

Context of Institution: Northumbria has held an HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiR) since 2013 (last renewed 2021) and is a signatory to the new “Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers” launched in Sept 2019. Our strategic investment in building research capacity is demonstrated by success in the Research Excellence Framework (REF2021) - Northumbria University had the biggest rise in research power ranking of any UK university for the second time. Our REF tripled from 343 FTE to 1095 academic staff between 2014 and 2021.

Target Audience: At April 2023, we had 1,708 academic and research staff of which c.10% (n175) are contract researchers (research only) (this is an increase from c.9% (n156) in 2021 which is low for the sector), 119 technical staff and 1098 PGRs. The increase in contract researchers is attributed to our successful growth in Research Grant & Contract Income (RGCI), and we are committed to connecting and integrating those staff in our academic departments. RGCI has more than doubled from £4.6m to £10.0m over the REF 2021 period & continues to grow (£22.9m at year end 2021-22). We take an inclusive approach to supporting academic staff at an early stage in their career, including PDRAs and contract research staff, PGRs, and Vice-Chancellor Fellows (VCFs) and academic staff who are within the early stages of permanent roles. We have a broad approach to support for researchers and implementation of the Concordat principles. As the University is transformed into a research-intensive university, we recognise that established academic staff may still be moving - even at a later stage in their career - from teaching-focussed responsibilities to developing a research track record.

How the internal evaluation was undertaken: To develop the 3-year forward looking plan Researcher Development Steering Group (RDSG) carried out a gap analysis using a Theory of Change model to prioritise actions against the Concordat commitments. RDSG developed a shared vision, key outcomes and activities for the Concordat, putting happy researchers at the heart of the plan with better quality, more impactful research, and integrity and good conduct embedded in our research culture. To achieve the vision, outcomes were described as: improved research environment, better collaboration between industry policy makers and the public, Northumbria is known for its excellent researcher development offer (with better engagement), improved funding applications and better recognition and understanding of the value of academic citizenship.

In May 2022 we commissioned our first Research Culture Survey (RCS) and participatory (15 colleagues) workshops consulting all staff who conduct, enable and support research, setting a benchmark against progress in the 2-year backward plan and a baseline from which to measure initiatives to develop and improve our research culture. The survey engaged researchers (at all career stages and contract types), technical staff, PGR students and research support teams to capture their experiences and understanding of research culture and how we are performing against the Concordat Commitments. The survey was themed around **mentoring and support; career development and progression; research assessment and evaluation; research integrity & ethics; open research**. Of the 428 survey respondents 13% were on fixed term contracts, 40% considered themselves early career and 33% mid-career. 61% (n235) of researchers who had been here >5 years felt that research culture had improved in the last 5 years with 26% feeling it had improved a lot. Positive findings included: strong collegiality in departments/groups (70% agreed) and research quality and integrity are particularly valued (74% agreed). Survey outcomes fed into a shared vision for research culture that enables our individual and collective research ambitions and identifies areas for improvement which will be prioritised through the HRX 3-year plan and in our emerging Research Culture Action Plan. Both plans were also informed by external surveys (CEDARS 2020 & PRES 2022) and supplemented by advice and guidance from the BAME Network, members of which also sit on RDSG, and ECR forum meetings.

Governance structures: The RDSG is responsible for embedding the principles of the RD Concordat within relevant HR initiatives, is responsible for both the forward- and backward-looking actions plans, reporting annually on progress to the Board of Governors. RDSG is chaired by the PVC for Research & Knowledge Exchange. As of July 2021, membership includes senior representatives and 2 ECR from each of the 4 Faculties (including contract researchers), a member of technical staff whose role involves undertaking research and representatives from HR, RIS, Graduate School, and Library. The parent body of RDSG is Research & Knowledge Exchange Committee (RaKE), which also has ECR representation. RDSG meets quarterly to review and evaluate progress against action plan, institutional research culture and the EDI agenda. The ECR Forum Management Group (constituted of the RDSG ECR members) meets quarterly and reports activities and actions on the Concordat quarterly into RDSG. This Group gathers feedback via Faculties and Departmental networks and ECR forum events ensuring researchers have opportunities to contribute directly to the development and implementation of the action plan, and issues of research culture. RaKE also collects concerns from research staff.

The University is committed to sector-wide initiatives to enhance research culture, including: The Technician Commitment, The Concordat to Support Research Integrity, The Race Equality Charter, Athena Swan Charter, Knowledge Exchange Concordat, San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). A new Research Culture Committee will support their implementation at Northumbria, and seek to simplify and integrate planning, reporting, and measuring their impact. We hold an institutional Athena Swan Bronze Award (2015) and Bronze for all academic departments. Our Research & Innovation Service (RIS) are preparing a Bronze Award submission, the first professional services team to do so. The EDI Committee oversee, monitor, and report on the progress of EDI matters, chaired by our Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive. An EDI representative is on RDSG.

Past progress and achievements

There has been significant and positive progress made on our 2021-23 action plan, and some actions that will roll forward detailed into the 2022-26 plan.

Environment and Culture

In Nov 2021 we signed the Technician's Commitment and co-created, with technical staff, an institutional 24-month action plan. Technical staff are encouraged to take part in our full range of researcher development activities, and we launched a Technical Staff Homepage (Jan 2023) to highlight funding opportunities, professional and personal development, resources, news, and development opportunities available specifically for technicians.

A new mentoring framework has been developed and rolled out to Professional Support staff. Online resources and regular Mentoring Briefing Sessions are now available. Academic colleagues are mentored locally in Departments with resources freely available to access for all staff. Action on academic mentoring will roll forward into the new plan.

We launched (Oct 2022) an Internal Seed Corn Fund (2 rounds a year), open to all research staff including contract researchers. The fund supports research, impact and knowledge exchange, policy engagement, participatory research and research culture projects, and collaborations between our Newcastle, London and Amsterdam campuses. Income was distributed via a university-wide competitive process with an anonymised reviewing process. In total, £980,892 was awarded. 244 applications resulted in 86 awards. Monitoring is in place to evaluate the process and ensure the investment levers future research success or research culture improvements. Applicants prepared their budget in Worktribe, a new a costing, pricing and approval system (April 2022) that enables researchers to prepare costings for Research & KE project proposals within funder and University regulations.

Employment

A new 'Unacceptable Behaviours Policy' and reporting mechanisms for staff and students (launched Dec 2021) mean we are compliant with funder terms and conditions. However, our Research Culture Survey (2022) results show only 53% respondents were satisfied with how bullying and harassment is addressed in their department. There is activity required to embed behaviours and anti-bullying and harassment policy into our research culture and we have an accessible online tool for colleagues and students to seek support and/or report their concerns if they experience, or witness, unacceptable behaviour. By identifying and calling out such behaviour, our aspiration is that everyone in our University Community can flourish professionally, academically, and personally. Northumbria's Values & Behaviours': Academic Excellence; Innovation; Inclusivity; Collaboration & Ambition initiative, launched 2022 following a broad consultation process with input from all staff and developed by colleagues from across the University, presents the guiding principles that outline what is most important to us all and the practical applications of these values. They provide clarity on how we do things as individuals, as a collective, and as an organisation.

A more holistic, and inclusive, Academic Development Review (ADR) process (introduced Nov 2022) has replaced the annual Academic Promotions round, focussing on the development of all colleagues. Instead of applying for promotion, colleagues make a submission through a transparent, inclusive, and devolved process intended to remove any potential or perceived bias and improve the success rate of under-represented groups. Absence of promotion quotas means all colleagues meeting the criteria will be promoted.

Our REF 2021 submission highlighted sabbaticals were not routinely made use of across all academic departments so as part of the Academic Career Framework, we relaunched new sabbatical arrangements supporting all colleagues to develop their knowledge, skills and experience at each stage of their academic career, including regular periods of sabbatical. Sabbaticals last up to one semester (15 weeks). All eligible independent researchers will be supported to take a sabbatical every 7 semesters (once every 3.5 years), with regular uptake central to research culture at Northumbria and a key process to ensure academic colleagues can undertake quality research.

We remain committed to recruiting staff on open ended contracts when posts are not linked to externally funded research project delivery. We are proud of our track record responding to the cost-of-living crisis and are developing terms and conditions for all staff that are among the very best in the sector. We have introduced some of the most generous maternity and paternity provisions, raised the pay of our lowest paid colleagues and agreed to match or better the Voluntary Living Wage; and equalised annual leave entitlements across the University to seven weeks with an innovative scheme to allow colleagues to sell one week of annual leave (equivalent to an annual salary increase of 1.92%). We received an Advanced Award for the Good Work Pledge (2023), launched by North of Tyne Combined Authority, in recognition of the great work we do against all five pillars of good practice and building a thriving workforce and a thriving North of Tyne economy.

We have developed an 'Inclusive Recruitment' toolkit with recommendations to include positive EDI statements for inclusion when advertising vacancies and sample, evidence-based questions for use in interviews. This supports other key activity such as mandatory EDI training & Unconscious Bias training which 127 people attended in 2021-22.

Professional & Career Development

We support professional and career development through the Researcher Development Programme. We offer 3 Cohort Programmes (ECR, Future Research Leaders & Fellowship Ready) and in 2023 we piloted Funder Specific Writing cohorts and a new approach with the

Faculty of Business & Law, with co-created cohort programmes around their specific needs. Our 2022 Research Culture Budget allocation enabled us to work with over 10 new external delivery partners to offer new programmes and sessions, including personal, professional and skills development sessions in varied delivery formats: online, self-paced, in person.

The relaunched ECR Forum (over 50 attendees) has a planned networking event in May 2023 and an interdisciplinary workshop in Sept 2023. The Forum's allocated budget will enable members to develop a seminar series with invited speakers and other opportunities to network. Following feedback from ECR Forum and cohort programme we created a dedicated and easy to find hub of resources specifically for ECRs. The Hub brings together internal and external resources and opportunities specifically for the ECR audience. The Researcher Development webpages now incorporate themed offers from all professional support services. A monthly Researcher Development Bulletin is sent to all academic, technical and professional support staff that support and enable research. A new PI Toolkit signposts resources and contacts to facilitate the successful management of grants.

In Jan 2022 we appointed a Dean of the Graduate School, with responsibility for enhancing the PGR student experience at the University. Current ECR training and development offer, and the ECR Forum is now offered out more broadly to our PGR community. Our PGR Directors developed new in person, scenario-based PhD Supervisor Training to enhance the current online offer and enable supervisors with differing experience to come together to share best practice, these sessions have been well attended and will run in Faculties once each semester.

To review the quality of outputs prior to REF2028, and develop capacity for researchers to conduct peer review, we launched a Research Quality Outputs system in 2023. This enables researchers to develop reviewing skills, improve their outputs, raises visibility for peer-review support processes, and creates an equitable output review system across the university.

Strategic objectives & implementation plan

How the strategy aligns to the broader Institutional strategy: Over the last two years the work to enable the Concordat principles has occurred alongside a broader university drive to create a supportive, inclusive, ambitious, diverse research culture that helps all our researchers and those enabling and supporting research to flourish. Our emerging Research Culture Action Plan sets out Northumbria's commitment to supporting and sustaining an inclusive and healthy research culture. This plan goes out for consultation in June/July 2023. From 2023 the Dean of Research Culture (DRC, appointment May 2023) will Chair a new Research Culture Committee (RCC) to set the ambition for the different Charters, Concordats, and Declarations that we are committed to delivering. Terms of reference for RCC have been agreed at University Executive.

The Research Culture Action Plan supports delivery of the University's Research & Knowledge Exchange Strategy 2023-2029, to ensure that alongside delivery of high-quality research, due consideration is given to the processes in which those outcomes are achieved and the maintenance of a fair, transparent, and positive culture for all involved in research. From 2023, implementation of the action plan will be monitored by the cross-institutional RCC, a subgroup of RaKE. Work related to the Concordat will sit within the RCC Chaired by the DRC. This Committee will have Concordat progress and reporting as a standing agenda item. RDSG will continue and be called upon as a working group when required. University Business Outcomes relating to the Concordat include Research Culture & Environment (new BO: Transformation in Research Culture) and Researcher Development (BO 012: Increased levels of quality research grants and contracts applications).

How it addresses gap analysis against the 3 Concordat principles, high level actions and success measures we plan to put in place to meet any gaps

Environment and Culture

With the appointment of a DRC, the Concordat obligations and action plan will be embedded into the RCC. A new Communication Plan will ensure all stakeholders are aware of their Concordat responsibilities. A consultation is underway on the draft Research Culture Action plan. RCC will monitor and evaluate progress, including towards our Concordat Commitments. Almost 1000 people across all academic departments, career stages and professional support services have taken part in Strategy 2024-30 consultation workshops. The process builds on the collaborative work to develop our 'Values & Behaviours' in 2022.

Employment

By reviewing our Induction process we will ensure all new staff have an excellent on-boarding experience with contacts, resources, support and tools to enable them to flourish. We will work with the VCF cohort to develop a university wide holistic approach to Induction and interview a group of new starters to reflect on the experience and improve future offer.

Following the launch of the ADR we will develop Case Studies around successful promotion through 1:1 interviews demonstrating different pathways to promotion, particularly highlighting cases of women and BAME colleagues' promotion.

We will better communicate that the Research Incentive Fund (RIF) for PI & Co-Is can be used flexibly to bridge short term RA contracts between research grants and will use 1:1 interviews across career stages to show ways RIF has supported high quality research.

Professional & Career Development

We want to improve the weak areas highlighted by our RCS. Mentoring across academic Departments is still not an equitable experience so we will roll out and review a new mentoring framework to all academic staff, ensuring all ECRs (including contract researchers) have access to a mentor and can share best practice.

We will develop a communications plan and induction materials around the Concordat, highlighting the expectation that research staff take minimum of 10 days professional development pro rata per year. Research Culture workshops raised the issue that it was unclear who was responsible for delivering training and support, and webpages were difficult to navigate. We will review the current web offer and ensure it is appropriate for the needs of our community. RIS are working with all Professional Support Services that deliver researcher development (Graduate School, Organisational Development, Library (Scholarly Communications Team) & Marketing) to provide a more linked, holistic development offer.

For 2023 we are investing in an additional cohort of new Vice-Chancellor's Fellows (across all career stages) and have shortlisted 40 applicants from 600. The next VCF cohort will be inducted through a new Fellowship Academy and offered a bespoke researcher development programme appropriate to their career stage. To bolster research leadership, members of the Academy will engage in peer-to-peer mentoring and develop their leadership skills and academic citizenship within and outside the Academy.

To formalise our internal peer review processes and propose recommendations that will support a university-wide best practice for internal peer review we are piloting Worktribe peer review functionality across 3 Departments. If successful, this will roll out across all Departments in September 2023, providing a more consistent and equitable approach to peer review across the University.