

## Edge Hill University HR Excellence in Research Award Summary Document

### Context of the institution

Prior to 2010 research was a marginal activity at Edge Hill, engaged in by a very small proportion of staff, and the University had only a modest number of postgraduate researchers (PGRs), all of whom were registered part-time on what was at the time our only research degree, the PhD. Since 2010 we have made very considerable progress in transforming research at Edge Hill but are still at what is really a relatively early stage as we pursue ambitious goals. That is reflected in the figures relating to the Concordat/HREiR audience at the institution.

We have very few staff on research only contracts (14) and so the vast majority (653) of the audience are staff on research and teaching contracts and managers of researchers. Around 300 of those have been designated as having significant responsibility for research (SRR). 51% of our academic staff are research active. In addition, we now have 300 postgraduate researchers with registrations over three research degrees (PhD, professional doctorate and MRes). Most of our postgraduate researchers are now registered on a full-time basis. Around 90 of our PGRs are also Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). Our GTAs complete a PhD on a full-time basis but also contribute to a small amount of teaching, marking and academic support. They are afforded almost all the rights of academic staff of the University, other than where the requirements of the Research Degree Regulations take precedence. For example, continued GTA status depends on suitable progress with the PhD, including success in examinations.

The decision was made at the point of development of our previous documentation that we should continue to regard staff on research and teaching contracts and PGRs, particularly GTAs, in addition to staff on research only contracts as the primary direct beneficiaries of our researcher development processes. In our last submission certain other staff were also identified as members of the audience, but that somewhat stretched the clear stipulation that the identification of the audience should be limited to those who are *direct* beneficiaries and so those are not included on this occasion, which is not to say that they might not benefit to some degree. All PGRs are researchers, and, while they may not all be employees of the University, they all benefit from many of the same researcher development initiatives. It is for that reason that we have chosen to include all PGRs.

### Internal evaluation

Following revisions to the University's academic career progression processes, Human Resources held several in-person 'roadshows' designed both to inform staff and managers of developments and to receive feedback to inform further development. Roadshows were held for all staff in the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Medicine and the Faculty of Education. In addition, Human Resources met with Heads of Department in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and held sessions for all staff as part of the University's learning and teaching day and at academic induction. Around 200 research active academics were reached as a result of those consultation exercises, plus a wide range of heads of department.

Those consultation exercises were, and will continue to be, coordinated by the External Charters Manager, a relatively new post based in Human Resources, which is the first of its kind at the University and a product of the strategic investment in the implementation of action plans and frameworks designed to build and develop a thriving academic culture within the institution.

There is an extensive set of consultation processes to gain feedback from postgraduate researchers. Those processes are administered and coordinated by the Graduate School. It holds regular focus groups, which, following a review process, the Research Degrees Sub-Committee (RDSC) decided was more effective than the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) because the focus groups help us to evaluate the specific experience of PGRs at Edge Hill much better than the more general PRES. The Graduate School provides PGRs with a permanent anonymous feedback mechanism and has a group of PGR representatives that meet regularly with the Associate Dean of the Graduate School and are members of RDSC, which is chaired by the Dean of the Graduate School and attended by the Pro Vice-Chancellor Research (PVCR). The PGR representatives provide a report to each meeting of RDSC. The research degree annual appraisal process is also a good source of information. Obviously, a good deal of that is about research degree matters, but it also helps inform researcher development initiatives. Some of these mechanisms informed a review during the 2021-22 academic year of the GTA contract resulting in several changes designed to support GTAs and protect them from the danger of the requirements of the GTA role adversely affecting their research and development as researchers.

There is also regular consultation with the University's professors at events facilitated by the PVCR and attended by the Dean of the Graduate School, the Director of Human Resources and the Director of the Research Office. The most recent of those events was attended by over seventy professors (almost all the professors in the University). The event was an internal evaluation exercise designed, *inter alia*, to inform the Concordat/HREiR and wider researcher development work. Feedback from professors engaged with the annual Promotions Round has resulted in several proposed changes designed to clarify expectations and support around research leadership development and available training.

### **Governance structures**

The committee with primary responsibility for researcher development and therefore for researcher career development is Research and Innovation Committee (RIC), which is chaired by the PVCR. Responsibility for the implementation of Concordat/HREiR work lies with the Academic Career Development Implementation Group (ACDIG), which is also chaired by the PVCR. RDSC, chaired by the Dean of the Graduate School, is responsible for postgraduate researcher development and the career development of GTAs. The representation of researchers and managers of researchers on the relevant committees is extensive (around 95% in the case of RDSC and 75% in the case of RIC).

Oversight and strategic leadership is provided by the following senior leaders (committee memberships in parentheses): the Director of Human Resources (ACDIG, AB), the Dean of the Graduate School (ACDIG, RDSC, RIC, AB), the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research) (ACDIG, RDSC, RIC, AB), the Director of the Research Office (ACDIG, RIC, AB), and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (EDI) (ACDIG, AB). In addition, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor is a member of RIC and the Chairman of the Board of Governors attends RIC. Concordat governance reports to Academic Board (AB) by ACDIG and RDSC reports to RIC and RIC reports to AB.

The External Charters Group (chaired by an associate dean line managed by the PVCR) is the formal means by which Concordat strategy connects with that in relation to other accreditations (such as the Athena SWAN charter).

### **Past progress and achievements**

There are far too many actions that would belong in the 'carried forward' category from the backwards action plan. To some extent that reflects less-than-ideal progress, but there is more to the matter than that. While it is true that different stages and phases of development

require different strategic approaches, a major lesson learned in the last two years is that there was a fundamental flaw in the approach to identifying the actions that are now reported on in the backwards action plan. At the time of our previous HREiR submission, we were at a stage where it was judged that what was required was an exercise in *initiating* a number of *discrete* processes and courses of action in relation to the development of researchers and Concordat responsibilities. At best it might be thought that such an approach has served its purpose to some degree and that the phase in which that was what we required has come to an end. More self-critically, the initiation phase resulted in an atomistic approach in which various things were initiated and moved forward, but there was not yet a coherent strategic plan for coordinating the various elements into a holistic, integrated approach. Without such an approach, actions will fail to be properly effective. If the institution pursues an integrated approach, there will be a coherent set of policies, procedures and strategic actions focused on addressing the Concordat principles. Fundamentally, the correct institutional approach to meeting the obligations of the Concordat on the institution will not simply meet the institution's responsibilities, but ultimately ensure, not by regulation, but by a change in culture, that managers and researchers meet their responsibilities. It is only within such a coherent, integrated, holistic approach that specific actions identified in the forward action plan can genuinely make a difference to the professional and career development and experience of researchers, to managers of researchers and to the institutional environment and culture.

Identifying actions that seem to address specific individual obligations identified in the Concordat without paying sufficient attention to the full extent of what the principles amount to is a little like hearing the notes but not recognising them as forming a tune. There is no doubt that there have been challenges in relation to engagement and developing meaningful awareness of the Concordat, its principles, and the obligations it places on the institution, managers and researchers, but that is hardly surprising if actions are discrete rather than presented as connected elements in a whole, the general form and purpose of which is much more easily communicable than a great many atomistic actions.

Affecting a fundamental change of approach to flip the focus from actions reactively mapped to obligations, albeit with the very best of intentions and some good results, to conceiving of a whole that reflects the principles of the Concordat *and what they are designed to achieve* is the primary focus of the recent developments to our strategy. Exercises such as this renewal process might in many cases prompt a defensive approach. We have chosen not to take that approach. It is important, however, to emphasise that does not mean a rejection of previous initiatives and actions, but it does mean revisiting them, recontextualised within a conception of the whole. For example, a particularly good step was the formation of mid-career fellowships by the University's Institute for Social Responsibility. Those will be developed further and supported by the University's Research Investment Fund (RIF), but RIF funds will also be used strategically to support the development of ECRs so that there is coordinated strategic investment in both early and mid-career development.

### **Strategic objectives and implementation**

Our performance, development and review (PDR) process for all staff includes review of objectives and development needs, but the process is such that research tends to receive insufficient attention for the process to constitute a central component of our approach to researcher career development. It is for that reason that we are redesigning the PDR process and system, to embed the learning and skills needs analysis and development planning process undertaken by PGRs. As part of the revised PDR process and system each member of staff who has research as part of their role will:

- develop an individual research plan which will be regularly updated,

- assess their individual development needs as a researcher, through a process that employs the Researcher Development Framework,
- develop an individual researcher development plan (including career development) that will outline what actions will be taken and what support will be provided to address the identified needs, along with a timeframe for each action.

The revised PDR process and all the relevant documentation will be logged formally using the MyView system. There will be a main annual meeting between each researcher and the relevant manager, along with an interim review six months after the annual meeting. Mentors will be able to use PDR intelligence to inform their support.

This is intended not only to prevent attention on development relating to an individual's status as a researcher being neglected by being overshadowed by other considerations included in a PDR exercise but also to create a hub around which everyone's development needs specifically as a *researcher* can be evaluated and addressed.

For that process to function as such a hub, it must be properly integrated, rather than just a discrete process that does what it does but is not part of a larger holistic system. Integration should not only be with the various other components of the strategy for researcher development and with the PDR, but also with the institution's broader development strategy such that it forms a fundamental part of the University's development and general direction of travel. In an institution with a relatively recent history of significant development relating to research and a traditional focus on teaching, such extensive integration is essential to ensure that the approach becomes embedded in the University's standard processes and reaches all staff engaged in research.

A properly integrated system requires other elements. For example, an extensive process to train managers responsible for conducting researcher development review meetings is essential because little can be gained by a good process badly operated. Staff need to have confidence in such a process and that comes partly from seeing it operating well and bringing clear benefits to their development and working life. For that to happen, managers will need to understand both the form of the process and its purposes and goals, along with how it fits within a wider integrated package of measures related to researcher development and existing processes with which managers are already familiar, such as the rest of the PDR process.

It is also necessary to have clear articulations of the various career phases for the relevant groups of staff and clear guidance and support to help staff understand their current position within that and what is required for progression. Again, managers need better training in such matters. That emerged from the review of promotion processes and subsequent meetings of ACDIG. Again, staff need to have confidence in the processes and the support and advice with which they are provided through those processes, and that can only come from managers being well-trained and staff seeing processes operating well. If managers are not well-trained staff will be poorly advised, often not helped to have realistic expectations of their current position and what is required for progression and feel that the whole thing is a lottery. While that is far from the case, a rigorous process around progression and promotion decisions that is a mystery to those considered within the process is of no use. As line managers often form an intermediate link between those applying and those considering applications on panels, the importance of good training for managers is central to the success of the process.

In addition, it would be no good identifying researcher development needs through a rigorous process yet having inadequate mechanisms for staff to address their development needs. To that end, we have reviewed and revised our approach to the provision of a

package (more a menu than a programme, as use, is directed by need) of opportunities for staff to address their development needs. That includes significant contributions from the Graduate School, HR, the Research Office, Knowledge Exchange, Learning Services and Careers, along with external contributors.

Again, training of managers will ensure that staff are well-advised with regard to the opportunities available to them. There is also another reason why good training of managers is important, namely, that it has a bearing on equality, diversity and inclusion. It is very important that there is equality of opportunity and support for researchers and that is not guaranteed simply by having a process that applies to all. How well the process is operated could vary with different managers and thereby create inequalities in relation to opportunities and support. Good training for managers can prevent that.

The integrated approach sketched here and described in detail in the forward action plan is such that there isn't one part designed to address one of the Concordat principles and other parts designed to address the other principles; it is an integrated whole and as such the various components work together to address the three principles. The whole should address the need to develop a supportive and inclusive research culture to facilitate, support and sustain excellent research (the environment and culture principle) and the need to ensure that researchers are recruited, employed and managed under conditions that recognise and value their contributions (the employment principle), while also ensuring that professional and career development are integral to enabling researchers to develop to their full potential (the professional and career development principle).

High-level success measures include:

- Implement a fully integrated, online, PDR process that is used by all research-active staff to capture their learning and skills needs analysis through individually tailored development plans that will help them reach their full potential.
- Having robust support in place for all phases of the research career path from MRes to professor with clear information about what is expected at each phase and what is required for progression.
- Having a programme of training for managers of researchers along with a system of ongoing support for managers to enable them to provide the highest level of advice and support to researchers such that all researchers have equally extensive opportunities, guidance, advice and support, and that their contributions are equally valued.
- Having increased opportunities for career development through a greater range of research leadership opportunities and a Research Leadership Development programme.
- Increased awareness of the Concordat commitments across the University with extensive engagement in the performance development processes and evidence of both of those through CEDARS and other feedback and review mechanisms.
- Use of CEDARS-generated intelligence to provide improved researcher visibility and researcher voice in informing University strategy and policy-making.