

## **HR Excellence in Research Award Eight Year Review: Contextual Report** ***(covering the period January 2019 – May 2021)***

### **Introduction and Background**

In November 2009, the Research and Knowledge Transfer Office (RKTO) and the department of Human Resources (HR) completed the first self-audit against the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2008) and identified an action plan which was approved by Senate in June 2010. The University of Chester achieved its first HR Excellence in Research award in 2012 and successfully renewed the awards in 2014, 2016 and 2018. We have been working with the 2019 Concordat since its publication.

Since the last award review, the University has continued to progress its research agenda with increasing levels of grant and contract income awarded across a wide range of subject areas. Highlights can be found in our Annual Review here: <https://www1.chester.ac.uk/annual-review-2020/our-year-highlights> The REF2021 preparations, now completed, have enabled us to continue our focus on reviewing and planning enhancements to our research culture and infrastructure. The University has now finalised and approved a new Research & Knowledge Exchange (R&KE) Strategy with considerable input from colleagues across the institution and support from the new Vice Chancellor (who joined the University in January 2020). This change in leadership has also meant that the process of updating the University's Corporate Plan (the 'Citizen Student strategy') is ongoing with consultation with colleagues across all areas. Both of these strategic documents and the process by which they have been created or developed, affirms the importance of fostering a culture of personal and professional development, attracting and retaining a skilled workforce and to the creation and propagation of knowledge with recognised impact and excellence. Our community of researchers (used in the broadest sense - to include research and academic staff) therefore continues to remain vital to the achievement of our research ambitions.

### **Evaluation process**

For the award renewal, our internal evaluation process involved a working group of five key members of staff in RKTO now known as RIO (Research & Innovation Office) and HR who worked through and continually updated the action plan from the last review with our achievements and progress. Our evidence base for the forward looking action plan was a report of the analysis of the 2020 CEDARS survey which was distributed to staff employed on either an academic or a professional services contract as a *research only* member of staff. Participation in the survey was to gather general feedback but also to allow some comparison with national results. As such, we have produced a separate report on the results of this survey. We plan to hold focus groups approximately twice a year with survey respondents and our researcher population to address the findings of the survey, with the first meeting planned for June/July 2021. A steering group continues to oversee and advise on the review process as well as monitoring progress on the action plan. The steering group comprises of: the working group members, two researchers from different faculties, two research assistants including a third faculty, a line manager of researchers, an early-career academic and a Head of Department - the aim being to capture a wide range of perspectives.

The steering group were invited to:

- Review progress against the 2019-20 action plan;
- Review the analysis of the 2020 CEDARS survey;
- Identify strategically important areas and key priorities for the future and formulate new actions;
- Advise on consultation with a wider researcher group; and
- Recommend the action plan to Research & Knowledge Transfer Committee and Strategic Executive Team (SET) for approval.

Institutional approval is provided at the most senior level with Senate delegating authority to the Research & Knowledge Transfer Committee to undertake the final approval and submission of the renewal documents once the SET (which includes the chair of Senate) have also confirmed their support. Senate will receive a copy of the final submission documents for information.

### **Ongoing monitoring**

Since the last review, changes to some of the monitoring arrangements have been implemented and continue to work well. The working group met quarterly in 2019 and increased the frequency of meetings through 2020 to ensure momentum was maintained in the lead-up to the renewal deadline. We sought an extension to the deadline due to overlap of key team members working on REF and KEF submissions and additional pressures/workload in response to the impact of Covid-19. The steering group continues to monitor progress on a quarterly basis and submits an annual update to the Research & Knowledge Transfer Committee. We have retained overlapping membership with the Athena Swan steering group in order to ensure the two action plans work in tandem and that researchers are considered within our work on gender equality.

### **Governance Structures**

The review has taken place within the following Governance structures at the University. The steering group reports to the University's Research & Knowledge Transfer Committee. This committee is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) (Research & Innovation) and includes the Director of Research & Knowledge Transfer (also a member of the HREiRA working and steering groups), representation of academic colleagues across all faculties, knowledge exchange professionals and the Student Union. This committee, in turn, reports to the University Senate which is chaired by the Vice Chancellor and whose membership includes all PVCs, Deans of Faculty, Directors of Service, senior staff representatives from across academic faculties and professional services and representation from the Student's Union.

The steering group will have ensured that the correct approval steps are taken before the final renewal application is submitted i.e. Research & Knowledge Transfer Committee to approve first, with final approval and sign-off to be provided at institutional level from the VC via the SET and Senate.

### **Institutional Context/Challenges**

#### **Institutional Context**

The University of Chester is a teaching-led institution which currently employs approximately 1750 staff and 14,300 students. There are 7 academic faculties located across 6 sites in Cheshire, Shropshire, Warrington and Wirral. The University's R & KE strategy focuses on four interdisciplinary Core Themes, which build upon existing strengths, reflect the institutional values, and contribute to all United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The core themes are:

- Health and Wellbeing;
- Culture and Society;
- Sustainability and Environment;
- Regional Economy

#### **Researcher population and representation of key stakeholders**

In applying for the HREiRA and its subsequent renewals, we have consistently defined the researcher population as those staff who were employed on research only contracts. At Chester, this number is small – typically around 30 (currently there are 43 staff that meet this definition) in comparison to the broader academic staff. With the publication of the new Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, we opened up a discussion within both our working group and steering group to explore the possibility of applying the 'researcher plus' definition to our academic population and thereby widening the scope of direct beneficiaries. After careful consideration taking into account advice sought from Vitae, it was agreed to continue to focus on the '*research only*' staff as the *primary* beneficiaries of the Concordat so as to avoid any dilution of resource or support to this small group of specialist staff. However, our aim is to ensure that the principles of the Concordat are to the benefit of all of our academic colleagues.

#### **COVID-19**

The global pandemic inevitably created challenges for us as an institution both in relation to the review process and also in our ability to conduct research. For many of our colleagues and students, research methods had to adapt to align with Government guidance and restrictions and so we saw an increase

in data gathering being moved to online methods rather than in person. Research involving overseas travel had to be paused and we sought other ways in which to support our researchers through this difficult time. One such initiative was to divert some of our QR funding to support short term research projects which had a COVID focus. We released two calls for applications – in May and June 2020 and awarded more than £110,000 to 15 different projects across a broad range of disciplines. Despite the pandemic we continued to maintain the momentum regarding working group and steering group meetings and these all moved online through Microsoft Teams.

**Key Achievements, Progress and Ongoing Actions for the period 2021-2023**

Good progress has been made against the action plan submitted at the 6 year review. With a priority to enhance the research culture across the University, our strategy is necessarily long-term and evolving over a number of years. Our continuing aim is to improve the quality, reach and impact of the research we undertake and harness this new knowledge to improve our teaching and student experience.

**Environment & Culture:**

Achievements	Significant improvements have been made regarding the resources available to researchers and the implementation of the 'Researcher Hub' on the University's intranet platform (Portal) has been key here. We have established a mentoring scheme and currently have 15 research mentors signed up to this with 4 mentoring relationships created to date. The Research & Knowledge Exchange Festival is now a popular annual event and provides a broad range of sessions which our researchers can access; thus providing more formal networking opportunities.
Progress/ Ongoing Actions	The new R & KE Strategy, which will run until 2026, is a key development since the last review and will underpin progress moving forward. The vision is to raise the profile of research within the University by creating four Research Institutes aligned to the core themes of the R&KE Strategy. The aim of these institutes is to bring researchers together into larger units of critical mass which will, in turn, contribute significantly to the improvement of the University's research environment. In support of our ongoing commitment we have ensured that all Researchers have access to the Concordat and are aware of our obligations as an employer. We will continue to ensure it is included within the resources of the Researcher Hub and email a copy directly to all research staff. We will also continue to promote and support good research practice, for example, by encouraging researchers to complete the 'Research Integrity' online training (which we provide through Epigeum) and to discuss the management of integrity within research more broadly with colleagues, RIO and through dedicated working groups as appropriate.

**Employment:**

Achievements	The new online orientation programme designed to support new employees has seen an increase in the completion rate among newly appointed research staff (35.71% compared to 33% at the last review). We also successfully reinstated information about research within the University's institutional induction or Welcome event and addressed feedback on concerns that employment contract type might mean that research staff may be perceived less favorably. A guide called ' <i>Professional</i> ' vs ' <i>Professional Services employment contracts</i> ' was published in April 2020 and is available to all staff on the Portal. The guide contains information about the differences between professional contracts and standard professional services contract for grades OS9 and above, promotional protocols, and role re-evaluation. In answer to the CEDARS 2020 question "when you started with your current employer how useful did you find your induction at institutional level?" 60% of respondents found it "useful" or "very useful".
Progress/ Ongoing Actions	RIO continue to routinely contact all new academic and research staff by email to introduce the service, highlight support for research and forge links. We will continue to work to ensure that managers of researchers are effectively trained in relation to equality, diversity, wellbeing and mental health. As part of this, we are revising the University's Induction Policy which will include: rebranding as the <i>Welcome and Orientation Policy</i> ; a recorded session covering research strategy, policies and practices and where to access resources/information on the Portal Researcher Hub as part of the virtual Welcome events which

	<p>are facilitated 3 times per year; ensure RIO participate in the Welcome Q&amp;A panel event; monitor online orientation process engagement which identifies activities at departmental/local level; develop a Leading and Managing from the middle developmental programme for 'middle' managers– this will include managing and leading research staff; signpost researchers to the Researcher Hub via the online orientation process; ensure the Researcher Hub includes the following resources: <i>Citizen Student Strategy</i>; <i>R&amp;KE Strategy</i>; <i>Career Development Policy</i>; <i>Managing Your Career Guide</i>.</p> <p>We will also review the existing competency framework to ensure it aligns to the new Citizen Student Strategy; Introduce/launch the new INSPIRE Values together with the revised competency framework; integrate and embed both into all HR policies/procedures/practices in particular the Performance and Development Planning online system; explore contextual factors/logistics of bringing together the WAMS processes and PDP processes under one policy e.g. <i>My Contribution Policy</i>.</p>
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### Professional and Career Development:

Achievements	<p>The fund to support researchers wishing to attend conferences for development purposes (which complements schemes designed for research dissemination) has been rebranded the '<i>Early Career Researcher Fund</i>'. Since 2019, 16% of research staff have benefitted from the scheme. We expect to continue including this funding within the RIO budget to allow more researchers to benefit.</p> <p>The continual development of the Researcher Hub on Portal has provided improved access to training, information and resources. More recently, an events calendar has been added to link to any University events (training or other) which feature 'research' in their title or description. Training needs analysis has been strengthened via the online PDP. 100% of researcher respondents to the CEDARS survey confirmed that they had completed/engaged with the PDP process. We will continue to monitor and manage PDP participation rates for all research staff as this includes career development conversations and personal/professional development plans to support performance in their current role and in support of realistic career aspirations.</p>
Progress/ Ongoing Actions	<p>Other feedback from the University staff and CEDARS surveys indicated a very positive response regarding researchers taking responsibility for their own development with 60% of respondents keeping a formal record of CPD activities. In addition 60% of staff felt encouraged to engage in personal and career development and 60% of respondents confirmed that they had a clear career development plan. We will also ensure that managers of all research staff are aware of the <i>Managing Your Career Guide</i> which includes information about conducting career conversations increased participation in PDPs &amp; staff survey.</p> <p>Work on the Careers Pathways Framework is ongoing. This long term project is an important step in promoting personal and career development and the University's commitment to supporting research careers. Building on this we plan to develop and implement a university wide <i>Career Framework and Policy</i> by December 2021</p>

### Conclusion

The new R&KE Strategy lies at the heart of our plans for the development of research over the next five years. The establishment of the new Research Institutes will enable a clearer focus and prioritisation within key research themes, grouping these to enable the development of research networks (both internal and external) and subsequently enable profile raising to broaden and develop research. Continued engagement with our researcher population through the focus groups will enable a greater contribution to the development of the research environment at Chester and will support the aims and objectives of the R&KE Strategy longer term. Alongside this we hope that this new direction will lead to an increase in research income (through external grants and increased engagement with external stakeholders) to support a larger body of researchers within the University and facilitate sustainable research activity. Our commitment to the Concordat remains strong and will underpin our plans going forward to enable the continued development of our research environment to support Chester's researcher population within the wider context of our institutional strategy.