**HR Excellence in Research Award: 10-year report**

# **Background**

The University of Stirling received the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2011 and has retained it every two years following external review, most recently in September 2019. The University of Stirling has 5 Faculties: Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Faculty of Health Sciences & Sport, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Stirling Management School, with 577 research active staff as of 1/8/2021, of which 177 research-only members of staff.

The University’s Research Environment Group (REG), formerly the Research Environment Working Group, leads on the development and co-ordination of the HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiR) process, the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers action plan, and the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS). It previously led on the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) and Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS). REG reports to the University Research Committee quarterly and REG membership is reviewed annually to guarantee a cross Faculty representation at all levels and effective succession planning. In view of Concordat signatory obligations and development work, REG meetings have increased from 4 to 6 per annum

# **REG Membership and Institutional Networks**

Work has also been done to strengthen REG and membership has increased from 15 members at the time of the 8-year review to 18 currently. To ensure that the principles of the Researchers’ Concordat are embedded across the institution at a *strategic level*, REG membership comprises the Deputy Principal for Research, the institutional deans for Research Engagement and Performance (Dean REP), and for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (Dean EDI) and two faculty research leads, referred to as Associate Deans for Research. To ensure a *diversified representation* and *dissemination of activity* via local networks REG has a strong cross-Faculty academic representation of 12 research-active staff members, including two Research Fellows and a Lecturer (early career researcher). For effective communication into Faculties and local networks, the Research Fellows are also representatives on the Faculty Research Committee and/or on the Fixed Term Contract Researchers Forum. REG has key professional support from HR & Organisation Development, Careers and Employability Service and Research, Innovation and Business Engagement (RIBE) to assure interlinking with other staff support initiatives. REG Chair meets regularly with the Dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS). IAS was established in 2019 to support researcher development and foster a sense of community for the whole researcher community.

# **HREiR / Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers Action Plan Audience**

The HREiR 2-year 2019-2021 action plan contained over 20 actions, focussing in the main on community and capacity building activities for the research community, comprising welcome lunches and induction events, Faculty away days, promotion of interdisciplinary connections and collaboration via dedicated events, the creation of a new ECR network, the development of an international mentoring programme and resources for PIs. The emergence of the Covid pandemic in early 2020 necessitated a re-alignment of the action plan priorities considering new challenges faced, whilst also becoming a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (Concordat) in October 2020 which was welcomed as an opportunity to refresh and reinvigorate future plans and scope.

The HREiR Action Plans had previously embraced initiatives for all research staff, however REG recognised that the focus and activities of the forward-looking action plan could specifically benefit and support early career researchers, who have been disproportionately affected by the impact of Covid-19. Therefore, in developing the revised two-year HREiR/Concordat action plan a decision was taken by REG, and agreed with members of the University Research Committee, to focus on activities that would benefit early career researchers defined at Stirling as *those who are new post-docs to those transitioning to or establishing independence, with no rules based on years since PhD or whether the ECR currently holds a permanent/open-ended academic position. An early career researcher can be someone returning to research from a career break or following time in other roles, with no limits in respect of time spent outside a research environment.* The institutional audience for this award is primarily Research-only staff (approx. 170) and Research and Teaching staff (approx. 180). Not all these contractual roles will be or identify as an ECR however the purpose of this definition is to be inclusive and encourage self-identification.

# **Internal Review and Researcher Engagement**

Since undersigning the Concordat, REG has undertaken a variety of activities to engage with individuals and groups to explore priority areas in which to focus resources, actions, and training to better support the ECR community.

* *Dedicated REG task groups* were developed as part of REG consultations, to undertake i) the internal gap analysis in Spring-Summer 2020 of current practice against the new Concordat; and ii) to conduct a review of REF Environment Statements for evidence of institutional good practice.
* *Concordat Discussion Sessions* to raise awareness and explore responsibilities with stakeholder groups were held via MS Teams with ECRs, PIs and Associate Deans of Research.
* Hosting of *Café Culture Conversations* based on the Wellcome Trust Café Cultures over Feb-March 2021, led by the Dean REP were an opportunity to discuss shared perspectives on common challenges and co-create solutions for change.
* An *ECR Teams channel* was created hosting 135+ members and we have consulted on our Concordat development plans and provided outcomes of conversations through this network.
* *A Research Strategy, Development and Ideas Panel Session* with Deputy Principals of Research and Internationalisation was hosted during the Festival of Research in May 2021 as an opportunity for the research community to identify and address specific issues as the interim Strategic Plan and the next Research Strategy are developed.
* *CEDARS* was undertaken in June 2021 with a 26% research active staff response rate; its preliminary findings have also informed the final action plan published in October 2021 with longitudinal data from the 2019 CROS & PIRLS.

Updates on this development work were shared with the University community via University Research Committee, cascading of information from REG colleagues to Faculty Research Committees and to ECR networks, the Research Bites blog series, University-wide staff newsletter, and the creation of talking head resources on our internal website. The engagement and consultation process identified several key areas to be addressed as outlined in the **Key New Actions and Future Plans** section.

# **Key Achievements & Progress**

The wider University research support system and REG have successfully progressed many new and existing organisational-led initiatives in support of the researcher community:

# **Principles 1 & 2: Recruitment and Selection, Recognition and Value**

* All academic recruitment is currently centralised. Researcher recruitment is managed in Faculty with plans to centralise this activity in the future. Work has been done to standardise job descriptions, establish scoring grids and interview questions.
* The institutional Dean of Research Engagement and Performance (Dean REP) was appointed in 2019 as a commitment to enhancing research culture. Since this appointment, there has been a range of initiatives defining and exploring good practice including: the *Research Culture themed Festival of Research in May 2020*; the *Research Integrity Mini-Festival series of events over Autumn-Winter 2020,* theinternal *Research Integrity staff survey* *in November 2020*, and two iterations of the annual *Research Culture**Awards* in 2020 and 2021 to recognise and celebrate wider contributions to research. The Research Awards have gained momentum with the number of people nominating increasing from 66 in 2020 to 116 in 2021 and the number or nominations increasing from 97 to 164 respectively.
* The first *Induction for Researchers* was piloted in October 2020 as part of the wider Corporate Online Induction, with 2 further Researcher Inductions delivered virtually in March and October 2021. The inductions were extended to 30+ new research staff at each event and as inductions have rolled out, engagement has increased with a near full attendance at the most recent October 2021 iteration. A positive impact of these dedicated events is a greater engagement with RIBE for funding support activity and with the IAS Researcher Development Programme.

# **Principles 3 & 4: Support and Career Development**

* A new *Ethics Review Manager*online system for managing the ethics approval process was launched in October 2020 with institution wide training sessions run in academic year 2020-21.
* The new *Mental Health Strategy 2021-24* makes the protection and enhancement of mental health a priority for the University.
* Creation of the *Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Toolkit* developed in partnership with the University of Cape Town, Universidade Estadual Paulista - São Paulo State University, and Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment to provide core information, case studies and structured resources to support the creation of new research collaborations and the management of GCRF/international funded research projects.
* *Monthly coffee morning* virtual events co-hosted by Dean REP and IAS were introduced in October 2020 and ran throughout 2020-21 as a dedicated informal space for the research community to connect, discuss challenges and network.
* A dedicated *Safeguarding Policy for Research* was approved in Dec 2020.
* Stirling became a signatory to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) at the beginning March 2020 and a code of practice is under development.

# **Principles 5: Researchers’ Responsibilities**

* A pilot *International Mentoring Partnership Programme* (IMPP) to develop research capability and enhance cultural and social learning between the University of Stirling and São Paulo State University (Brazil) was successfully delivered to two cohorts of 10 mentors and 10 mentees as part of our GCRF-funded activity. The first pilot ran in June 2019, with the second iteration was re-designed to be delivered as a distance course online which began in February 2021 and was completed in June 2021.
* TheECR focussed leadership and networking initiative *Stirling Crucible*, was delivered to 17 early career researchers from across all 5 Faculties April-June 2021. This biennial 6-day training event aims to enhance the potential for interdisciplinary research collaborations and supports early career researchers with the opportunity to bid for seed funding of new collaborative research projects.
* Increase in *awareness of the Concordat*: 43.6% of CEDARS 2021 respondents had “some knowledge & understanding of the Concordat” compared to 19.5 % in CROS 2019.

# **Principles 6 & 7: Diversity and Equality, Implementation and Review**

* Continued support for *Athena Swan submissions* is led by our Dean for Equality, Diversity & Inclusion with the new Institutional Bronze submission anticipated in July 2022. Faculty Bronze awards are currently held in Health Sciences & Sport, Social Sciences and most recently the Stirling Management School. Divisional awards are also held by Biological and Environmental Sciences, the Institute of Aquaculture and Psychology.
* *REG membership* has been strengthened to include 3 early career researchers allowing for REG work to link into early career networks and communicate more effectively with postdoctoral fora.

# **Key new actions and future plans**

The engagement and consultation process highlighted several key areas for inclusion in the HREiR / Concordat 2021-22 Action Plan including: improving career management and mentoring support for early career staff; improving institutional and local induction experiences; improving staff mental health and well-being; improving communication of staff policies, procedures and reporting mechanisms; enhanced opportunities to participate in decision making and enhanced provision of leadership and project management training opportunities. Key new actions to address these areas are outlined in the table below. Full details and intended success measures are detailed in the [HREiR/Concordat 2021-23 Action Plan.](https://www.stir.ac.uk/media/stirling/services/research/documents/researcher-development-concordat-action-plan-2021-2023.pdf)

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| **Key new actions HREiR/Concordat Action Plan 2021-23**  |
| **Environment & Culture*** Embed research culture and activities into Research Strategy and Faculty Research Strategies (further details and success measures ECI5). The University’s new research culture and environment strategy is currently under development.
* Development of new information resource/s to support Induction– an *Induction Checklist* and a *Researcher Guide* -to aid new Research Staff and PIs to navigate institutional policies, practices and support relevant to researcher life (further details and success measure in EI2 in Action Plan).
* Development of a Research Integrity Action Plan in 2022 with guidance in good research integrity practices (further details and success measure in EC15).
* Implementation of the recently launched institutional Mental Health Strategy 2021-24 with the roll out of dedicated mental health and wellbeing development programme of training for line managers (further details and success measure in ECI3).
* Ongoing commitment to report on and seek to improve the quality of the research environment via participation in CEDARS 2023 (further details and success measure in ECI3).
* Increase engagement of researchers in institutional policy development and researcher fora, encouraging an ECR rep on each Faculty Research Committee, expanding REG representation further and promoting engagement of early career researchers on all EDI policy fora (further details and success measures in EI7).
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| **Employment*** Raise awareness of DORA and develop clear guidance on recruitment, promotion and career advancement with the creation of a guide to responsible research assessment, with specific training on “*What is responsible and fair research assessment and what does it mean for me*" (further details and success measure EI1).
* Inclusion of research specific leadership and research project management training opportunities for Managers of Researchers and Researchers within the IAS Researcher Development Programme 2021-22 (further details and success measure in EI4).
* Delivery of dedicated ECR Preparing for Promotions training sessions and Performance Conversations suite of training to support excellent people management (further details and success measure EI3).
* Explore the introduction of EDI criteria in recruitment and selection criteria and processes and Equality-impact assess promotions criteria (further details and success measures in EI1 & EI3)
* Explore the implications of offering open ended contracts from 3 years with funding where possible (further details and success measure in EI6).
* Improve institutional and local induction experiences (EI2).
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| **Professional and Career Development*** Embed our institutional commitment to supporting research staff to achieve a min of 10 days professional development within drafting of Research Strategy, clearly communicating examples of internal and external development opportunities (awareness of opportunities and a positive increase in engagement will be monitored via CEDARS 2023 – action PCDI1)
* Creation of a dedicated Achieving Success form for fixed term/early career staff to facilitate career development reviews for early career staff and deliver a dedicated Achieving Success Reviewers course for Managers of Researchers within year (further details and success measure in EI5 & PCD2).
* Promote engagement in the University Mentoring Scheme via the Managers Network newsletter (further details and success measures PCDI4).
* Explore participation in the external Teaching, Research and Academic Mentoring Scheme (TRAMS) a 7-way HEI collaboration hosted by St Andrews and University of Dundee (further details and success measures PCDI4).
* Ensure researchers have access to professional advice on career management with dedicated Careers -IAS-Alumni networking events and workshops (further details and success measures PCDI3).
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