

## **Ulster University – HR Research Excellence Four Year Review – January 2017**

### **1. Background**

This reports illustrates how Ulster University has revised and implemented its Action Plan for the HR Excellence in Research Award (first awarded in 2012 and updated in 2014) and how Ulster has continued to review its implementation of the Concordat Principles as a foundation for moving forward. It also outlines how the strategic commitments linked to the Concordat will be actioned in the implementation of Ulster's Five & Fifty Strategic Plan and more specifically, the Research & Impact Strategy. Both strategies will deliver a dynamic and positive effect on all our researchers including our Contract Research Staff (CRS).

### **2. On-going monitoring of the Concordat at Ulster**

The Coordinator for the implementation of the Concordat for the Career Development of Researchers along with representatives from departments across the University have both formally and informally monitored the progress of the Action Plan since 2012 and attempted to ensure that the voices of CRS were heard in the preparation of this Four Year Review. The main formal mechanism for this monitoring to date has been through two university level committees, the HR Research Forum and the Research Concordat Steering Group, which meet on an annual basis.

As a listening organisation, Ulster has always and will continue to engage its research staff in the fulfilment of researcher development. Ulster established an Organisational Development & Change Management group to ensure the provision of a research environment that is supportive of the conduct of research and the conduct of researchers. Ulster also sponsored an ECR Forum to enable peer learning and mentoring, the identification of enhancements pertinent to the ECR community and through whom an additional means of consultation is achieved. In preparing this submission, the views of the key stakeholders in the Research Community at Ulster, most importantly CRS and other researchers including PhD students 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). For CRS in particular, feedback was attained from CROS (see below for key issues arising from the 2017 CROS Survey which has informed our thinking going forward) and the annual Campus Fora held at each campus. For example, at the 2015 Fora, attended by over 50 CRS, views were sought on promotion and progression and more specifically development and training initiatives through future RIGOUR and SOARING programmes. Core to the development of the Research & Impact Strategy we engaged ECR's, seeking their input as a key strategic group highlighting the focus of the Research & Impact strategy on its people. Over 1/3 of all CRS responded which is a strong indicator of engagement. We also consulted on how ongoing communication should be structured to help shape policy recommendations. Additionally after hearing from CRS representatives at these meetings, and taking account the views of the researcher representative on the HR Research Excellence working group, it was clear that enhancing CRS communication was vital as well as offering an area on the website to showcase their work. Integral to this was the development of an 'Our Researchers' link in the Research & Impact section of Ulster.ac.uk and Research Communications outlined in Section 3 was subsequently developed. Section 3 also includes more details on The RIGOUR Programme designed to develop/further enhance our research income grant generation capacity and research environment, which was shown to be a major issue for CRS when discussions were held and the CROS survey results analysed.

In response to changes in leadership at Ulster, and to achieve maximum engagement with CRS and other key stakeholders in the implementation of the Action Plan, and to have appropriate governance structures in place to ensure its effective delivery, a new structure based upon three key stakeholders (**Contract Researcher Forum, Research Concordat Coordinator and HR Excellence in Research Implementation Group**) is now proposed for September/October 2017.

#### ➤ **The Contract Researcher Forum**

Formed by and comprised of Contract Research Staff, Forum membership will be open to any Ulster CRS in all four faculties. The Forum aims to support CRS based on the needs raised within the group and to advocate on their behalf in the university. Roles will include the generation of ideas and initiatives to support CRS which may help to assist the effective delivery of the Action Plan. Solutions will come from both the Forum and the University. Ulster will be responsive to the Forum's requests/concerns through strategy and policy change. The Forum will be independent and chaired by a CRS member. All actions arising will be channeled directly to the Research Concordat Coordinator with decisions and results relayed directly back to the Forum via their Chair.

#### ➤ **The Research Concordat Coordinator (already in post)**

The Research Concordat Coordinator is a senior staff member who acts as a champion for the Concordat Principles and has a key oversight role in the implementation of the Action Plan. The Coordinator has always acted as a first point of contact, after Principal Investigators and line managers, for CRS and his communication with CRS has helped to contribute to the review for this revalidation process. Under the new structure, the Coordinator will serve on the HR Excellence in Research Implementation Group and continue as the direct liaison point with the Contract Researcher Forum. The Coordinator will lead on discussing actions arising from the Contract Researcher Forum and liaise with relevant Ulster staff to bring answers to the group. The Concordat Coordinator will also facilitate the bi-annual survey and annual Campus Fora on each campus.

#### ➤ **The HR Excellence in Research Implementation Group**

This group will meet every six months to oversee the effective implementation of the Action Plan. Chaired by the Director of Research & Impact, it will include the Research Concordat Coordinator and representatives from Human Resources, the Doctoral College, Staff Development, Research & Impact and a representative from the Contract Researcher Forum.

In addition, a central focus of the monitoring of the key indicators of the Concordat implementation is Ulster's continued participation in various initiatives designed to hear the voices of the CRS community including the Campus Fora, tailored information and dissemination events and perhaps most importantly the CROS survey. The findings from the 2017 survey, which was completed by 44% (n=72) of Ulster's CRS (as at May 2017) illustrate several positive factors linked to how Ulster's CRS perceive their employment conditions. The findings provide the basis for a number of key recommendations/remedial actions included in the revised Action Plan for 2017-19. The following points provide a summary of some of the key findings and Ulster's committed actions:

- **Recognition and Value** – in general terms the majority of CRS who completed the CROS 2017 reported satisfaction with many aspects of their researcher experience, particularly recognition for their part in writing publication material with (78% 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that their contribution was recognized). However, the survey also illustrated that there are areas to be addressed. For example, over a third (39%) of respondents expressed concern about the provision of information on promotion and progression. It is therefore proposed that Ulster continues to offer enhanced information for CRS wishing to apply for promotion, including specific guidance on the promotions process (an initial CRS promotion workshop was delivered in October 2015). With regards to the issue of enhanced induction activities, the latest CROS findings illustrate that when efforts are made to address CRS concerns, success can be achieved. For example, in the 2017 CROS findings, changes to the induction process made by Ulster to clarify and enhance the induction process were paying dividends. 74% of those who responded to the question regarding the value of local induction stated that it was a useful and positive experience (this was encouraging given that in 2015 68%, responded similarly).
- **Support and Career Development** - The results from the 2017 CROS also show that in general Ulster CRS have relatively high levels of satisfaction with access to professional researcher development opportunities (many respondents [79%] stating that they felt that they were 'encouraged' to participate). The analysis also reveals that efforts made by the Staff Development representative on the HR Research Excellence Working Group to underline the importance of self-monitoring in relation to participation in development activities were paying dividends. Findings indicate an increased awareness among CRS on the need to maintain a formal CPD Plan (63% agreeing that they maintain a formal CPD record in 2017 v 55% in the 2015 CROS). Another key finding illustrated that researchers continue to avail of the professional development activities offered at Ulster. For example, 40% had undertaken training and development in research skills; 39% in equality and diversity; and 51% in ethical conduct. Many also expressed a desire to participate in future activities that would help with Knowledge Exchange (62%), Research Impact (67%) and Leadership (64%). Given the apparent desire to engage in a wide range of professional development activities, and the aspiration for more mentoring (59% indicating that they would welcome more mentoring), potential professional development opportunities for all CRS need to be communicated more effectively.
- **Equality and Diversity** – While slightly down on the 2015 figure (86% in 2017 v 92% in 2015), an overwhelming majority felt that Ulster was committed to Equality and Diversity, with 91% asserting that they had never felt discriminated against in their position. As with the 2015 CROS findings, most respondents (77%) stated that they were satisfied when asked about work-life balance. This figure is significantly higher than the satisfaction rate in the 2013 survey when only 57% felt that they had a good balance between work and personal life, but shows a slight decrease from 2015 when 80% were satisfied with their work life balance.

#### Implementing the Concordat (Highlights since 2014)

Ulster has endeavoured to continually monitor the implementation of the Concordat. In this section, we will outline some of the recent key highlights against each of the seven Principles of the Concordat and how they affect CRS at Ulster.

##### Principle 1 – Recruiting, Selecting and Retaining Researchers

In 2015 a review of the Recruitment and Selection Policy determined that the existing policy is robust and fit for purpose. It was however felt that further action was required to embed the University's core values outlined in the Five & Fifty Strategic Plan within recruitment practice. Work is underway to develop methodologies to embed these within recruitment practices. The Action Plan has been updated to reflect that the review will be completed by April 2018, with revised documentation developed and in use by 1 July 2018. Additionally, Ulster is committed to ensuring fairness in determining starting salaries for new CRS. A transparent methodology has been developed based on years of comparable service. The outcome of the assessment is documented in a standard pro-forma. Recent measures to recruit and retain CRS include:

- **Redeployment** - one of the mechanisms Ulster uses to avoid redundancies among CRS is the Redeployment Register. All vacancies (except very short-term vacancies) are initially restricted to those on the Register. The trawl is only opened to wider competition if there are no eligible re-deployees on the Register. The Register has been highly effective in avoiding redundancies due to the ending of fixed-term contracts. In 2015, 18% of contract research posts were filled via redeployment register trawls and 14% during 2016. Without a Register those individuals would have been made redundant. Feedback from CRS users of the Register suggests that it is a very important and much valued initiative.
- **Scientific Officer** - an important innovation since 2014 has been the introduction and development of the new job category 'Scientific Officer'. This category is a hybrid between an academic role and a contract research role. These are permanent appointments which helps address the lack of job security in some contract research roles.
- The University has recently promoted a fixed-term CRS to a permanent professorial post.

##### Principle 2 – Recognition and Value

We can report that we have robustly implemented and monitored the actions which were included in our Gap Analysis and Action Plan in relation to Principle 2. Recent successful developments since 2014 include:

- **Local Induction** - In previous reviews Ulster had identified issues with induction. After feedback from CRS, it was clear that,

in a number of cases, structured induction was not delivered and in other cases there were concerns in relation to the delivery quality of the induction. During the last four years, significant action has been taken to improve both the quantity and quality of induction for CRS. In relation to 'local' induction, an Induction Checklist has been further developed as a quality measure. The checklist is published in a document and must be signed-off by the inductee and their line manager. To ensure that induction occurs, in all cases the signed checklist must be returned to the Human Resources Department, who have put in place procedures to issue reminders until all checklists are completed and returned. In addition the University also has an online corporate induction.

- Annual Performance Review and Personal Development Planning – the Five & Fifty Strategic plan has made the development of a new integrated Staff Performance Expectations, Development, Recognition & Reward Framework a clear strategic priority. The proposed Integrated Framework will enable and recognise the achievement of the Five & Fifty Strategic Performance Measures. Every research staff member will have an opportunity each year to formally review their performance and agree a Personal Development Plan (with strategic development goals) with their Line Manager and/or Research Leader. Success will be measured on the percentage of CRS completing this Plan and the Review.

#### **Principle 3 – Equipping Researchers to be Adaptable and Flexible**

Full integration of researcher and professional transferable skills and attributes are pre-requisites to researcher adaptability and flexibility. Ulster has developed an integrated Researcher Development Implementation Model that promotes and facilitates the development of these pre-requisites. Reflecting Vitae's Researcher Development Framework (2010), the model introduces researchers to four integrated development pathways: Investigator; Innovator; Educator and Leader.

Researchers will require both technical researcher's skills and professional transferable skills and attributes to perform effectively in the roles of investigator, educator, leader and innovator. The model encourages researchers to think about their development from a holistic researcher development and performance perspective. That is, all researchers are motivated to acquire investigator, innovator, educator and leader skills, so that they can make an impact, including economic and societal. A key advantage of using this implementation model to support how researchers apply Vitae's Framework, is that the model remains relevant in multiple non-academic settings, therefore increasing researchers' adaptability and flexibility. This aspect of acquiring skills and knowledge was clearly desired when CRS completed the CROS 2016/17 survey.

The four integrated professional researcher developmental pathways are applicable to all researchers and our aim is to review and develop/enhance the suite of professional development options on an on-going basis to ensure they are relevant and being accessed by all levels of research staff.

#### **Principle 4 and 5 – Personal and Career Development, and Lifelong Learning**

A key component of the implementation model is personal and career development. ECRs, alongside Doctoral researchers and all researchers in Ulster, have access to professional researcher development. In the "Strategically Planning Your Research Career" workshop researchers are challenged to think about their area of expertise, Vitae's Framework and how it can be implemented through the pathways model, in terms of writing their own Strategic Development Plan. As shown in section 3 above, the model is designed for implementation in multiple contexts and can support lifelong learning in alignment with Vitae's Framework.

#### **Principle 6 – Diversity and Equality**

The Mission Statement of Ulster's Five & Fifty Strategy encourages "a diverse university community". Ulster's commitment to equality is articulated in its Equality Scheme and Equal Opportunities Policy. The Equality Scheme addresses issues on gender, marital status, religious belief, political belief, race, age, disability, sexual orientation, and responsibility for dependents. Gender and race are just two of the dimensions of diversity that are prioritised at Ulster. A three-year Athena SWAN action plan has been in place since 2014. It aims to support and develop the careers of women in STEM and includes activities to increase opportunities for career development such as:

- networking events (for example a 'Mid-Career Academic Women in STEM: Exploring Career Choices and Motivation' lunchtime event was held in March 2016);
- academic promotion workshops (a dedicated workshop was held for contract research staff);
- a pilot mentoring scheme - FAME (Female Academic Mentoring Engagement) was developed to address the poor representation of female academics in senior positions in STEM. The scheme will be developed and expanded under the University's new four year Athena SWAN Action Plan.

Since 2014 four STEM Schools have gained Athena SWAN awards, and two additional School applications were submitted in November 2016. The Athena SWAN Committee approved guidelines to increase gender representation in the selection process in 2016 and this has been circulated to all STEM schools. One of the actions recommended was to implement Unconscious Bias Awareness training for staff. To date, training on Unconscious Bias Awareness has been attended by 97 staff. Ulster continues to fund staff to participate in the female leadership development programme 'Aurora', with eight people participating in 2016/17 and a further twelve committed to participate in 2017/18.

#### **Principle 7 – Implementation and Review**

As demonstrated, Ulster has an ongoing commitment to adherence to Concordat Principles, as evident by reflection (improved satisfaction levels in CROS Survey) and action (implementation of strategic and operational activities to enhance CRS experience). Moving forward, the new HR Excellence in Research Implementation Group and the focus on supporting, developing, and recognising key employees in our strategic plans will provide greater clarity on what it means to be great Ulster researcher and how we will grow our research talent base. The Group will be represented at a participatory level at VITAE conferences and best practice recommendations will be reported back to the Group. For example, the former Researcher Development Lead presented Ulster's Researcher Development Implementation Model at Vitae's International Conference in Manchester 2016 (interactive workshop).

### 3. Strategic Plans and Implementation to support CRS at Ulster

Ulster University is embarking on a new and ambitious strategic plan that will take us to our fiftieth anniversary in 2034. The plan is focused on delivering a University that is innovative and sustainable with a strong and international reputation. Research continues to be a priority for Ulster in this plan with Academic Excellence with Researcher Development a key area of focus. The complementary Research & Impact Strategy 2017-2022 puts People at the heart of the strategy, "The success of Ulster University and its Research & Impact Strategy, is dependent on the quality and the performance of its people". Ulster is committed to providing professional support and development to its researchers to ensure that they have the right skills and systems available to deliver our ambitious vision for research development and impact. The strategy is aligned with the Concordat Principles to equip researchers to be adaptable and flexible and to support researcher Personal and Career Development and Lifelong Learning.

In relation to [P1], Ulster has identified that action is required to embed the University's core values outlined in the Five & Fifty Strategic Plan within recruitment practice. Work is underway to develop methodologies to embed these within recruitment practices. The Action Plan has been updated to reflect that the review will be completed by April 2018, with revised documentation developed and in use by 1 July 2018.

Implementation of the R&I Strategy is dynamic - active researchers within Ulster (early career to senior researchers) have access to a suite of developmental opportunities that are designed to increase their capacity and capability to create economic, societal and academic impact. Moving forward and in alignment with [P2, P3, P5], the development opportunities will be made available through our new bespoke Researcher Development Portal. This Portal will provide technology supported learning opportunities and digital access to collaborative learning opportunities, to optimise researcher mobility and interdisciplinary learning. Success will be measured in two ways: (1) Year 1: 30% of CRS to access the Portal, Year two, increase to 40%. (2) Measurement of the increase in the number of CRS research applications (10% in year 1, 15% in year 2)

Ulster is committed to ensuring that the quality of our researcher development is at the highest international level with all CRS at Ulster eligible and encouraged to participate in the most recent researcher development activities including Communications training and those which follow [P3, P4, P5]. The introduction of the 'Our Researchers' section on <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/our-research/researchers> not only showcases our quality researcher development experience but also promotes Ulster as an attractive university to work in as a CRS. Success in this area will be measured by the number of events held and the % increase in attendance by CRS on an annual basis.

Planned new professional researcher development activities in alignment with [P3, P4, P5] include:

- I. The RIGOUR Programme (Research Income & Grant Opportunities for Ulster Researchers): provides researchers with support to enhance and improve their success rate of funding bids. Targets 2017/18: 10 events, 300 attendees. 40% of attendees will be CRS. 2018/19: 10 events, 300 attendees. 45% of attendees will be CRS.
- II. SOARING (Significance and Originality in Academic Research: Interpreting New Guidance): a new support programme focused on further strengthening Ulster's research outputs by increasing their quality and REFability. Targets 2017/18: 10 events, 5% of attendees will be CRS. 2018/19: 10 events, 10% of attendees will be CRS.
- III. INSPIRE (Industrial, Social and Political Impact: Rethinking Excellence): a new support programme designed to help academic researchers to develop skills to create impact from research. It will provide strategies and tactics for maximising the reach and significance of the impact of Ulster's research excellence. Targets 2017/18: 10 events, 300 attendees, 25% of attendees will be CRS. 2018/19: 10 events, 300 attendees, 30% of attendees will be CRS.
- IV. Research Challenge Fund: aims to motivate and build the capacity of CRS to develop high quality research.
- V. Distinguished Research Impact Awards Scheme: recognises the contribution of outstanding Ulster researchers.  
<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/staffdevelopment/professional-and-leadership-development/professional-research-development>

Ulster's Doctoral College students will also be offered the Researcher Development Programme aligned to the Vitae framework. Success measures will include the number of PhD researchers undertaking skills audits and development plans, growth in these numbers year on year and feedback. The Programme will also be reviewed by June 2018.

A formal Staff Mentoring Scheme will be launched in 2017/18. Success will be measured by the % of CRS who are recruited to be mentored and the % increase of CRS participants year on year.

Ulster's Equality & Diversity Strategy [P6] for the next four years is based upon embedding Athena SWAN into all schools to ensure that those in possession of Athena SWAN School Bronze Awards progress towards the Silver level. Ulster will also apply for a Bronze Award in the Race Equality Charter. Similar initiatives will be included in the Action Plan to promote equality of opportunity in recruitment and career development. Achievement of this Charter will be evidence of success.

The new implementation and engagement structures on page 1 are designed to achieve maximum engagement with CRS and other key stakeholders in the implementation and ongoing monitoring of the Action Plan and Concordat Principles [P7] and will ensure Ulster has appropriate governance structures in place to secure its effective delivery. The success of this engagement will be the achievement of the Strategy targets. Measures have been agreed and The HR Excellence in Research Action Plan will be a standing Agenda item of the HR Research Forum chaired by the Director of Research & Impact. The Concordat and HR Excellence in Research will also be a standing item at the Research & Impact Committee. The minutes of these meetings will be provided to Council who will provide governance of the strategic goals and progress against achievement including retention of the Award.