

University of York HR Excellence Action Plan 2026-2029: Summary Report

Institutional context

The University of York is a research-intensive university - placed 10th overall in REF2021 - with a mission which remains true to its 1960s founding ethos to be “a university for public good.” Researchers sit within 27 Departments and Schools, brought together into three faculties: Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences. Researchers may also be based within one of 16 major research centres, many of which are interdisciplinary (e.g. Institute of Mental Health Research) or multi-institutional (e.g. ESRC Vulnerability and Policing Futures Centre). Research strengths include creative technologies, health and social care, autonomous systems, heritage, food and farming.

Staff on “research-only” contracts number 854 (774 FTE), comprising Research Assistants, Postdoctoral Research Associates and Fellows, and around 150 independent Research Fellows. 46.1% of our research-only staff are on fixed term contracts determined by external funding. The University is also home to 923 FTE staff on academic, research and teaching contracts, and around 1,300 postgraduate researchers. This action plan focuses on those staff on research-only contracts (i.e. the core Concordat audience), as we believe that this group of staff experience particular challenges related to their career stage, contract status and development opportunities which require focused attention.

The University’s [Research Strategy 2023-2030](#) focuses on 5 key strategic priorities: people and culture; ideas and creativity; impact; partnership and place; and support and infrastructure. The institutional Research Culture Action Plan (ReCAP) supports the development of environments and cultures which help diverse people, ideas and approaches to flourish. It is a key means of delivering the ambitions of the People & Culture pillar of the Research Strategy, such as to “create career paths, incentives and reward mechanisms that develop and encourage all members of the research community” and to “embed the principles and culture of open research and responsible research and innovation.” The action plan is based on feedback from a series of 20 research culture cafes including sessions exclusively for the research-only staff community, and as a result of this, there are a number of actions which relate specifically to this group. The ReCAP is a living document and biannual HREiR action plan review will inform ReCAP updates. The Research Strategy will also be supported by research culture KPIs to include consideration of research-only staff and HREiR-aligned obligations.

The University was one of the first to be awarded the HR Excellence Award in 2010, and became a signatory to the revised Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers in 2019. We aim to ensure that everyone in the research community can succeed as part of an equitable, inclusive and collegial culture, where we maintain and promote both “independent minds and a collective spirit.”

Key achievements in the 2022-2025 action plan period

- A new [York Research Staff Forum](#) has been created to bring together researchers across the institution and to unite the departmental research staff societies. We intend to develop this group’s formal opportunities to input into policy making and make it a strong voice for research staff, as well as providing networking and training opportunities.
- An institutional [Research Culture Action Plan](#) was launched in 2024. Progress has been made on actions which impact on research staff groups. Our focus is currently on supporting departments to develop their local research cultures, and research staff are part of the working groups assessing departmental culture and drawing up action plans which incorporate

departmental Concordat actions. Research staff have been able to apply for grants from the [Enhancing Research Culture Fund](#) to act as PI on projects to enhance research culture locally.

- As part of the White Rose Consortium, we have launched new cohort programmes for early career researchers including a [Prosper programme](#) for postdocs and a [Crucible](#) for fellows and newly appointed lecturers to develop interdisciplinary leadership and collaboration skills.
- Longstanding [Research Staff Liaison Officer](#) roles create the bridge between research staff in departments and central University support and policy.
- [Celebrating Spaces: Connecting Researchers](#) has become established as an annual postdoc-led event which shines a light on their role and their research, offers a chance to demonstrate what they do in their own research spaces, and provides support and connection.
- A behaviours framework, [Community without Limits](#), is being rolled out across the University. The framework is currently being used for team development, career advancement and developmental feedback, and the intention is for it to be applied throughout the employee lifecycle, becoming an integral part of recruitment, reward and talent management.
- An online **ECR Hub** brings together a range of information, support and training opportunities for ECRs, and is due to be launched in spring 2026.
- New, comprehensive **research staff induction** webpages are also due for launch in the new year. For the first time, they provide a step-by-step induction process for research staff and bring together the information needed when joining the University as a new researcher.
- The Wellcome-funded [Valuing Voices](#) project is piloting new practical approaches to research team equity and offers training for ECRs on equitable and responsible research practices. A new [Research Reputation and Social Responsibility Framework](#) outlines ethical approval, due diligence and other oversight considerations for research projects.
- Enhanced employment conditions for research staff includes immediate rights to [parental leave](#).

Governance and decision-making structures

Action plan creation and reporting for HREiR is overseen by the Research Culture Working Group (RCWG). This committee - which brings together expertise in areas such as EDI, professional development and research integrity, with membership representing each constituent staff group - has a remit to support the development of positive cultures to benefit all members of the research community. Research staff are represented on the RCWG by the Fellowships Lead, one or more Research Staff Liaison Officers, and a York Research Staff Forum lead. The Concordat and HREiR action plan are part of the Terms of Reference and core business of the group, with sessions dedicated specifically to review of this action plan and the associated annual reports. As the RCWG oversees both the HREiR and ReCAP, biannual HREiR review will feed directly into updates to the ReCAP to ensure we are supporting researchers across the institution based on current need and community-informed priorities.

The RCWG reports into the University Research Committee (URC), the highest level oversight body for research within the University. URC is also formally consulted on the action plan, with sign off by the PVC-R who chairs both committees and is the institutional lead for the Concordat. The operational Concordat lead is the Head of Research Culture & Researcher Development. Responsibility for supporting researchers is shared across the institution with line managers, senior research leaders, and all those who are responsible for the creation of policies, processes and environments which affect research staff. Research Staff Liaison Officers, who are active researchers on research-only contracts, act as the conduit between researchers and the University, establishing links to key activity such as departmental ECR fora and annual postdoc-focused events, as well as representing the views of research staff. RSLOs typically have a one-year term and are selected on the basis of their ideas for supporting the community and to represent the range of ECR roles and disciplines as widely as possible.

In the last year we have established a research staff-led cross-institution group which, amongst community-building aims, has a role in representing the voices of research staff. Going forward, we propose strengthening the York Research Staff Forum as a governance structure for the HREiR action plan, including holding annual action plan review meetings with this group prior to the creation of annual reports, and increasing its role in feeding into policy and process development. In the coming year, the group will establish means of monitoring engagement across disciplines and roles, and identify ways of reaching out to underrepresented groups to ensure wide researcher representation.

Internal evaluation and gap analysis

In preparation for the creation of a new 3-year action plan, we gathered both key quantitative information and the viewpoints of stakeholder groups, via three key mechanisms:

- A series of workshops - two for research staff, one for line managers of researchers, and one for key stakeholders including members of the Research Culture Working Group. These workshops were delivered by the Research Staff Liaison Officers and the Research Culture & Researcher Development team. In the sessions, we asked contributors to consider how well we were currently delivering the different obligations within the Concordat, to suggest which elements they felt should be prioritised moving forward, and to highlight any solutions or good practice they had experienced. 55 people participated, including 26 managers of researchers.
- A survey - aimed at researchers, their line managers and senior research leaders, which gathered insights into the priorities and challenges of these key stakeholders. 37 people contributed.
- An institutional gap analysis - conducted by the Research Culture & Researcher Development team, with input from specialists including the Head of EDI and the research policy team. The gap analysis was considered in the context of the Research Strategy, Research Culture Action Plan and EDI Strategy/draft institutional Athena Swan action plan, and drew on data from staff surveys. It included consideration of groups within the research-only staff community who might be disproportionately affected by particular challenges (e.g. minoritised, health barriers).

The gap analysis and consultation results were considered at a RCWG meeting in November 2025, and were presented to and discussed with researchers at a York Research Staff Forum event in January 2026. Key general findings include:

- As a result of the HREiR's previous format which required actions against all 50+ obligations within the Concordat, gap analysis identified that we have made broad but shallow progress against all elements of the obligations, but there was more that could be done in all areas.
- The gap analysis identified some areas with key potential for focused attention, based on the scale of the gap, links with institutional strategies and their alignment with the needs and priorities of researchers and line managers as identified via the consultation process.
- A lack of evidence to support measurement of progress is a key gap at the present time.

Action Plan 2026-2029 - vision, priorities and selected obligations

Environment: vision and expected change

The gap analysis highlighted a lack of awareness of the Concordat and its responsibilities amongst both researchers and managers, and the opportunity for greater input into institutional culture and decision making from research-only staff. Our vision as set out in this action plan is for a research staff community who are aware of their responsibilities and opportunities under the Concordat, and whose voices are heard via an empowered institution-wide research staff forum, a research culture survey, and better representation on research and research-related committees. Line managers will in turn become knowledgeable about the Concordat and gain confidence in their roles and responsibilities.

Environment: selected Concordat obligations

Obligation 1: Awareness raising around the Concordat was the highest priority *Environment* topic both for workshop attendees and survey respondents (84% in favour), as well as being a key gap in our analysis. Proposed actions for this obligation focus on communications directly with researchers and managers in their home departments, and developing a consistent communications plan to increase understanding of both the Concordat responsibilities and the institutional policies which support research staff. Data on the experience of research staff was also identified as a key gap during the gap analysis process. The creation of a research culture survey and analysis of data around culture, environment and careers for the research-only staff group will have a significant impact on the ability to monitor and report against all other actions, making this a key priority for our new plan.

Obligation 6: This obligation is linked to a strategic institutional focus on finding ways to better represent the views of researchers and to involve them in decision making, as evidenced in the ReCAP action to “create an environment where representation is consistent for all parts of the research community … within wider university meetings and committees.” The creation of the new York Research Staff Forum as an institution-wide platform for research-only staff in the last year has also opened up an important space for the research staff voice to be heard in decision making. In addition to reviewing the representation of research staff on committees at all levels and making and implementing recommendations, we will also seek to formalise the role of the YRSF in reviewing key research and research culture policy and process changes.

Employment: vision and expected change

Lack of appropriate reward and recognition mechanisms, and confusion over where to find the right information in relation to policy and procedures, were key challenges raised in the gap analysis and consultation. We aim with the actions in this plan to make research staff feel that their efforts are appropriately rewarded and that the contribution they make to enhancing our research cultures is acknowledged. We intend to equip their managers with the right tools to support the research staff they manage to understand and adhere to the relevant policies and legislation and to be aware of and utilise the range of opportunities to reward and recognise their work.

Employment: selected Concordat obligations

Obligation 8: We selected this obligation around reward and recognition because it was the highest ranked priority in our survey in the *Employment* section, with 81% of respondents indicating that it should be prioritised in future. This links to two significant ReCAP ambitions: “Research team members feel their contribution is recognised and celebrated, and that they are a valued member of the research community”, and “new reward and recognition structures support our research culture values, and people are thanked and acknowledged appropriately in research outputs and within their departments or teams”. Actions for this obligation focus on creating new methods for rewarding and recognising researchers for their contributions to PGR supervision and research culture, and guidance for managers on the variety of ways to reward and recognise research staff.

Obligation 9: As the key day-to-day contacts for research staff, line managers play a crucial role in the oversight and support of researchers to ensure they work in accordance with policies and procedures mandated by institutions, employment law, and funders. During consultation, line managers strongly expressed a need for centralised information on institutional policies and practices relating to managing and supporting researchers to aid them in their roles. This aligns with our ReCAP aim that “our everyday processes help to embed our research culture values through clear and supportive policies and

systems.” The proposal for a toolkit for researcher line managers/PIs is a key priority because it also helps address other obligations through greater clarity and researcher line management-specific guidance. Sitting alongside a new institutional toolkit for line managers containing general information, it will focus specifically on the requirements and support for the management of research staff. This obligation will further be addressed by providing clarity around individual responsibilities in relation to policies, procedures and legislation through statements of expectations for researchers and managers.

Professional development: vision and expected change

Both the gap analysis and consultation highlighted the uncertainty of researchers and their managers around the minimum 10 days professional development time, and how it could be used, as well as a lack of opportunity to develop leadership skills, particularly for researchers. We intend to support our researchers to move on to their next opportunities with a sense of their own research identity and leadership skills to equip them for a variety of future roles, supported by managers who are trained in collaborative leadership techniques, and who have the tools and skills to deliver high quality professional development to their staff.

Professional Development: selected Concordat obligations

Obligation 12: Support to engage in 10 days professional development was the second highest priority within *Professional Development* for researchers in our consultation, with 67% identifying it as an area to focus on in the next 3 years. It is a key priority in the ReCAP to meet the training needs of research staff, as well as “to encourage engagement with a wide range of professional development opportunities and enable a greater number of researchers to achieve the minimum ten days development time”. Actions for this obligation will include new resources and comms targeted at researchers and their managers to help identify skills gaps and development opportunities to be explored during the 10 days.

Obligation 15: This obligation was selected because it had overwhelming support as a priority area from our survey respondents, with 87% saying research identity and leadership should be a focus area in the next 3 years. Respondents also indicated that it was the most urgent area of support required by managers in respect to supporting their research staff, with 78% of line managers identifying it as a priority. This aligns with our Research Strategy’s aim to “provide time and reward for staff to deliver on the institution’s research and impact ambitions”, complimented by the ReCAP aim to allow researchers to free up time to concentrate on strategic, exploratory or novel ideas, and to allow staff to “gain the skills and experience they need for a rewarding career.” Actions will focus on a new cohort-based programme to help researchers develop their identity and leadership skills, accompanying resources to expand this learning to a wider group, and policy change to allow researchers to more easily engage with career-stage appropriate funding opportunities. Managers’ own leadership skills will be addressed via a campaign to encourage them to access an institutional Collaborative Leadership programme, and new resources to enhance their ability to support research staff professional development.

Monitoring and communicating the 2026-2029 action plan

The SMART actions within the plan are designed to dovetail with the creation of a new research culture survey which will enable us to establish baselines and directly monitor progress. The actions will continue to be reviewed within biannual Concordat/HREiR-focused meetings of the Research Culture Working Group, with annual monitoring and input from researchers within the York Research Staff Forum. Implemented changes will also be widely communicated to the research community via our newsletters, YRSF HREiR annual meetings and special events. As with our Research Culture Action Plan, the Concordat/HREiR plan will be a living document, responding to any changing needs and priorities of the community, and any changes of direction suggested by our outcomes data, as required.