



University of Worcester

Four-year contextual report for HR Excellence in Research Award – June 2021

1. Introduction

The University of Worcester received the HR Excellence in Research award in June 2016. The award was renewed in June 2018 following an internal review. The 4-year external review was due to take place in June 2020 but it was agreed with Vitae that this would be delayed for a year due to a combination of the Covid-19 pandemic and extended absence of key staff in the researcher development team. This report provides a brief account of the institutional context for research, describes the governance structures that underpin the Concordat action plan and how progress against the plan has been evaluated, gives an overview of progress against our 2018-20 action plan, highlighting some of the challenges, and sets out our forward-looking strategy.

2. Institutional Context

The University of Worcester was founded in 1946 as a teacher training college, gaining University title in 2005 and Research Degree Awarding Powers in 2010. We are thus a relatively new University but we have grown rapidly over the last 15 years. We now employ approximately 1200 staff: as of the HESA 2020/21 return, 452 are on academic contracts (excluding hourly paid lecturers) of whom just over 30 are on research only contracts. We educate just under 10,000 students, of whom 200 are PGRs.

Research has become integral to our mission through underpinning our Learning and Teaching and our societal impact. As part of an academic restructure in 2018/19 whereby existing Schools were brought together in 3 Colleges, research leadership was enhanced through the appointment of College Directors of Research and Knowledge Exchange. In addition to driving forward RKE within the College and its schools, these Directors also expected to lead on a designated cross-University RKE agenda

This College RKE Directorate forms part of the institutional RKE Directorate led by the Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor Research. This directorate also incorporates: the Research Office which has responsibility for coordinating policy and process for RKE funding, strategy, governance and researcher development (Staff); and the Research School which is responsible for our PGR programmes, PGR student life and research student and supervisor development.

The University approved a new 5-year Research and KE Strategy in Summer 2020. This was a delay on original timescales highlighted in the Concordat Action Plan, not least due to the academic restructure. The strategy sets out a vision to deliver excellent research and high quality KE which impacts positively on people's lives particularly in 5 identified Areas of Challenge (Human Health & Wellbeing; Sustainable Futures; Digital Innovation; Culture, Identity & Social Exclusion; Professional Education). Delivery of the strategy is built on 5 pillars: People, Infrastructure, Culture, Collaboration and Engagement. The People pillar is particularly relevant here with 3 core objectives relevant to the Concordat identified:

- We will seek to recruit and retain excellent researchers at all career stages but with a particular focus on attracting the next generation of researchers and research leaders to the University.
- We will seek to increase the number of Postgraduate Research (PGR) students in identified areas recognising that they are fundamental to a rich, vibrant and sustainable research culture.
- We will develop and mentor researchers across their research careers (from PGR to Professor).

Given the focus of our new RKE Strategy we have identified a broader group of researchers as the focus of our Concordat implementation plan. This is staff on research only academic contracts (research staff), staff on teaching and research academic contracts who were identified as having a Significant Responsibility for Research or as Emerging Researchers through our REF 2021 Code of Practice; and Postgraduate Research Students (PGRs). This represent a little over 300 researchers.

3. Governance structure

Oversight of the Concordat implementation plan and of the HREIR award falls to our Concordat Implementation Group (CIG) currently chaired by the Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor Research (who is also chair of the University's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee). The following groups are represented on the CIG:

- Research Staff
- Postgraduate Research Students
- Research Leaders
- Researcher Development team
- Human Resources

The CIG reports to and acts on behalf of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee which in turn updates the University's Academic Board on progress against the action plan. It meets 3 times per year.

Moving forward, one of the College Directors of RKE will take the lead on Researcher Development and of the CIG. It is also intended to add the following representatives to the CIG:

- Researcher Managers (likely a Head of Department)
- Academic staff with a significant responsibility for research

4. Evaluation Process

CIG has met 8 times over the last 3 years, overseeing and reviewing progress against the original action plan. Following each meeting, the 2018-20 action plan has been updated and action points fed to appropriate stakeholders.

An initial gap analysis was undertaken against the new Concordat in 2019/20 by the CIG which has informed the development of the new action plan.

Documentation for this 4-year review was considered by the CIG in May 2021 and approved by the RKE Committee in June 2021.

5. Key Achievements Against the Original Action Plan

The key achievements during 2018-21 period have been

Principle 1: Recruitment, selection and retention

- New RKE Strategy approved with a central focus on recruitment, development and retention of excellent researchers.
- Policy and procedures for recruiting research staff has been reviewed and enhanced to ensure all relevant parties are involved in recruitment and selection.

Principle 2: Recognition and Value

- Policy on fixed term contracts enacted by new HR Business Partners has led to retention of staff between funded projects

Principles 3 & 4: Support and Careers Development

- Researcher Development Programme reviewed and relaunched in 2020/21 with focus around 7 “clusters”: Getting Started in Research; Research Integrity; Publishing Your Research; Funding and Delivering Your Project; Research Supervision; Impact and Engagement; Research Leadership.
- Review and relaunch of Research Mentoring Programme in 2019/20.

Principle 5: Researchers’ Responsibilities

- Action plan for the Concordat to Support Research Integrity enacted and kept under review by Research Integrity and Governance Committee

Principle 6: Equality and Diversity

- Established action plan for future applications for departmental Athena SWAN awards.

Principle 7: Implementation and Review

- CIG has maintained a core role in the delivery of the Concordat Implementation plan

There have been some challenges in delivering the action plan, some internal, some external, and this is reflected in the actions that have not been adequately progressed:

- The academic restructure has had positive benefits in terms of providing enhanced research leadership and support but it has meant there has been some rethinking of responsibilities and consequent delay in actions, not least the development and launch of the Academic Career Pathways scheme.
- As noted, long term absence in the small researcher development team has impacted on the work of the CIG and on specific actions. Responsibilities have now been reallocated to avoid this issue going forward.
- Research staff engagement with some key initiatives has remained limited; a good example of this is attendance and buy-in to the Research Staff Forum. Feedback from this group suggests they do not really identify as distinct from other academic staff. This has led to our decision to focus our Concordat implementation plan on a wider group of researchers.
- The ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has limited our ability to implement key actions over the last 12 months not least because of academic staff focus being on delivery of online teaching but also because of the need to focus support staff on other matters, not least the delayed REF. Further, some research staff have been furloughed.

6. Future Strategic Direction

Our new action plan carries forward elements of the previous action plan that were not completed. The most significant example of this is the Academic Career Pathways scheme which remains a core component of this plan. However, in many ways the new plan is quite different from the previous plan reflecting the revised focus of the Concordat itself but also wider changes in the HE landscape and internal changes in structure and focus. We are conscious that the upcoming R&D People and Culture Strategy may have a significant impact going forward on researcher development priorities and we recognise that this may shift some focus in our action plan even over a 2-year period.

The key new actions in our plan are:

- The identification of a senior research leader (one of the College Directors of RKE) responsible for researcher development.
- The more systematic use of the University's Research Mentoring Scheme and the association of the mentors with a new Research Compact scheme which will enable researchers to work closely with an expert in their field and/or in some aspect of the research system (e.g. funding, impact, integrity) to identify and reflect on their research objectives and to identify the training and development necessary to meet these objectives. This Compact will feed into appraisal.
- The development of dedicated training and guidance for managers of researchers, most specifically Heads of Department who will be responsible for managing the majority of our researchers.
- The establishment of a Task and Finish Group to look at Career Development for researchers (specifically, PGRs and Research Staff).