

HR Excellence in Research Award 6 Year Review

Introduction and Background

Ulster University received the HR Excellence in Research award in 2012 and subsequently undertook a 2 and 4 year review in 2014 and 2017 respectively. At each review a modified action plan covering the period up until this 6 year review was developed and implemented.

As demonstrated in Ulster University 2012 submission documentation and subsequent reviews, the University is fully committed and supports the principles outlined in the Concordat for career development of research active staff. These principles are underpinned in Ulster's Five & Fifty strategic plan and more specifically actioned through the Research & Impact Strategy. Support for research active staff continues to be offered to employees on research and teaching contracts as evidenced in **Appendix 1**.

Process for Internal Evaluation and monitoring of the Concordat at Ulster

The coordination for the implementation of the Concordat for the Career Development of Researchers along with representations across the University have both formally and informally monitored progress of the action Plan since 2012 to ensure that the voices of Contract Research Staff (CRS) is captured and enhanced engagement in the fulfilment of researcher development.

The main formal mechanism for monitoring progress to date has been through the Research Governance Triangle structure created in 2017 and is made up of the Contract Researcher Forum, Research Concordat Coordinator and HR Excellence in Research Implementation Group. The Chair of Contract Research Forum has provided feedback to the Senior Leadership on discussions at the annual Campus for CRS, in particular it was highlighted that over the past few years the Researcher Governance Triangle had operated on an irregular basis and it was felt that communications between the three elements of the triangle could be strengthened. This feedback was raised at the CRS workshop in April 2019 and it became clear that a link was required to ensure that the HR Excellence in Research Implementation Group, Research Concordat Coordinator and Contract Research Forums were in communication. To this end, a dedicated resource (a CRS Secondment) has been funded to review the CRS Forum and deliver key actions to ensure improved communication within the triangle structure. In addition, progress on performance against the plan is reported to the Research & Impact Committee and the Senior Leadership Team on a quarterly basis. Moving forward, both People & Culture and Research & Impact have committed to allocate staff resources to ensure the effective delivery of the new 2019-2021 action plan.

For CRS in particular, feedback was attained from a CRS workshop which was held in April 2019. Over 40 CRS attended this workshop at which views were sought on issues impacting contract research staff. The aim of the workshop was to put in place updated action plans to reflect and address these discussions. Following the success of the CRS workshop, which provided CRS with a platform to directly feedback to senior leadership in the University on actions that might help support their career development, we have made a commitment to organise two CRS events annually involving the HR Excellence in Research implementation group, the Research Concordat Co-ordinator and CRS per year. Crucially, there will be a significant career development component to these events. The CRS workshop also revealed that many CRS are unaware that they have access to various training opportunities. To address this, the dedicated CRS web page will provide information on the Researcher Development Programme (RDP) and the process by which CRS can gain access to this training and other programmes. A further outcome of the CRS workshop was that there has been inconsistent practice in terms of how PIs facilitate the professional and career development of CRS. This will be addressed by the changes to the Guidance Notes for PIs, which now includes emphasis on helping CRS develop into independent researchers and is discussed in the first section of this document, as well as more detailed support for PIs around their responsibilities in terms of career development.

In preparing this submission, the views of the key stakeholders in the Research Community at Ulster, most importantly CRS and other researchers including PhD researchers and Principal Investigators, were taken cognisance of (NB: Ulster participates in the PIRLS, PRES and CROS Surveys to ensure that formal mechanisms for obtaining views are in place) To note: the next CROS is due to take place in June 2019 as a follow up and a response to feedback from the April 2019 CRS workshops. Feedback received from the Researcher Development Programme and the roll out of a number of programmes which were developed to support researchers RIGOUR, SOARING and IMPACT shaped and informed the 2019 action plan.

Since the initial submission and reviews of the HR Excellence in Research award, the Action Plans have been published on Ulster University's webpages and have continuously been reviewed, monitored and reported in line with governance structures. Some areas still need to be considered as ongoing, partly due to the nature of fixed-term employment contracts and partly due to the significant restructuring of Ulster University Faculties and Schools (6 faculties to 4, 33 schools to 26) and the restructure of all departments through the Professional Services Review Group's Five & Fifty project, which was established to deliver a holistic approach to staffing structures to ensure we have the right skills and capacity in the right teams in the right part of the university structure to support the delivery of Five & Fifty. These restructuring processes took place between January 2017 and April 2019.

Key Achievements and Progress over the Six Year Period

Key achievements since 2017 have been selected for each principle to outline progress (other key achievements have been previously recorded on the Reports for 2015 and 2017. However, **Appendix 1** demonstrates full progress against each principle for this review period.

Principle 1: Recognition of the importance of recruiting, selecting and retaining research active staff

- In April 2019 Ulster University approved a new policy of allowing 'named investigators' on project applications. This allows CRS to be a named researcher at application stage and not go through the recruitment process, thereby mitigating some of the cases of precarious employment.
- Since January 2017 100% of recruitment panel members underwent recruitment training to ensure that the right panel compositions and to ensure fair selection methods are used throughout the recruitment process.
- In 2018 Ulster University established a new 'researcher pool' to which all PhD researchers are invited to apply at the point of submission. For contracts of less than 4 months PIs have been able to hire from this pool. Moving forward, PIs will be able to hire from this pool for contracts up to 6 months.

Principle 2: Research active staff are recognised and valued by the University as an essential part of our human resource.

- Of 44 high quality talking head videos published on the Ulster University website and YouTube channel between 2017 and 2019, 25% were CRS and 20% were PhD researchers. Showcasing their cutting-edge research across Ulster's four strategic themes.
- Ulster has an annual promotion cycle specifically CRS, which allows advancement from Research Assistant right through to Professor. This CRS promotion pathway will be further promoted to CRS over 2019/2021.

Principle 3: Research active staff are equipped and supported to be adaptable and flexible in the global research environment.

- The RIGOUR (Research Income Grant Opportunities for Ulster Researchers) programme has consisted of 11 events in 2017/18 and a further 8 events since 1 August 2018. 17% of participants at these events have been CRS.
- The SOARING (Significance and Originality in Academic Research: Interpreting New Guidance) programme consisted of 4 events between January and August 2018 and 11 events between September 2018 to March 2019. Events for 2018/19 attracted 16% CRS.
- The Impact Development Series has run 17 workshops since January 2018, with over 400 participants. 16% of participants have been CRS.

Principle 4: Recognition of the importance of research active staff personal and career development at all stages of their career.

- Ulster University launched a formal staff mentoring scheme in May 2019. Of the 114 registered mentees 27 are CRS.
- New guidance notes for Principle Investigators, approved in April 2019, outline the responsibilities of Principle investigators to guide the development of CRS into independent researchers.

Principle 5: Individual research active staff share the responsibility for and need to pro-actively engage in their own personal and career development.

- From the founding of the Doctoral College in 2017 all PhD researchers are required to undertake a Training Needs Analysis and Personal Training Plan. To date, 428 Training Plans have been completed and 336 Training Plans are in progress.
- In April 2019 a workshop hosted by the HR Excellence in Research Implementation Group attracted over 40 CRS participants. This gave CRS an opportunity to raise issues facing them and play an active role in developing updated action plans to reflect and address these unique challenges.
- The introduction of a sabbatical policy for research staff which constitutes at least one sabbatical period per Research Institute core member.

Principle 6: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion must be promoted in all aspects of the recruitment and career management of research active staff.

- The new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy, approved in May 2019, will galvanise and revitalise Ulster University's approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.
- Ulster University has maintained compliance with Northern Ireland race equality legislation and opened a dialogue with BME research staff using the CROS survey as a starting point. The percentage of BME Research Staff has increased from 18.58% in February 2010 to 24.65% in February 2019.
- Between 2017 and 2019 four Schools received Athena Swan Awards. A total of 10 Schools now hold Athena Swan and targets for further applications before 2021 have been agreed.
- Ulster University joined Stonewall Diversity Champions Northern Ireland Programme in March 2019 and began implementing its third Disability Action Plan in May 2019.

Principle 7: The sector and all stakeholders will undertake regular and collective review of their progress in strengthening the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK.

- Following the success of the CRS workshop in April 2019, the HR Excellence in Research Implementation Group has committed to organising two annual workshops that bring together the Research Governance Triangle.

- Ulster will launch the CROS Survey in June 2019 to seek the views of CRS on the progress the University has made and how it might further improve the CRS experience. This survey will include specific additional questions regarding training for CRS and the experiences of BME staff.

Strategy for the Next Two Years

Over the next two years Ulster University's strategy is to continue to improve the experience and opportunities available to CRS in line with Ulster University's Research & Impact Strategy 2017-2022, which is dependent on the "quality and performance of its people". By empowering our people to undertake interdisciplinary research in a supportive environment to produce internationally excellent and world-leading outputs with transformative impact. It will support Ulster's vision to deliver globally significant research with local relevance and to make a positive contribution to society as a whole.

Through delivery of the Research & Impact Strategy 2017-22 we will realise the scale of ambition set out in our Strategic Plan Five & Fifty. We will achieve the delivery of research with impact and development of Ulster's researchers through the seven key objectives as set out in the Research & Impact Strategy 2017-22 and summarised below:

1. Our People; By 2022 we will increase the number of enrolling PhD researchers by 30% and engage in a process of further capacity building to increase the number of Ulster staff returned to REF by 50%. We will develop strategic approaches, including targeted investment, that will make these objectives achievable.
2. Our outputs; We will increase the level of our research grant awards by 50% during the course of this strategy. We will provide a support platform to stimulate the transformation of our research outputs so that they reflect the significance, originality and novelty of our research. We will ensure that Ulster University is at the leading edge of national and international peer-review processes and that this knowledge of world-leading research outputs permeates our research community. We will use targeted resources to increase the number of internationally co-created and co-authored research outputs.
3. Our Impact; Ulster University will improve its positioning within the top 25% of UK Universities within the next REF assessment for 4* and 3* research impact and in the top 20% of UK Universities within the 2021 HESA Higher Education-Business & Community Interaction Survey league for its HEIF-determining metrics.
4. Our Research Focus; To strongly embed Ulster's chosen interdisciplinary research themes of creativity and culture, healthy communities, sustainability and social renewal within our research environment, underpinned by targeted investment from Ulster. Ulster's strategic research themes will become the focal point for the university's investment in research development. These will encompass big societal challenges to which the University will make a global contribution; while other discipline-specific research topics will continue to be supported within the Faculties.
5. Our Research Environment; To provide a supportive research environment to produce internationally excellent and world-leading outputs and transformative impact.
6. Our Research Governance and Ethics; To create a culture in which adherence to the principles and procedures of research governance and ethics is encouraged and valued, reflecting the increasing demands of government, funders and our research partners, supported by a clear and accessible framework of policies, procedures and guidance, summarised and illustrated in the Code of Practice for Professional Integrity, which will keep pace with changing sector-wide requirements.
7. Our Performance & Delivery; To ensure that we all understand what it means to be a great researcher and how this will enable us to realise our strategic ambitions as articulated in the Five & Fifty Strategic Plan. More specifically, Ulster University will achieve its year 1, 3 and 5 targets for our Research Student Experience; Research Student Completion Rates; PhD Researcher/Staff Ratio; Number of Staff Returned to REF; Number of Staff Collaborating Internationally; Number of Citations; Value of Research Grant Awards; Value of RCUK Research Grant Awards; Value of International Research Grant Awards; Number of Collaborative Research Projects with Business; Value of Knowledge Exchange Income; and Number of Live Impact Projects.

The success of the strategy will be measured by Key Performance Indicators, each contributing to Ulster University's vision to deliver outstanding research and teaching that encourages the innovation, leadership and vision needed to help our community thrive. A Balanced Scorecard and annual Faculty implementation plan have been developed which include performance metrics, benchmarks and actions which are time-bound, with clear ownership and outputs.

To continue Ulster University's progress in line with this strategy, the new HR Excellence in Research Action Plan for 2019-21 (Appendix 2) has been developed to achieve these aims. Each of these points is discussed in detail, aligned with Research Concordat criteria and associated with SMART success measures. Within this action plan Ulster University have set targets for CRS participation based up individual participation to support the personal development of researchers.

More broadly, in support of the Five & Fifty Strategy, Ulster University has created its first "People & Culture" Strategy designed to provide greater detail and clarity around the conditions which will let people flourish. In 2018, a new People & Culture Directorate was created, whose vision is create an environment where **we achieve excellence by working together**. This vision will be achieved through seven Strategic People Priorities, as follows: 1: University of Choice, 2: Supporting Performance 3: Strengthening Engagement, 4: Promote Wellbeing, 5: Develop People, 6: Positive Employee Relations, underpinning these is the promotion of 7: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Operational plans for delivery of these Strategic People Priorities will be brought to life between 2019 and 2021.