

HR Excellence in Research Award Ten Year Review: Summary Report ***(covering the period May 2021 – May 2023)***

Context of the Institution and Background Information

Institutional Context

The University of Chester is a teaching-led institution which currently employs approximately 1800 staff and 14,000 students. From the 1st January 2023 there are now three academic faculties located across six sites in Cheshire, Shropshire, Warrington and Wirral.

The University's new Research & Knowledge Exchange (RKE) Strategy 2022-28 has the following areas of focus:

- Research Environment and REF;
- Knowledge Exchange and KEF;
- Postgraduate Research Provision and PRES;
- Citizen Student Strategy

Researcher population and representation of key stakeholders

In applying for the HREiRA we have consistently defined the researcher population as those staff employed on 'research only' contracts. At Chester, this number is small – typically around 30 (currently there are 28 staff that meet this definition) in comparison to the broader academic staff. We continue to have discussions around whether we should widen the scope of direct beneficiaries by applying the 'researcher plus' definition to our academic population. Whilst this is something that we may introduce in the future, we have agreed, for now, to continue to focus on the 'research only' staff as the primary beneficiaries of the Researcher Development Concordat to avoid any dilution of resource or support to this small group of specialist staff. However, it is important to note that our aim is to ensure that the principles of the Concordat are to the benefit of all of our academic colleagues and students who are involved in research.

Background

Following the University's first self-audit in 2009 against the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2008), we successfully achieved the first HR Excellence in Research award in 2012 and subsequently renewed the awards in 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2021.

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 Reviews here:

<https://www1.chester.ac.uk/annual-review-2022>

<https://www1.chester.ac.uk/annual-review-2021>

Work surrounding the preparation of and submission to REF2021 enabled us to continue our focus on reviewing and planning enhancements to our research culture and infrastructure. At the point of our 8-year HREiRA review, the University had approved a new Research & Knowledge Exchange (R&KE) Strategy, endorsed by the new Vice Chancellor (who joined the University in January 2020). During the period covered by this report, there have been further changes with a new Pro-Vice Chancellor Research & Innovation joining the University in January 2021. This has led to further discussions around the University's strategic approach to research, which has resulted in the development of a subsequent new RKE Strategy, which was formally approved by Senate in December 2022. This new Strategy is aiming to increase the visibility of research across the institution and embed activity more clearly within it. To support this, and following the restructure of the Academic Faculties (from seven to three), there has been the recent appointment of an Associate Dean for Research and Innovation for each of the new faculties. These roles will be responsible for driving the research agenda forward in each of their nominated areas. Highlighted in our previous review, the Citizen Student Strategy, which is focused on creating opportunities for our students to become confident world citizens with the skills to positively impact the communities within which they live and work, is now fully embedded within the University, informing all areas of operational activity and is reflected in the new RKE Strategy. A programme of communication activity is

underway to promote and raise awareness of the new RKE Strategy and the implications this has within each academic faculty and professional service departments. The key driver behind these strategic documents continues to be the importance of fostering a culture of personal and professional development, attracting and retaining a skilled workforce and to the creation and dissemination of knowledge with recognised impact and excellence.

Evaluation process

For the award renewal, our internal evaluation process involves a working group of four key members of staff in the Research & Innovation Office (RIO) and HR, typically meeting quarterly and more frequently as required. They worked through and updated the action plan with our achievements and progress.

A steering group continues to oversee and advise on the review process as well as monitoring progress on the action plan. The steering group currently comprises of: the working group members; two researchers and two research assistants from different faculties; two people with line management responsibility for researchers; an early-career academic; representation from each of the Researcher & Knowledge Exchange Institutes (RKEIs); Associate Deans for Research and Innovation in each Faculty and the PVC Research & Innovation - the aim being to capture a wide range of perspectives. The Steering Group also typically meets quarterly but will convene more often as required and in preparation for the final submission. The steering group:

- Reviewed progress against the 2021-23 action plan;
- Will review the full analysis of the 2023 CEDARS survey;
- Identify strategically important areas and key priorities for the future and formulate new actions;
- Advise on consultation with a wider researcher group;
- Recommend the Forward Looking action plan to Research & Knowledge Exchange Committee and Strategic Executive Team (SET) for approval

In addition to these 'formal' mechanisms of review and evaluation, we also held Focus Groups, on average every 6 months, to gain qualitative feedback from the researcher community on their experience as researchers. The creation of the new Research & Knowledge Exchange Institutes (RKEIs) also provide a further opportunity for communication and feedback on researcher experience. Feedback received from our focus groups and Steering Group members clearly identified contractual issues for researchers and this has been a clear driver for a priority action. We also identified that the institutional induction process is not always helpful and can be disproportionately burdensome especially for those researchers on short term contracts. We have subsequently identified an action to introduce induction/welcome meetings with RIO to outline the resources and support available to our researcher community.

We also ran the CEDARS Survey in March 2023 for a limited 4 week period (to allow for a meaningful analysis of findings in time for the renewal submission deadline) to enable a direct comparison with previous survey findings and to allow for reporting on the success measures as outlined in the previous Action Plan.

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 Exchange Committee which holds overall responsibility for the action plan. This committee is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) (Research & Innovation) and includes the Director of Research & Knowledge Exchange (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. Institutional approval is provided at the most senior level

with Senate delegating authority to the Research & Knowledge Exchange 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.

The University connects its Concordat work to other key accreditations and quality assurance processes. Included here is the work on the Technicians Commitment – the University became a signatory to the Technicians Commitment in June 2018 in recognition of the important contribution that our technical staff make to the successful delivery of high-quality teaching and research.

Past Progress and Achievements for the period 2021-2023

Good progress has been made against the action plan submitted at the 8-year review. With a priority to enhance the research culture across the University, our strategy is necessarily long-term, evolving during this reporting period and for the next few years of the current RKE Strategy. Our continuing aim is to improve the quality, reach and impact of the research, knowledge exchange and public engagement we undertake and harness this new knowledge to improve our teaching and student experience.

| Environment & Culture: | |
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| Achievements | <p>Continuing improvements have been made regarding the resources available to researchers. This includes a greater visibility and awareness of the Concordat amongst researchers and improved training resources, which have expanded from Research Integrity to also include Research Skills, Advancing your Research Career and PGR Supervision.</p> <p>The establishment of 3 active RKEIs has further supported cross-faculty and cross –discipline research collaboration providing another vehicle for communication, researcher development and networking.</p> <p>We are building a culture which recognises and values high quality research, as evidenced by an 85% increase in 3* and 4* outputs in the REF2021 results. Recent CEDARS 23 survey results show 80% of respondents indicated they felt included in their local research environment.</p> <p>Appointment of Associate Deans for Research and Innovation who are accountable for the new Faculties to progress the visibility and importance of research activity and environment across the University.</p> |
| Progress/ Ongoing Actions | <p>The new RKE Strategy, which will run until 2028, is a further development since the last review and will underpin progress moving forward. The vision includes a higher profile of research within the University supported through the RKEIs with a main area of focus looking at the development of the wider research environment. There are 6 dedicated workstreams within the new strategy which include: the ongoing development of training resources for staff with a focus on publication strategies and output assessment; the development of an RKE staff mentoring scheme; the establishment of a Research Management Group to oversee research environment related activity and the annual Mock-REF exercise as outlined in the strategy; support wellbeing and mental health through workload planning via the PDP process.</p> <p>We are seeking to improve the engagement with the greater range of training resources and information/development sessions within the RKE Festival and those now run by the RKEIs by dedicating resource within RIO to actively promote and monitor completion rates and feedback.</p> |
| Employment: | |
| Achievements | A new ‘Leading from the Middle’ workbook has been developed and introduced by HR and this is signposted through the online orientation and |

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| | <p>Researcher Hub. RIO have now launched the Post-Award Project Kick-off meetings and associated Checklist to enable principal investigators/researchers to understand their obligations for the line management of researchers and the reporting obligations to funders.</p> |
| Progress/ Ongoing Actions | <p>We will continue to work to ensure that managers of researchers are effectively trained in relation to equality, diversity, wellbeing and mental health. This includes the review of existing PDP materials and processes so that they also align to the aims and workstreams within the new RKE Strategy and to support the University's strategy to improve staff retention, ensure contractual issues and workload allocation is managed appropriately.</p> <p>The University's institutional induction (Welcome event) has recently moved back to an in-person event following Covid and RIO are once again included enabling a more focused approach to providing relevant information. We feel this can be further built upon by looking at the development of induction resources to be used in faculty/department inductions which may be more effective than the general institutional induction.</p> <p>We will also continue to review the existing competency framework to ensure it aligns to the new Citizen Student Strategy.</p> <p>We are also now working closely with HR and SET to explore the development of hybrid/bespoke employment contracts for researchers to reduce the career progression limitation, which they currently perceive.</p> |
| Professional and Career Development: | |
| Achievements | <p>Funding to support researchers to attend conferences for development purposes (which complements schemes designed for research dissemination) has been secured within the next business planning cycle.</p> <p>Other feedback from the University staff and CEDARS surveys indicated a very positive response regarding researchers taking responsibility for their own development with 80% of respondents keeping a formal record of CPD activities. In addition 80% of staff felt encouraged to engage in personal and career development and 60% of respondents confirmed that they had a clear career development plan.</p> |
| Progress/ Ongoing Actions | <p>We also plan to revisit the 'Managing your Career' guidance to enable better conversations between researchers and their managers. We also plan to continue work on a 'Leading and Managing Research Staff' programme which will include resources for managing and leading in times of uncertainty whether this be structural changes/fixed term contracts. This will form part of a comprehensive research training directory outlining all the programmes on offer. We also plan to conduct a training needs analysis of research staff to ensure that the training opportunities on offer meet these needs.</p> <p>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> <p>Work on the Careers Framework and policy continues to be ongoing. This long-term project is an important step in promoting personal and career development and the University's commitment to supporting research careers. We plan to develop and implement a university wide <i>Career Framework and Policy</i> by May 2026.</p> |

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| | We anticipate that increased engagement and activity with the RKEIs will help to develop researcher relationships, strengthen networking and collaboration, and establish researcher identity. |
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Strategic Objectives and Implementation Plan

Our strategy to meet the obligations of the Concordat are largely aligned to the objectives, aims and workstreams of the new University R&KE Strategy 2022-28. In particular we have specific workstreams identifying the need to improve the quality of research and the research environment, the provision of more training to support this, achieving a greater staff retention and linking the PDP process to workloads. As explained at the beginning of this summary, we continue to prioritise the needs of the key audience for the Concordat (research only contracts), whilst ensuring that the aims of our strategic approach applies to all staff and students engaged in research to some degree. This means that the actions outlined in our forward looking plan are not limited solely to researchers but they have been considered with them as the priority. The adoption of the new RKE Strategy with endorsement at the highest level in the University demonstrates the value applied to this work and that of the Concordat more broadly and lies at the heart of our plans for the development of research over the next six years.

Our Forward Looking Action Plan identifies the areas requiring ongoing work and has identified any new gaps against each of the 3 Concordat principles. Of these, we have identified the following priority areas for focus:

Environment:

Improvement of the research environment - the embedding of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Institutes will enable greater inter-disciplinary research activity within specific themes and will provide a solid foundation on which to support the implementation and realisation of the Strategy aims and workstreams. Continued engagement with our researcher population through the focus groups will enable more meaningful feedback to inform 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 anticipate that the strategic aim to increase research grant income (through external grants and increased engagement with external stakeholders) will, in turn, help to support a larger body of researchers within the University and facilitate sustainable research activity.

Employment:

Meaningful negotiations and discussions with HR and SET on the potential implementation of hybrid/bespoke contracts for researchers to remove the perceived lack of career progression in comparison to colleagues on academic contracts. We will also explore the desire to create areas of critical mass in the University with more permanent researcher positions.

Professional & Career Development:

Introduction and development of comprehensive research training; improvement of the PDP process to ensure that managers discuss workloads and allocate resource to support the career development needs of researchers. Throughout the action plan we refer to 'signposting' of resources within the institutional Researcher Hub. In light of our new strategy and implementation of these actions, we have also identified a substantial project to overhaul this resource so that it better meets the requirements of researchers going forward. Staffing resource will be allocated to this to facilitate the initial updates and subsequent maintenance of the site.

Our commitment to the Concordat remains strong and will continue to underpin our plans for the future development of our research environment and support of our researcher population.