS 2020 showed that 55% of respondents were aware of the pathways at Northumbria, compared with 49% in the sector. This is positive but shows we still have some work to do on awareness raising, see Action EI5 of the 2021-23 plan). Developing our internal research leadership mechanisms has been a key priority for Northumbria in the last two years and underpins our research strategy and builds support for ECRs through research mentoring (Action 3.2). A new leadership role of Associate Professor was created in 2016, to recognise an individual's research contribution and leadership within their discipline; currently we have 173 colleagues in Associate Professor roles (a growth of 22% in two years) who provide key academic leadership and mentoring to new and less experienced research colleagues. Guided by the ECR forum and RaKE, mentoring remains a key issue for ECRs, and we plan to further develop our mentoring programme through a centralised framework (see Action PCD14 if the 2021-23 plan). Recognising that technical staff are also part of the Concordat remit, a comprehensive review of technical structures and role responsibilities was completed and implemented during 2019/20 (Action 1.5). New role descriptions and person specifications have been developed for roles at all levels. These set out the role responsibilities, expectations and criteria required at each level, and we hope to measure the impact of this from the next staff survey.

In tandem with this investment in our research capacity, we have continued to invest in our professional services and infrastructure to support this growth and have begun to develop new policies and practices to strengthen research leadership and research culture (Action 2.5; 3.2), and additional posts to support research staff in developing successful funding proposals through bespoke training programmes which are open to contract researchers (Action 3.1; 4.1). RIS continues to work with Faculty Research Ethics Directors to embed research ethics and integrity training through the implementation of a new online ethics training module which includes ethics reviewer training (Action 4.4) for academic staff (including contract researchers), and PGRs. Oversight of both the Concordat to Support Research Integrity and the Researcher Development Concordat with RIS allow us to utilise synergies between the Concordats (evidenced in Action Plan 2021-23).

Researcher Support, Career Development and Inclusivity

Sustained and comprehensive researcher development and career support remain integral issues for the ECR forum, who help to steer the University in development of its researcher training offer. We are committed to supporting and embedding an inclusive and collegial research culture and have been proactive in supporting the professional development of contract researchers, PDRAs and ECRs (Action 1.2; 1.3; 2.1). We encourage researchers at all career stages to utilise opportunities open to them, supported by their appraisal, coaching, training, and sabbaticals. ECRs, PDRAs and contract researchers are integrated into Departmental research groups which foster a strong sense of community through regular activities such as research group meetings, seminars, grant-writing workshops, as well as Faculty based research mentoring and department-wide research events (with 71% of respondents saying they feel included in their immediate research environment/ group, CEDARS 2020).

We continue to invest in researcher development programmes to support researchers and have redesigned our delivery in the wake of the pandemic to online modules (with 76% of respondents accessing training and development opportunities, CEDARS 2020). In 2019 RIS undertook a significant review of our researcher development offer and have tailored our researcher development to career stage (Action 4.1). Our flagship Early Career Researcher Development programme is open to any researcher who identifies as an ECR, including contract researchers (Action 5.1; 5.3). It has three taught elements and a 4th session for a writing retreat/1:1 surgery with our Research Development Managers. Participant numbers have increased over the academic year, from the first cohort of 28 to the third which now has 58 participants. This is reflected in our CEDARS 2020 results which show an increase in researchers accessing career development and training 76% (from 69% in 2019). A visible benefit of working remotely has been researcher's ability to participate in more researcher development activity, with attendance for programmes delivered by RIS at least doubling. Given this impact and the positive feedback for the programmes, many of these sessions will continue to be run virtually over the next academic year, with complementary face to face sessions when needed. This increase in attendance and researcher development activity was echoed by the Library Researcher Development Programme, which was delivered virtually via Blackboard Collaborate (Action 2.4). This included, 'Copyright essentials for researchers', 'Measuring research impact for your literature review' and 'Introduction to research data management'. Fifteen sessions were delivered, and the total number of participants was 395. Northumbria is committed to the aims and principles of open research and has issued an open research statement and is a signatory of DORA. The University has an institutional repository for research data (Figshare) promoting the principle and supporting infrastructure for open research data (Action 2.4). The Scholarly Communications Group (also a subcommittee of RaKE, and with researcher representation) drives Northumbria's approach to creating an open research environment and ensures that we are engaged and responsive to developments such as Plan S, rights retention and transformative publishing deals, and responsible metrics (see Action EI3 in 2021 – 23 Plan).

A key focus for Northumbria during the Covid-19 pandemic has been developing the wellbeing offer, raising awareness of support available, and helping staff to feel connected in a dislocating time. In 2020 the wellbeing team ran 24 events relating to Mental Health Awareness, with a total of 133 attendees (Action 3.3). There were also 15 sessions delivered on Developing Personal Resilience with 77 attendees. During the pandemic a new session called 'Taking control of your work and wellbeing' was delivered - ran nine times during 2020 with 55 colleagues attending and there are now 32 trained Mental Health First Aiders. This significant piece of activity, although aimed at all staff, has impacted positively upon researchers as reflected in our CEDARS 2020 results which demonstrate the number of respondents accessing mental health and wellbeing training is 73%. During the Covid-19 pandemic we have refreshed our induction arrangements and developed new online induction materials and guides. All ECRs, contract researchers and PDRAs are invited to attend a re-designed University-wide Welcome Event which is led by the VC or Deputy VC and provides information on the mission and strategy of Northumbria as well as an opportunity to network and find out more about University (Action 1.2). Staff undertaking research are also invited to attend the Research and Knowledge Exchange induction which was introduced in 2020. The improved induction experience has seen increased satisfaction levels, rising by over 20 percentage points (Institution level induction 53.6 % found useful (CEDARS 2020) compared to 30% in CROS 2019). A new action (EI2 in the 2021-23 plan) has been developed, to build on this.

As described earlier, our ECRs (broadly and inclusively defined) take a leadership role in the development of their communities through the ECR Forum Management Group, made up of eight ECRs (including contract researchers) from across the University (Action 2.1). The ECR Management group shapes the content and programme for the ECR Forum and membership is renewed every two years. Covid-19 has meant that there was a pause on most ECR Forum activity between March 2020 and March 2021. Nevertheless, a number of activities were held including a welcome event (October 2019), five ECR led writing retreats between

October 2019 and February 2020 (Action 2.1). CEDARS 2020 survey result indicate that access to career development and training opportunities rose to 76% from 69% in 2019. Meanwhile ECRs have created virtual coffee mornings to support each other during the Covid-19 pandemic, while HR and RIS have developed a number of online resources for researchers (Action 1.4). Furthermore, following feedback from the ECR Forum on publication writing development opportunities, Northumbria has invested in two external training programmes for researchers (Action 2.2). The first, Nature Masterclasses for Researchers, has 131 users on this programme in STEM discipline areas. In May and June 2021 workshops will be held for researchers in humanities, arts and social sciences.

Our commitment to ED&I underpins the University's Vision 2025 and Strategy, and is inclusive of all staff, at all career stages. To support our ED&I goals all staff are required to undertake mandatory equality and diversity training (Action 6.1). The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion mandatory training module was redesigned and re-launched in 2020 to be more specific to Northumbria, and to include Unconscious Bias (CEDARS 2020 results show that 81% of respondents had completed ED&I training, and 71% felt the institution is committed to equality and diversity). Furthermore, our Staff Survey data shows that most contract research staff believe the University respects individual differences (84%); and personally, feel they are treated with fairness and respect (93%). Northumbria was awarded a Bronze Athena SWAN Award (STEMM) in 2015 (Action 6.1) which catalysed fundamental changes to its ED&I structure, and researchers are included on the self-assessment team. The University renewed its award in 2020 under the broadened criteria covering Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law, Professional Support and trans staff and students. The 2018-2023 University Strategy embeds a timeline for all departments to achieve Athena Swan recognition and the first subject awards in Business and Law, Geography and Environmental Sciences, Nursing, Midwifery and Health, Psychology, Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation, and Social Work, Community and Education have been granted. Several other departments are due to submit their applications in 2021. These changes are positively reflected in our CEDARS 2020 data which shows that respondents 71% of respondents felt Northumbria was committed to equality and diversity, however to build on the impact our ED&I activity is having on researchers, a new action is included in the 2021-23 plan (Action EC12).

The ED&I committee, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, has five sub-groups (Unions Special Interest, Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team (SAT), Accessibility Review, LGBTQ* Steering Group, and the Race Equality Charter SAT). Faculties have a Director of ED&I, Departments/Services have EDI leads and our HR service has a Head of EDI as well as an Organisational Development Manager (EDI) and a Race Equality Manager. Northumbria is a member of the Stonewall Diversity Champion Programme and is self-assessing against the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index. Northumbria is also a signatory to the Race Equality Charter, and we are developing actions to support this where the Concordat and Charter intersect (Action ECF1; EM1, 2021 – 23 Plan).

Next Steps: Our strategy and success measures for the next two years

The University Strategy aims to develop *'Exceptional people empowered to achieve shared ambitions'* and our researchers are a key part of this vision. Continued investment from the University in research professional support will see the appointment in June 2021 of a dedicated Researcher Development Manager to deliver bespoke training to researchers, and the appointment of a Research Culture and Quality Manager who will monitor and deliver actions from the Concordat.

Our Concordat Action Plan 2021-23 (Appendix 3) sets out the focus for the next two years, and a gap analysis will be undertaken every six months as part of the RDSG responsibilities. While Northumbria's CEDARS 2020 results highlighted that some measures of Concordat implementation are more positive than is the case nationally (e.g. recruitment and selection; ED&I training; wellbeing support), there is further development needed in specific areas (e.g. line management support, career management training), and our strategic focus on developing our research culture. The ECR Forum has also emphasised the importance of continued publication support, and careers & employability training for contract researchers, and it will conduct an ECR survey to further evaluate the needs of our researchers. The RDSG has also developed strategic links with other Groups working on ED&I issues such as the Decolonising Research Network and will further enhance engagement with Faculty and Senior Leadership in the delivery of this agenda through RaKE, Directors of Research, and Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellors. These comprehensive feedback routes have led to the development of our Action Plan 2021-23 and ensure that collectively researchers voice and needs are listened to and met. Our success will be measured by the specific SMART deliverables agreed in the plan. Our success indicators include evidence of progress and improvement from CEDARS response data and response rate compared with previous years. Wider outcomes will be monitored through the research strategy, RDSG, and RaKE, and Concordat activities and principles will continue to support our people policies to ensure a consistent approach to sabbaticals, mentoring, and retention for researchers.