



ROYAL HOLLOWAY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH: FOUR YEAR EXTERNAL REVIEW
(November 2021 – November 2023)

1. Introduction

Royal Holloway's research is motivated by social purpose. Our researchers transform culture, stories and systems, and seek creative solutions to complex challenges, including alleviating inequalities and living sustainably. We support world-leading research and encourage ambition and intellectual risk in extending knowledge. We foster transformational impacts for individuals, society, and the environment as part of our civic and global responsibilities as a university of social purpose. We also aspire to give our undergraduate and postgraduate students an education that is informed by the highest standards of research and scholarship: an achievement of our inclusive research and education which was commended in TEF2023.

Our community of researchers is key to these aims, and we endeavour to provide an intellectual and physical environment that supports the highest level of academic research. We aim to provide clear advice, guidance, training and support to enable staff to maximise their research potential and progress through their careers, with the Concordat providing an essential framework for our approach. HR Excellence in Research (HR EIR) is an excellent opportunity for review of this approach, in support of our overall research strategy.

The University continues to define researchers as individuals who are employed to conduct research or scholarship and who would be expected to develop their research identity as part of their career progression. This includes staff on research, teaching and research, teaching-focused or professional practice contracts, professional support staff and technicians, regardless of contract type, level of training, experience and responsibility. We consider that all are target beneficiaries in our Concordat work. Our REF 2021 submission demonstrated our commitment to including a diversity of staff in outputs, impact case studies and research environment statements.

Early Career Researchers (ECRs) are a key part of the target group, for whom a similar inclusive definition is applied, allowing individuals to opt into the definition regardless of their role. Staff numbers for ECRs are therefore difficult to define, but as a guide, Research staff make up 12% of our overall Concordat beneficiaries (127 colleagues), and research and teaching lecturers a further 15% (157 colleagues). Therefore 27% of our target group are at the early stages of their research career.

2. Institutional context 2021 – 23

Our most recent 3-year strategic plan for the University – and its focus on 'Research Recovery' post-Covid – is coming to an end. We are now shaping a vision for the 2030s which builds on what has been achieved but visibly embeds people and skills into our research strategy. 'Inclusive Education and Research' is the leading strand in the development of this vision for the 2030s, with the conscious pairing of education and research designed to reflect and support the experience of staff and students in what will continue to be a student centred and research-intensive University. We will continue to identify and resource new opportunities to catalyse collaboration around the complex challenges of the present and align those initiatives with our renewed focus on open, inclusive, outward-facing development opportunities for all researchers.

This HR EIR review is timely alongside the development of this new strategy. As an organisation we performed extremely well in REF2021 in research outputs and impact, however the outcomes in relation to research environment were less positive in many units of assessment. This demonstrated that there is significant potential for us to deliver innovative, collaborative and impactful research through development of the backdrop and context in which this work is done – our research culture. The obligations within the Concordat are essential to this development, and this review has enabled us to identify objectives which will help us to drive forward our research strategy and which play a significant role in developing our research culture.

3. HR EiR governance and internal review process

Improved involvement and engagement across our research community has been a key focus of our work since our last review. Each of the six academic Schools now has a Vice-Dean Research and Knowledge Exchange (0.5 FTE) who leads on fostering a positive research culture in their Schools, sharing ownership of our research values with the Associate Pro Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Postgraduate Research, University Ethics Lead and Director of Library, Learning Support and Culture through monthly Research Advisory Group (RAG) meetings.

HR EiR is overseen by the Staff Research Environment Working Group (SREWG), chaired by our Associate Pro Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation, Professor Ruth Livesey. Membership of SREWG has expanded significantly to enable broader focus and engagement. It now has 25 members including ECR representatives from across the University's six academic schools, representation from mid-career and senior academics as well as colleagues from Research and Innovation, HR Operations, Organisational Development, Educational Development and Library Services. One of our Technical Operations Managers is also part of the group, providing linkage with the Technician Commitment.

SREWG provides a breadth of insight into researcher experiences at the University, and this has enabled us to shape the action plan together. In September 2023 we ran the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) and the outputs of the survey were reviewed by SREWG to understand the impact of action already taken and identify further issues and priorities. Other mechanisms for feedback include RAG, and our newly formed ECR Academy. The University has also run two surveys for all staff within the period – a pulse survey with ten questions in 2022, and a full People and Culture survey in 2023. Results of these surveys have also been reviewed within academic schools and by SREWG, and this has also provided insights into the views and experiences of our researchers.

SREWG reports to the University's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RKEC), and Professor Livesey reports regularly on progress both to the University's Executive Board (EB), and to the Students, Education and Research Committee (SERC) at Council level. This ensures that our commitment and actions in relation to the Concordat are visible and assessed at the highest levels within the University.

A key aim in the next three years will be going further to improve this involvement and engagement, through the further development of our new ECR Academy (ECRA) and the appointment of an ECR chair who will also attend RKEC. In June 2024 we will also hold our first annual Festival of Research. This will celebrate and showcase our researchers and their work, engage them in key discussions in relation to improving our research culture, and provide a platform to develop peer to peer exchange and support.

We will be introducing a new centrally supported annual research planning cycle in all research units from 2024. We will engage researchers at all career stages in local SCOPE workshops to identify their own preferred measures of positive research culture. This annual cycle will allow central teams to identify areas of good practice or development needs in relation to research culture and an opportunity to reinforce our commitment to Concordat principles.

4. Key achievements and progress 2021 – 2023

The key achievements and progress since our last internal assessment are outlined below. The outcome and impact of specific actions identified can be seen in our action plan review.

Environment and Culture

The expansion of SREWG and the introduction of the post of Vice Dean for Research has enabled us to collectively consider what we would like our research culture to embody, reviewing our strengths and where we need to develop. SREWG has identified that to support research excellence, our culture needs to be

inclusive, enabling, collaborative, efficient and outward-facing, and these principles will be at the centre of our first Festival of Research in 2024. We are also pleased that alongside this, awareness of the Concordat has improved (15.3%, CEDARS 2021, 27%, CEDARS 2023).

In the last year mental health awareness training has been implemented for line managers, and this popular course is now helping managers to understand how they can support staff with wellbeing and mental health at work. So far 8% of academic Heads of Department have attended this course and a small number of research managers, and our aim is for these numbers to grow over the next three years.

The University formally introduced a remunerated role of Vice Dean for EDI (0.4 FTE) for each academic School in 2023, who leads on school-based approaches and contributes to EDI leadership at University level. In June 2023 we launched our [EDI Framework 2023-2028](#) marking a shift towards community building, visible EDI leadership, championing and role-modelling, accessibility and inclusion by design, and empowering confidence and action at a local level across academic schools and professional services.

In 2022 we implemented a comprehensive review of central EDI training. We procured a new EDI Essentials e-learning package as part of a wider approach to mandatory training for all colleagues. This package comprises training in allyship, bullying and harassment, unconscious bias and diversity and inclusion in the workplace. We consider this training to be a baseline, which must be followed up with dialogue and discussion. We will complement this training with micro-learning videos and recordings which are currently being produced to support colleagues to embed EDI thinking into regular activities.

Our Ethics Policy was revised in 2022, and a risk framework is now being implemented alongside a new system to support ethical review. A revised Research Misconduct Policy was signed off in June 2022. We have a statement of research performance expectations and a code of good research practice. Research ethics and integrity at Royal Holloway is promoted through intranet pages and through the provision and delivery of research ethics training. We subscribe to online research ethics training via Epigeum, and we provide training via annual research ethics sessions for all staff, ad-hoc meetings with School PGR leads to promote research ethics and address any common issues and dedicated training for staff working in areas of elevated integrity risk (e.g. security-sensitive subjects) in collaboration with UK government

Employment

We have improved guidance and EDI training in recruitment, including on writing inclusive job descriptions. We have also updated our recruitment applicant tracking system so that it now requires recruiters to confirm that they have completed recruitment training, with a link to the relevant training, and to mandatory EDI training. 85% of managers who responded to CEDARS reported that they had completed recruitment and selection training.

In the last year we have established a new academic promotions workshop which includes a greater focus on acknowledging leadership within the promotion criteria. We have also ensured that promotion panels are as diverse as possible, have received tailored Unconscious Bias training, and are reminded of EDI principles at the start of panel meetings. We incorporated a greater focus on individual circumstances during the promotion process especially in the light of the impact of Covid-19.

Academic promotions are now subject to an extensive review of the process and criteria, to allow more flexibility and transparency, a focus on equality of application and to ensure accessibility for all. An initial review is now complete, and this included engagement sessions with over 130 colleagues, and a benchmarking survey with 49 UK universities. Working groups have been established to focus on revising pathways and criteria for assessment, arrangements to ensure fair and consistent decision making and user experience. A key element of the revised criteria under consultation is an increased emphasis on rewarding contributions to developing others and fostering a positive inclusive research culture.

Responses to CEDARS generally suggest that research manager confidence has significantly improved since 2021. We attribute this to development for line managers, which can be seen in detail in our action plan review, and strong support from HR Business Partners.

Professional and Career Development

We are currently reviewing our researcher development programme, previously known as “Advance”. In the last two years course occupancy fell to 63%, having peaked in 2021. We are aware that we are not alone across the sector in facing real challenges in re-building attendance and engagement in researcher development activities in the contexts of both Covid and sustained industrial action. Reflecting on this new reality has led to a strategic decision to redevelop our offering into three parts – an intensive one-day orientation in Royal Holloway research support and research culture for new staff led by the Research and Innovation team; a reorganised offering of training, resources, and guides available on need, rebranded as the ‘Researcher Development Programme for Staff’ and bringing parity of esteem and cohesion with our PGR RDP; and a forward plan for new, intensive cohort programmes focused on particular career stages with an initial emphasis on mid-career colleagues and moving into research leadership.

We have now also established a new ECR Academy to provide an environment where ECRs can develop their career and a sense of community by fostering collaborative relationships to address key challenges and share best practice with peers. Designed and led by ECRs, the academy will give them a forum to constructively contribute to the University’s strategy, empower them to co-develop initiatives beneficial to their career development, and support them to realise their leadership potential, creating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. The Academy launched on 2 November 2023 and we look forward to its growth and development.

We have recently implemented a centrally co-ordinated mentoring scheme in which every School offers the opportunity to either become or to find a mentor. This was developed specifically into response to our conversations with Early Career Researchers, which suggested that they sometimes have difficulty accessing guidance from senior colleagues in support of their research and career development.

The mentoring scheme is open to all colleagues, irrespective of discipline or career stage, who can request a mentor, volunteer to be a mentor, or both. Mentees choose areas of professional development in which they are seeking support, including specifics such as writing grants or publishing, as well as more general professional development such as preparing for promotion. Mentoring pairs are matched as closely as possible according to preference requests and expertise offered. A forum open to mentors and mentees will be held by each School on a termly basis to provide an excellent networking opportunity and build a sense of community for mentors and mentees. Since the 2021 review we have also implemented career development workshops for ECRs, to help them to be more proactive about planning their own career journey.

In the last two years we have found ways to support the development of new research and the skills and career development of our researchers through strategic use of QR funding. The Research Application Support Programme (RASP) is designed to support colleagues with excellent ideas for research projects to develop them into high quality research funding bids, whilst building up external networks, generating preliminary data and developing essential research funding skills. It is intended for academic staff across the University who have yet to establish a strong track record for externally funded projects but show some evidence of securing research funding, leading a team and working with external partners. Successful applicants receive up to £5k each, and they participate in a research funding skills development programme.

We have also used funding from UKRI to support participatory and policy-related research projects and related initiatives, and in doing so enabled our researchers to develop their skills and their research identity. In 2023-24 we are using this funding to help to consolidate our role as a Civic University. Expressions of Interest were invited in October 2023 for projects and initiatives which are co-created with regional partners, use innovative models and methodologies for participatory research, work in partnership with policymakers to have a regional outcome, improve dialogue and facilitate the use of existing research and exchange of knowledge between universities and policies makers, and regional partnerships and collaborations which are aimed at supporting evidence-based policy making. The internal competition has served as a case study for how strategic, open and inclusive internal awards can bring researchers together in new networks and identify excellence from across the disciplines, providing a sense of recognition as well as the development of our identity as a University of social purpose.

The [Social Science Impact Accelerator](#) (SSIA) programme enables collaboration and knowledge exchange to maximise the real-world impact of Royal Holloway's social science research for our region, the UK and internationally. It is funded by a 5-year ESRC Impact Accelerator Account grant (2023-28) and University match funding. As part of the programme, we offer [a residency scheme](#) with opportunities for researchers to spend time with partner organisations or for partners to spend time at Royal Holloway, to develop the impact of social science research. Residencies can be between 12-30 days (part or full time). So far, we have funded 4 residencies with organisations including, the Greater London Authority, Every Casualty Counts, Parents for Future UK and Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust. We will fund a minimum of 10 residencies per year.

5. Next steps and strategic focus – 2023-26

Our aim is to develop an inclusive, enabling, collaborative, outwardly facing and efficient research culture, and this will be embedded in our research strategy and our three-year action plan for HR EIR. Our priorities for the next action plan are to

- **Build further awareness and engagement with researchers and their managers**, embedding the researcher voice into policy and strategy reviews. We will develop effective feedback loops for key groups and in particular, identify and maintain regular communication with research staff on fixed term contracts. We will appoint a 0.2 FTE chair of the ECR Academy, to become a member of RKEC and REF steering group and integrate ECR recommendations into formal research structures.
- **Promote wellbeing and effectively manage workloads**. Just 28% of respondents agreed that their working environment supports their mental health and wellbeing in CEDARS in 2023. This area will be a action plan key focus, including scoping a project to develop a University-wide approach to workload modelling. We will monitor the impact of a range of initiatives designed to simplify, improve efficiency and reduce duplication in our work through engagement with researchers. We will continue our training for line managers in mental health awareness, and conduct an audit of existing wellbeing initiatives.
- **Address bullying and harassment** – indicators from CEDARS and our People and Culture Survey suggest that there are issues which need to be understood and addressed, relating to experiencing bullying and harassment in the last two years (28%), and understanding of how to report it (64%). This will be a key focus with a suite of actions planned around prevention, report and support, and incidence management.
- **Promote and maintain high standards of research integrity** – we will internally appoint two senior research leads with key responsibility for promoting initiatives for research integrity. We will continue with the development of Ethics and integrity training; using UKRIO and other external experts as appropriate, prioritising training for ECRs and ensuring feedback and follow up with ECR Academy
- **Review of our academic promotions process** including appropriate reward and recognition for contributions to positive research culture as well as excellent individual outputs and research outcomes.
- **Strengthen our approach to supporting career and professional development** through a new cohort-based approach, ensuring that it is relevant and well-targeted through qualitative consultation. We will strengthen access to career development support and guidance on careers outside HE for postdoctoral researchers through collaboration with the Doctoral School.
- **Improve career development conversations within Performance Development Reviews** through guidance and training for reviewers, including a longer-term planning perspective for research objectives.

We welcome the increased emphasis on the assessment of research culture across the sector and see HR EIR as essential in addressing this challenge. This shift in balance to the wider agenda of people, skills and culture is a significant change for many established research staff at Royal Holloway which will work in conjunction with our new vision for the 2030s. An important step in the development of our community of practice is the creation of a new post of Research Culture Development Manager, within Organisational Development. We have involved all staff groups in developing our RH2030s strategy through a series of creative conversations across 2023-24. The core objectives of our HREIR forward plan area aligned with our emerging objectives for the 2030s in research. Our future work in this area therefore will be embedded in communications and governance across the institution as we realise our vision of a student-centred and research-intensive University of social purpose.