

## Introduction

Northumbria University received the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2013 and retained it after the two-year review in 2015, and four-year review in 2017. During this time, Northumbria has undergone a major transformation, prioritising research alongside education and investing in our people, facilities and infrastructure. Our strategic investment in building our research capacity has changed the University's academic make-up and there is now an expectation that all academic staff undertake teaching and research activity; we therefore take a holistic approach to implementation of the Concordat principles recognising that many of our academic staff can benefit from the aims of the Concordat. To support this step-change to become a research-rich institution we have taken an open and inclusive approach to identifying our internal early career researcher (ECR) cohort, including contract researchers, Post-Doctoral Research Assistants (PDRAs), who may be a subset of contract researchers, final year Postgraduate researchers (PGRs), Lecturers and Vice Chancellor Fellows (VCFs), but recognising that some established academic staff are — even at a later stage in their academic career — transitioning from teaching-focussed responsibilities to developing a research track record. We currently have a small but growing cohort of contract researchers (c.7% of our academic and research staff), and therefore the Concordat's principles underpin activity aimed at contract researchers and our other research and academic staff groups. As a result, we take a comprehensive approach to support for researchers and implementation of the Concordat principles, recognising that the needs of those starting out on their research career, may differ from those in established academic posts who are also new to research.

The review and evaluation of Northumbria's Action Plan 2016-18 (Appendix 2) is undertaken by the Concordat Working Group (CWG). CWG is a sub-group of, and reports to RaKE (Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee), which is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), who is the University Executive Sponsor for the Concordat. The CWG is Chaired by the Faculty Associate PVC (Research and Innovation) Business and Law. The CWG meets quarterly to review and evaluate progress against the action plan. Contract research staff and ECRs have provided valuable input to the action planning and evaluation phases of the exercise via several Committees on which they are represented, including; the ECR Forum, the Concordat Working Group, RaKE and Faculty Research and Knowledge Exchange Committees. The evaluation and forward plan have drawn on a range of formal evaluation mechanisms including, CROS & PIRLS survey data 2017 & 2019 and our Staff Survey data 2018.

## Key Achievements and Progress

### Investing in Researchers

We have been able to attract and retain excellent researchers at Northumbria over the last two years through sustained investment and improved support for researchers on both open-ended and fixed term contracts. During 2016 and 2017 we invested £2.5M in recruiting 26 VCFs initially on fixed term contracts with a commitment that they would move to permanent contracts subject to satisfactory completion of probation and achievement of objectives. At least 27% of these colleagues have since successfully secured permanent contracts with us.

In 2019 we have invested a further £1.4M in recruiting another 35 VCFs (Actions 1.1 & 1.4). The VCF scheme now offers permanent appointments; this is 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, PDRAs and contract researchers. Our competitive VCF scheme received 1,056 applications for 35 posts for the round which closed in 2019 and appointees were offered permanent posts, assigned experienced mentor(s) and allocated quality time to undertake and develop a strong research track record (for example many have no teaching in their first year). Subject to successful completion of probation and achievement of objectives, these colleagues will progress to Lecturer or Senior Lecturer positions after three years.

We are committed to recruiting academic staff on open-ended contracts, except where posts are externally funded and linked to the completion of specific research projects. However, Northumbria's growth in research grant income (RGCI has grown by 80% since 2013) has led to a rise in the number of contract research staff (currently 99 contract researchers, from 52 in 2013). Our commitment to appoint new staff on open-ended contracts, wherever possible, means that we still have relatively low numbers of researchers employed on a fixed term basis when compared to the sector. Where fixed-term contracts are utilised, we ensure that terms and conditions of employment are the same as for comparable permanent staff and that contract research staff enjoy the same employee rights and benefits as permanent staff (our Staff Survey 2018 showed that contract researchers feel they are paid fairly and are satisfied with the non-salary benefits the University provides (77%)) (Action 1.1). Supported by HR, Line Managers work proactively with individuals well in advance of their contract end date to engage in 1-2-1 discussions focussed on career planning

and future employment options (Action 1.2). Taking a proactive approach to supporting staff on fixed-term contracts we have successfully extended employment beyond the original end date in around a third of cases (Action 1.1).

Through our inclusive and collegial culture, we have been proactive in supporting the professional development of contract researchers, PDRAs and ECRs. For example (Action 1.2 & 1.3) ECRs, PDRAs and contract researchers are integrated into Faculty/Departmental research groups which foster a strong sense of community through regular activities such as research group meetings, seminars, grant-writing workshops, Faculty based research mentoring and Department-wide research events. Contract Researchers, including PDRAs are, encouraged to present their work and to discuss their research and writing plans at research group meetings. Contract researchers at all career stages also routinely receive support from Departmental research budgets to attend external networking events, such as conferences, and workshops. This approach is positively reflected in CROS 2019; 77% of our contract research staff had engaged in career and personal development. We have also 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 Northumbria's Vision and Strategy as well as an opportunity to network and find out more about University service-leads and staff (Action 1.3).

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 1). Academic career progression is open to all based on merit and is not limited by quotas. Developing our internal research leadership mechanisms has been a key priority for Northumbria in the last two years and underpins our research strategy (Action 2.2 & Action 3.1). 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 144 colleagues undertaking this role. This group are key mentors to our ECRs.

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 developed new policies and practices to strengthen research leadership and research culture. Within Research and Innovation Services (RIS) this includes; an additional post dedicated to supporting researcher development and Concordat implementation; and additional posts to support research staff in developing successful funding proposals through mechanisms such as improved funding intelligence, ECR training programmes open to contract researchers, ECR cohort support and tailored feedback on grant applications (Action 2.1). In 2019 RIS introduced the PURE research management system for academic staff and postgraduate research students (Action 4.4). This enables comprehensive web-profiles for academic and research staff, and PGRs which gives researchers new opportunities to promote their research and grow their research profile. Following on from the introduction of a robust ethics online approvals system we have further embedded research integrity and governance through the implementation of a new online ethics training module (Action 3.3 & 4.3) for academic staff (including ECRs); contract researchers and PGRs.

### **Researcher Support, Career Development and Inclusivity**

We have significantly invested in researcher development programmes to support researchers (with 70% of our contract research staff taking up training opportunities, CROS 2019). Research mentoring is embedded across Faculties and is open to all academic and research staff (Action 4.5.1). RIS have undertaken a significant review of our researcher development offer which is tailored to discipline and career stage (following ECR feedback, Action 2.1). We offer significant support to our ECR communities through training, mentoring and peer review in order to enable them to gain Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (Action 4.2). Our contract researchers are encouraged by the Departmental Teaching and Learning Directors, where relevant, to apply for associate membership of the HEA. Our Next Generation of Large Award Holders Programme is aimed at our future research leaders and supports ECRs to secure their first big grant. The programme has over 90% satisfaction rates and is oversubscribed (Action 4.1).

Moving our Performance Development Appraisal (PDA) process online has enabled better monitoring around completion of this process, including for contract researchers (Action 1.4). The comprehensive PDA process encourages colleagues to reflect on their achievements over the year, and plan for the year ahead, including identifying their individual development needs, resources and the support they need to ensure they are successful. Career planning discussions also take place at least annually. PDA is positively reflected in our Staff Survey 2018 which showed that 95% of contract research staff respondents engaged with the PDA; and 81% agreed that they received constructive feedback on their performance and acknowledgement when they do their job well (91%). Echoing these findings our CROS 2019 data showed that 80% of respondents found the PDA process useful.

We encourage ECRs to take a leadership role in the development of their communities through the ECR Forum Management Group, made up of nine ECRs (including contract researchers) from across the University (Action 3.4). The ECR Forum Management group shapes the content and programme for the ECR Forum. Two events held in 2018/19 focussed on Researcher resilience and career support. Contract researchers are also integrated into Faculty ECR groups and each Faculty holds an annual doctoral conference.

A key group of ECRs at Northumbria are staff whose roles have focussed on learning and teaching who are new to research. We have provided enhanced support for existing colleagues to make the transition to engaging substantially in research alongside teaching. We continue to provide support to this cohort (including time and other resources) to help them to develop their research skills by doctoral study where this is considered to be beneficial (Action 5.1). We encourage researchers at all career stages to utilise opportunities open to them, supported by their appraisal, coaching, training, sabbaticals, secondments, and placements for PGRs – including staff supported to undertake doctorates (Action 5.1 & Action 5.2).

Our commitment to ED&I underpins the University's Vision 2025 and Strategy, and is inclusive of all staff, at all career stages (Action 6.1). To support our ED&I goals all staff are required to undertake mandatory equality and diversity training, which includes unconscious bias training (Action 6.1). In addition, we have signed up to the Stonewall Diversity Champion Programme and delivered a comprehensive programme of Inclusive Sport initiatives. These changes are positively reflected in our CROS 2019 data which shows that 77% of our contract research staff thought that Northumbria was committed to equality and diversity, and our Staff Survey 2018 data which shows that the majority of contract research staff respondents believe the University respects individual differences (84%); and personally feel they are treated with fairness and respect (93%).

The recently launched 'NU Women's Network' comprises research, academic and professional support staff (Action 6.1). Two listening groups have been held one focusing on flexible working and the other on career progression. Feedback from these is currently being analysed and will inform new policies such as our changes to flexible working and our move to all roles being advertised as open to part time/job share/flexible working arrangements, unless exceptions apply. We will also remove the current six-month qualifying period to request flexible working which is in place in our current policy. Our progress can also be measured in the achievement of a reduction in our gender pay gap between 2017 and 2018. At 14.16% our mean gender pay gap is lower than both the sector average and the UK average for all industries, and it is reducing. We are taking further action by ensuring that market-based recruitment and retention supplements, eligibility for bonuses, allowances and pay protection will be assessed for equality impact.

The CWG continues to have oversight of the University's Concordat Action Plan with a renewed membership which has increased ECR representation (following feedback from the four-year review), and now includes representation from UCU, Library and Technical staff, who had not previously been involved (Action 7.1). Membership was also expanded to include the HR Manager (EDI) and further align the quality assurance the Concordat brings with other governance and equality charters such as Athena Swan.

## **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. Our Concordat Action Plan 2019-2021 (Appendix 3) sets out the focus for the next two years. While Northumbria's CROS and PIRLS 2019 results highlighted that some measures of Concordat implementation are more positive than is the case nationally (e.g. appraisal review) there is further development needed in specific areas (e.g. induction, career management). Our ECR Forum feedback sessions have also emphasised the importance of publication support, and careers & employability training for ECRs and contract researchers. These results have fed into SMART actions which are included in the Action Plan 2019–2021 (including Actions 1.3, 1.4, 2.2, 2.4, 4.1, 5.1 & 5.3). As well as these actions, Northumbria will also:

- Begin working with contract researchers and technical staff as distinct cohorts to better understand the experience of these groups, particularly in areas where surveys indicate below the benchmark results, through focussed engagement and discussion.
- Further enhance engagement with Faculty and Senior Leadership in the delivery of this agenda.

Our success will be measured by the specific SMART deliverables agreed in our forward plan. Our success indicators include evidence of progress and improvement from 2019 to 2021 CROS and PIRLS response data and response rate compared with previous years. Wider outcomes will be monitored through the research strategy 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.