

HR Excellence in Research Award 2026

Summary Report

6 March 2026

HREiR Award – Summary Report (2026 Submission)

This Summary Report reviews Ulster University’s progress under the HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award and sets out priorities for the 2026–2029 period. The report follows Vitae guidance and is based on evidence gathered through evaluation and engagement with researchers. It highlights progress made during the current cycle and outlines a focused and realistic plan for further development aligned with the University’s wider research and people strategies.

1. Institutional Research Context

Ulster University is a multi-campus university with a strong applied research ethos and a growing international reputation for research excellence, impact and innovation. The University has over 27,000 students and almost 3,000 staff across its three campuses and makes a significant contribution to the economic, social and cultural fabric of Northern Ireland.

The University’s core activities include teaching and learning, widening access to education, research and innovation, and technology and knowledge transfer. Research strengths span health and life sciences (including nursing, allied health, and biomedical sciences), computing and engineering, law and the arts, creative and cultural industries, social sciences, education, and business.

Research activity is supported by close collaboration with industry, the public sector, communities and international partners, reflecting the University’s ‘People, Place and Partnership Strategy - Delivering Sustainable Futures for All’, and Research Strategy 2023–2028.

Ulster University’s research community comprises approximately 826 academic staff with teaching and research responsibilities, around 180 contract research staff, 750 postgraduate researchers and postdoctoral researchers, and a wide range of technical and professional services colleagues who support research and innovation activity.

The University is a recipient of the Times Higher Education University of the Year award and continues to perform strongly in national benchmarking exercises. In the most recent Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), Ulster ranked first in the UK for Research Support and among the leading institutions for overall satisfaction. The University holds the institutional Athena Swan Silver Award and a Race Equality Charter Bronze Award, reflecting its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

Researcher development is guided by the Research Culture Action Plan, which prioritises collegiality, collaboration, career development, research integrity and recognition through open and responsible research. Engagement with the Concordat and the HR Excellence in Research Award provides a framework for embedding these priorities in governance, policy and researcher support.

Key developments since the last award

Since the 2022 HREiR award, the University has continued to make progress in supporting researchers. A key development has been the implementation of a Workplace Agreement with University and College Union (UCU), to enable eligible contract research staff to move to a permanent contract of employment within the organisation, if they so wish. This development has been supported by close collaboration between Research and Innovation and People and Culture. Since implementation, 42 contract research staff have transitioned from fixed-term to permanent contracts. The initiative has been recognised by UCU as a positive example of tackling precarity in research employment.

During the reporting period, two staff networks – Neurodiversity and Carers – were introduced, complementing the existing Disability, BAME+ and LGBT+ networks, with research staff represented across all. The University introduced a new post, Dean of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, which has further supported EDI in research culture activity.

Research culture governance was strengthened through clearer senior ownership, the appointment of a Research Culture Manager and the establishment of a Research Culture Steering Committee chaired by the Dean of the Doctoral College. Researcher voice mechanisms were also expanded through the Researcher Network and research culture workstreams.

The Doctoral College has established a strong, structured approach to researcher development for PhD researchers aligned with the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF). Building on this foundation, development provision for research staff is becoming more visible and coordinated, supported by continued investment in people development, enhanced Welcome Events and the introduction of the University's learning management system, EVOLVE, which provides a central platform for delivering and monitoring development activity. These developments took place amid wider sector pressures, including Higher Education government funding uncertainty.

Evidence from reporting and engagement activities indicated some variation in researcher experience across career stages, particularly in relation to postdoctoral career pathways, people management and access to development opportunities. These insights have informed ongoing reflection on governance and the role of the Concordat in university planning.

Overall, developments during the reporting period have strengthened the University's approach to supporting researchers, improving employment stability, enhancing researcher voice and engagement, and strengthening coordination of researcher development provision.

2. Internal Evaluation and Gap Analysis

A university-wide review was undertaken in 2025 to evaluate progress against the HREiR Action Plan 2022–2026 and inform priorities for the next cycle. The review drew on multiple sources of evidence, including annual Concordat reporting, delivery against the HREiR Action Plan, survey

data from Valuing Voices (the University's staff survey), CEDARS and PRES, and qualitative insight from focus groups, Researcher Network discussions and research culture engagement events.

To ensure a focused and deliverable forward plan, identified gaps were prioritised using three considerations:

- the scale of impact on researcher experience indicated through survey evidence and qualitative feedback
- areas where experience appeared to vary across faculties, career stages or contract types
- opportunities where targeted action could deliver meaningful improvement within a three-year cycle.

Applying these criteria, the evaluation identified three priority themes: clearer postdoctoral career progression, strengthened support for research managers and principal investigators, and improved evaluation of researcher development and research culture initiatives.

These priorities align with the University's research strategy, research culture priorities and governance arrangements to ensure the forward plan is both relevant and deliverable.

3. Stakeholder Involvement

Researchers at all career stages, academic leaders and professional services colleagues contributed to evaluation and planning through surveys, consultations, Researcher Network discussions, Research Culture workstreams and focus groups.

Feedback from early career and postdoctoral researchers highlighted uncertainty around career progression and limited visibility of career pathways beyond individual research projects. This feedback informed the prioritisation of mentoring, career development support and clearer communication of diverse career routes.

Contract research staff emphasised the importance of consistent employment practices, effective induction and supportive management, which informed the focus on strengthening management support and the early career researcher experience. Academic leaders and research managers also highlighted opportunities to further improve the coordination and visibility of development opportunities and to strengthen monitoring of their impact.

These perspectives directly informed the priorities and Concordat obligations selected for the 2026–2029 plan.

4. Governance and Decision-Making

Concordat and HREiR activities are overseen by the Research Culture Steering Committee, which reports to the Research and Innovation Committee chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor

for Research. Both senior committees include Early Career and Contract Research Staff representation. Researcher representation is further embedded through the Researcher Network and Research Culture workstreams, with progress monitored through regular reporting and shared metrics.

5. Alignment with Wider Institutional Frameworks

HREiR activity is integrated within the University's wider research and people strategies, including the Research Strategy 2023–2028, 'People, Place and Partnership – Sustainable Futures for All Strategy', the Research Culture Action Plan 2025–2029 and the Technician Commitment.

This is further supported through the University's participation in the 2025 pilot REF People, Culture and Environment (PCE) Statement, which provides an additional mechanism to reflect on research culture activity, including Concordat commitments.

Together these mechanisms support coordination between researcher development activity and the University's strategic priorities.

6. Strategic Priorities and Delivery Plan (2026–2029)

6.1 Vision and Intended Change

By the end of the 2026–2029 period, the University aims to provide a more consistent and supportive environment for researchers across faculties, alongside strengthened institutional support for researcher development. Researchers will have clearer access to career development support, greater confidence in progression opportunities and stronger engagement with structured development and mentoring provision. By the end of the reporting period, the University expects to see measurable improvement in survey outcomes relating to career development, management support and research culture.

Progress will be evidenced through improvements in University and sector-wide survey outcomes (e.g. CEDARS or sector equivalent); increased participation in structured researcher development activities delivered through the EVOLVE learning platform; and greater engagement with mentoring and career development initiatives.

These indicators will demonstrate a more consistent researcher experience and strengthened support for researcher development across the University.

6.2 Priorities by Concordat Pillar

The priorities for the 2026–2029 period are structured around the three Concordat pillars of Environment and Culture, Employment, and Professional and Career Development.

Environment and Culture:

Strengthen researcher voice and engagement; improve the visibility, accessibility and consistency of wellbeing support for research staff and research managers; and further develop equality, diversity and inclusion capability among managers of researchers to support more inclusive research environments.

Employment:

Improve consistency in people development and employment practices for researchers; enhance local induction and early career researcher experience; support managers to manage researchers effectively; and promote regular, constructive performance support across research teams.

Professional and Career Development:

Deliver RDF-aligned researcher development, mentoring and support for diverse career pathways.

6.3 Selected Six Concordat Obligations

The six Concordat obligations selected for focused action reflect the priority themes identified through evaluation and stakeholder engagement, while ensuring balanced coverage across the three Concordat pillars of Environment and Culture, Employment, and Professional and Career Development.

Environment and Culture

Obligation 1A – Awareness and embedding of the Concordat

Why selected: To move beyond awareness-raising and ensure Concordat principles are embedded within day-to-day researcher support, leadership and governance.

Gaps addressed: Variable understanding of Concordat principles and uneven visibility within researcher-facing practice.

Strategic link: Supports the Research Culture Action Plan and institutional commitment to inclusive, transparent research environments.

Obligation 1B – Researcher feedback and voice

Why selected: To strengthen systematic, inclusive mechanisms for capturing and acting on researcher feedback.

Gaps addressed: Limited visibility of feedback outcomes.

Strategic link: Aligns with 'People, Place and Partnership' priorities and reinforces participatory governance and inclusive culture.

Employment

Obligation 2A/2B – Wellbeing and mental health

Why selected: To respond to evidence highlighting workload pressures and the central role of managers in supporting wellbeing.

Gaps addressed: Inconsistent use of the available wellbeing support and variable management confidence in addressing mental health concerns.

Strategic link: Supports workforce wellbeing priorities and institutional commitments to sustainable and supportive employment practice.

Obligation 4A / 10A–10C – People management capability

Why selected: To strengthen the quality and consistency of the people management skills of research managers and principal investigators.

Gaps addressed: Variation in induction, performance management and management capability for those leading and supporting researchers.

Strategic link: Aligns with workforce development, leadership capability and research culture priorities.

Professional and Career Development

Obligation 12A – Championing professional development

Why selected: To ensure researchers have consistent access to structured professional development across career stages.

Gaps addressed: Uneven awareness, coordination and uptake of professional development opportunities.

Strategic link: Supports researcher development strategy and alignment with the Vitae Researcher Development Framework.

Obligation 16A / 16B – Diverse careers and mentoring

Why selected: To strengthen support for career development within and beyond academia.

Gaps addressed: Limited visibility of diverse career pathways and variable access to mentoring support.

Strategic link: Aligns with employability, impact and people development priorities, and supports a resilient researcher pipeline.

These obligations are addressed through targeted actions within the HREiR Action Plan 2026–2029, with delivery monitored through established governance arrangements.

6.4 Strategic Alignment

The forward plan aligns with Ulster University’s strategic priorities by embedding Concordat principles within research culture, people development and management practice. It supports researcher and workforce development through targeted actions focused on wellbeing, management support and structured career development.

Progress will be monitored through annual Concordat reporting, survey evidence, researcher engagement and oversight through established governance structures.

Together, these priorities provide a focused and deliverable plan to strengthen the research environment, employment practice and researcher development during the 2026–2029 period.



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