

University of York HR Excellence in Research 10 Year Report 2020 (Cohort 1)

This report forms part of the University's ten-year submission to HR Excellence in Research Recognition process. It is supported by:

- A detailed progress report on the 2018-2020 Action Plan
- An Interim 2020-2022 Action Plan
- Examples of good practice (Appendix 1)

All documents and information about the University's implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers 2008 and Researcher Development Concordat 2019 are [here](#) and in the links provided.

Introduction

The period 2018-2020 covered by this report has been exemplified by change, at institutional, sector and at a global level. Planned and considered changes have been made to policy and practice aligned to the University's [Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Strategy](#) and more rapid response changes made to ways of working in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. To ascertain the needs of our diverse researcher population at this time of unprecedented change a [rigorous consultation process](#) is being undertaken to ensure that the action plan 2020-2022 reflects both, the institutional ambitions, and the lived experience of researchers and PIs. We aim to capitalise on what we have learnt about online delivery by working at home and to calibrate this against the needs of researchers to feel part of our institutional community of excellent researchers.

Over the last two years the Governance structures around the Concordat have been refined to ensure alignment with other committee structures, to accelerate decision making, and enable efficient communication and implementation of ideas relating to the researcher experience. The Concordat Implementation Group (CIG) continues to be chaired by the PVC for Research, Professor Matthias Ruth, who also chairs the University Research Committee and a newly created Fellowship Coordination Committee (FCC). The FCC includes the Faculty facing Associate Deans of Research and the Head of the Research Excellence Training Team who is responsible for coordination of the RD Concordat. Membership of the CIG has been revised to include greater Faculty representation from PIs, researchers and the Dean of the York Graduate Research School (YGRS).

The [Research Excellence Training Team \(RETT\)](#) continues to serve all those engaged in research through the delivery of training and development activities including interventions such as coaching, mentoring and research leadership. The RET Team now includes a KE and Partnerships Officer and Fellowship Coordinator enabling a greater portfolio of support to be delivered. The team continues to work in partnership internally with both academic and research related professional teams and externally with research funders, Russell Group fora ([Researchers14](#)), the [N8 partnership](#), European collaborators and business and third sector organisations. Over the next two years links with [Worldwide Universities Network](#) will be strengthened to better encourage collaboration among researchers.

The University became a signatory of the Researcher Development Concordat 2019 in March 2020 just days before lockdown. Inevitably, progress against some actions has been delayed and this is indicated in the Concordat Action Plan 2018-2020. Where appropriate some actions have been transferred to the University's Interim RD Concordat Action Plan 2020-2022.

Data used to support the documentation includes: Institution-wide consultation with researchers, PIs, professional support staff and the PGR and the Research Staff Liaison Officers about the priority areas for the Concordat Action Plan 2020-2022; Minutes from CIG meetings, the [UoY EDI Strategy 2017-2022](#) and the University vision and Strategic Plan. There has been a 29% increase in the number of early career researchers since 2018 (580 to 720), testament to the solid research performance of academic staff and a commitment to a positive culture. This is evidenced through Athena SWAN awards and the various Concordat commitments that the University of York values and respects its researchers. Postgraduate Research (PGR) students form a vital part of the research talent pipeline at York. Recognising this, a decision has been made to reflect, where relevant, policies and practices aligned to the Concordat to the 2000+ PGR students at York.

1. How did we undertake our internal review? (Including how researchers' views were taken into account during the review and, where relevant, how the review linked with existing QA and other implementation/monitoring mechanisms)

York has been successful, as detailed in section 2, in ensuring institution-wide researcher engagement with the Concordat Principles. The RD Concordat action plan 2020-2022 is built upon the experiences and needs of researchers aligned to the University's vision and commitment to the development of a supportive and collaborative community and culture.

Faculty and departmental level consultation: Two papers outlining the Researcher Development Concordat have been submitted to the University Research Committee, the second of which outlined the [process and timeline](#) for the consultation. All academic departments and research staff societies have been asked to add their contributions against three key consultation questions:

1. What would a positive research culture at York look and feel like?
2. What could we do differently around employment of researchers at York?
3. What could make a difference to researchers' lives with regards to professional and career development?

The Google document is deliberately open to encourage sharing of opinions between researchers at all levels. The responses received so far indicate a strength of feeling around contractual status and promotion, the value and importance of diversity, inclusivity, creativity and collaboration in all aspects of research, a call for more visible celebration of early career researcher successes, recognition of the contribution

made by researchers, and increased support for non-academic career routes and mentoring. The latter signals a greater need for communication about existing support at institutional and research centre level.

Consultation with individual researchers has been achieved in the following ways: Two online consultation events took place during August and September and as part of the [York Researcher Conference on 23 September](#) held during the [National Postdoc Appreciation Week](#). Groups of researchers from across all faculties met in virtual breakout rooms and collectively populated a Google JamBoard with their responses to the three key questions. The consultation events were facilitated by the Research Staff Liaison Officers (RSLOs) who work together to liaise with all departmental research staff associations and ensure that the researcher voice is represented at an institutional level. All three RSLOs and the PGR Liaison Officer (created in 2019) are members of the Concordat Implementation Group and work with the RET Team to facilitate the consultation on the RD action plan, to shape the York Researcher Conference programme and promote the Women in Research forum.

At the time of writing the consultation is still in progress but there are some emerging themes around what a positive research culture at York would look and feel like. These include a strong desire for enhancing and increasing social connectedness among colleagues across career levels and across disciplines. Regular and more flexible reviews of performance and career options with research managers and impartial parties such as mentors and specialist careers advisers is also strongly advocated. Practical suggestions to implement and support this included institutions dedicating physical space for social opportunities and facilitating team building activities as well as continued use for online networking. Remote working has in many cases opened up opportunities for informal networking and this is valued. Researchers felt that a positive research culture would reflect a strong sense of collaboration and collegiality, rather than a focus on individual outputs which can lead to unhealthy competition - that we should celebrate small, personal successes in addition to larger research outputs such as grants or prizes.

When asked what could be done differently around the employment of researchers at York, there was a request for greater clarity around terms of employment. For example, researchers are keen to have a better understanding of their specific workload and responsibilities, and would like to be supported in activities associated with academic citizenship, such as teaching and organising seminars. There was also a clear appetite for increasing promotion opportunities for researchers, not only in the frequency of opportunities but also in terms of encouragement and advice available from senior colleagues and support staff.

When considering what could make a difference to researchers' lives, researchers were interested in financial support to enable them to engage with specific skills training beyond the University remit. Related to this there are persisting issues in gaining support from line managers to engage in professional and career development, both from a financial perspective (for example, limited funds within research projects for conference attendance) and in terms of support and valuing investment of time in such activities. There was also interest in accessing more in-depth training and development opportunities over an extended period of time, and desire for participating in secondment opportunities.

2. Key Achievements and Progress against the Action Plan

2.1 Use of Fixed Term Contracts

With effect from 1 October 2020, where an employee's fixed-term contract is due to expire on or after 1 October 2020 if they have a period of two years consecutive service and there is an ongoing requirement for the work to be undertaken, they should transfer to an open contract. If, having reviewed the position, the department is not confident that there will be an ongoing requirement for the post (which may be related to the funding situation), consultation with the individual should commence in accordance with this guidance: Consulting with staff approaching the end of their contract." There are very few institutions putting into effect this policy and combined with moves from funders could potentially change the employment experience of researchers.

2.2 Representation and Community Building:

Identified as a key action in the 2018-2020 plan the number of [Research Staff Liaison Officers](#) has increased from one in 2017/18 to three in 2019/20. The RSLO concept was identified by the 2018 review panel as an area of good practice and has been showcased at Vitae conferences and is now emulated by other institutions including the University of Oxford. The three RSLOs have divided the departments and research centres among themselves so that each has a point of contact. In addition, a [new PGR Liaison Officer role](#) was introduced in 2019/20. The role holder has been instrumental in bringing together research staff and PGRs as part of the peer to peer led '[How to Thrive and Survive your PhD](#)' series designed to build a community of cross disciplinary researchers, enhance collaboration and reduce social isolation.

[The Women in Research Network](#) is steadily growing and now has 68 members spanning across all faculties and grades. To date, there have been two Women in Research conferences scheduled to coincide with International Women's Day. The network has enabled 7 networking events addressing themes including, 'strengthening your profile', overcoming imposter syndrome, mentoring opportunities, use of social media and research innovation and funding. A Women in Research Coffee Morning celebrated the experiences of postdoc researchers and provided an opportunity for networking as part of [Postdoc Appreciation Week](#).

2.3 Engagement in Training and Concordat Awareness:

The RET Team has expanded to provide a range of new interventions around Knowledge Exchange (KE), Commercialisation and Fellowship support. In the 2018 report it was pledged that "by 2020 we look to engage at least 10% of researchers in some form of KE training or activity". In the two years since the last report, 54 KE related events were delivered including 'Building Partnerships, Networking and Communicating with Partners' and 'Introduction to Industry'. Across all areas there has been a 91% increase in the number of researchers attending training. Since the last report the number of researchers engaged in training rose from 184 to 563. This has been enabled in part by lockdown and greater opportunity to engage with online training. Satisfaction rates were recorded at 97% in 2018/19 and 95% in 2019/20. Given that trainers were still honing their online facilitation skills during this period the 2% dip in satisfaction is not considered significant and offset by the increased

engagement. 92% in 2019/20 said they would recommend the training. Engagement with the annual [Research Staff Conference](#) is equally positive with a 50% increase in the number of researchers attending in 2019 compared to 2018. A further increase of 22.5% of researchers' engagement was recorded in 2020.

Concordat Consultation 2018/2019: The University of York had the highest number of Concordat Consultation *group responses* (7) of ALL institutions and the sixth highest number of individual responses (15), behind Oxford, Bath, Nottingham, Stirling and Birmingham, all significantly larger institutions, confirming widespread engagement of York researchers with the national initiative.

2.4 Mentoring:

The researcher mentoring programme piloted in 2017 formed the basis for a range of institutional [mentoring and coaching schemes](#). 66% of the total number of mentees participating in the University scheme are early career researchers. Since the 2018 report, 54 researchers have taken part as mentees of which 74% identify as female. 15% of all mentors are mid-senior researchers/Pis. In 2020, a new [PGR mentoring programme](#) was launched. This has involved 37 postdoctoral researchers being trained as mentors for PGR students in the last 18 months of their registration. 65% of these identify as female. The scheme follows the same cross-disciplinary, outcome based model as the other programmes with the core aim to provide support to PGRs, additional and complementary to their supervisory team who can discuss all aspects of the research experience and professional development. Several applied after a positive experience of being mentored themselves and wanting to contribute to the development of the next generation of researchers.

2.5 Fellowship Support & Training

In 2019 a new '[Preparing for Fellowship Success](#)' training retreat was offered through a competitive process. Applicants had to be in a position to develop a Fellowship application within 6-9 months and have the support of a Fellowship Mentor. Developed with Pis, the programme includes input from existing Fellows, senior leaders and funders, and features a Fellowship celebration networking dinner. Now offered annually as part of a wider programme of support for Fellows, the training has become an established key activity for researchers looking to move their research career to the next level. The University now has some 80+ externally funded Fellowship holders. A new programme of support, including shared practice events are aimed to increase this number and will be overseen by The Fellowship Coordination Committee. The Enterprise Fellowship Programme introduced in 2019 was recognised with the [Praxis Auril Internal Knowledge Exchange Award](#) and has led to the formation of a spin out company.

3. Next steps and focus of future strategy for the next two years, including success measures

The University Strategy is in the process of being finalised. Ensuring that the principles of the RD Concordat and the implementation of the University Strategy align so that they mutually support and reinforce each other is an immediate short term priority (October - Dec 2020). Once this is achieved it will be possible to replace the interim draft University Action Plan with a final version. Below are highlights of the more ambitious, strategic and/or collaborative projects anticipated as part of that 2020-2022 commitment:

Career progression routes and national intelligence around destination routes remain challenges to the sector. To this end we will:

- i. Use the principles of the RD Concordat and findings of the [Wellcome Trust's 2019 survey on research culture to support a wholesale review of what is working and what needs to change in order to further improve the positive environment in which researchers can flourish](#).** A new University Culture and Community Working Group has been created to enable the development of an institution-wide approach to developing a positive culture. The group will influence how and what is needed to support the realisation of the new University Strategy and will draw upon the RD consultation responses and lessons from the '[York Researcher Conference: shaping a positive culture for researchers at York](#)' to ensure that the responses of Pis and researchers are central to the decisions that are taken. This work is sponsored by the Director of HR and led by the Deputy Director of HR who is a member of the Concordat Implementation Group. (C13)
- ii. Conduct a comprehensive review of the suite of leadership programmes** including the Research Leaders Programme to identify the appropriate content, mode and medium of support required to serve the needs of researchers, Pis and the institution in the light of the University vision and developing strategy and vision for York as a [University for Public Good](#). (PCD14).
- iii. Consult and develop an institutional list of professional development activities.** This will enable Pis, supervisors and mentors to have meaningful conversations about professional development and ensure participation in training is recorded and discussed as part of annual performance review. In accordance with the University's commitment to public good the checklist will include civic duty through outreach, volunteering and mentoring. (EC4 & PCD11)
- iv. Conduct a full evaluation of the PGR mentoring by Postdocs scheme** and of the PGR buddy scheme to review if the lessons learnt can be cascaded to a cross institutional postdoc buddy scheme. (PCD13)
- v. Build on the strong links with European & International partners** (in particular the Universities of Munster, Maastricht and Aarhus and links through the [WUN](#)) in developing skills in cross cultural communication and building cross institutional collaborations between researchers. (ER1)

This strategic work will enable the UoY to capitalise on the gains made and put in place structural interventions to enable an institutional culture shift away from individual to collective leadership and shared responsibility for the lived experience of research staff and PGRs.

