**University of Dundee HR Excellence in Research Award**

**Revised Summary Report March 2024**

**Introduction**

The University of Dundee has held the HR Excellence in Research Award since 2010. Our previous award application was made under what were, no doubt for all higher education institutions, difficult circumstances. Delivering our action plan has required tenacity and, in some cases, adaptability. Nevertheless, we are proud of what we have achieved in the period since we last applied for the award. We hope that the following summary report will provide a satisfactory overview of our direction of travel going forwards, and our strategic approach to supporting researchers and research culture for the next three years.

**Context of Institution**

The University of Dundee is a relatively small but research-intensive university, employing 537 research staff, as well as 831 staff on academic contracts, and has 950 matriculated PGRs across eight academic schools. It currently ranks 301-350th in the Times World University rankings (2024). In the QS world rankings (2023), biology, pharmacology, art & design, medicine, life sciences and nursing are ranked in the top 200. In 2022 the University published a new five-year strategy and vision which underlines its ambitions as a triple intensive institution[[1]](#footnote-2) driven by social purpose. A key element of this is the People and Talent Enabling Strategy, which highlights, among other things:

* A renewed commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.
* A determination to deliver “exemplary staff development programmes” for all staff.
* The pursuit of best practice in the area of reward and recognition.

The subsequent implementation plan for this enabling strategy includes a detailed timeline and specific targets for fulfilling these aspirations.

While our relatively large population of research staff constitute the immediate beneficiaries of our actions in implementing the Researcher Development Concordat, a key feature of our approach going forward is to be maximally holistic, linking interventions specifically aimed at research staff to broad institutional change to the benefit of everyone wherever possible.

**Internal Evaluation**

In 2020, the University of Dundee conducted a formal gap analysis using a RAG methodology in pursuit of becoming signatory to the Revised Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (RDC). This analysis found that the university fulfilled the requirements of the RDC at least at a minimal level with the exception of one: the expectation that ‘managers of researchers must allocate a minimum of ten days pro rata, per year for their researchers to engage with professional development’ which has since been remedied.

In the summer of 2021, the University of Dundee ran the CEDARS survey, which played a key role in targeting action and benchmarks for the previous HR Excellence in Research Award Action Plan. Just over 20% of research staff participated, and while their responses indicated that Dundee is doing at least as well or better than comparable institutions in several areas, it also made clear that there was a long way to go in meeting the aspiration of ensuring that research staff are consistently supported to access their ten days of development, as well as in other key areas including induction, career progression and effective appraisals.

The University of Dundee routinely engages with the research staff and the wider researcher community by a variety of means, including:

* Research staff participation in the CDRS committee and the Research Staff Forum
* Liaising with representatives of School level Research Staff Associations (in Life Sciences and Medicine)
* One-off meetings of professional services with researchers and managers of researchers, either individually or in small groups
* Pulse surveys and focus groups carried out for specific purposes (for example, to investigate attitudes to training among managers of researchers)

A key focus of the University’s new People and Talent Enabling Strategy is the promotion of an active listening approach which aims at communicating and engaging with all of our staff more effectively, research staff included. As part of this, the University endorsed a new strategic approach to running staff engagement surveys in 2022. This agreed approach builds on previous practice of an externally run biennial survey complemented by more regular ‘in the moment’ pulse surveys on specific topics to inform progress on our strategic ambitions and to listen to staff views and suggestions to improve the staff experience.

With the assistance of an external partner, the University will be launching a new staff engagement survey to provide a baseline for measurable targets for the entire 2022-2027 University Strategy. The aim in designing the survey will be to take an agile approach with a view to avoiding survey fatigue or unnecessary overlaps. As such, we will not be running CEDARS as a distinct survey for the research staff community. The staff engagement survey will be designed to enable research staff responses to be disaggregated and research staff reports from this survey will be compiled and made available for the purpose of assessing the success of past and future actions where relevant. Due to the streamlined nature of the proposed survey, exact equivalent responses may not be available in all areas. Where gaps remain in our data as a result, we will endeavour to fill these by qualitative means, drawing on existing researcher networks (e.g. the Research Staff Forum and School Research Staff Associations).

Consultation with the researcher community in the period since our previous submission has continued to reveal a number of challenges. Some of these, such as concerns over career insecurity, workloads and inconsistent quality of management practice reflect long-term difficulties widespread in the UK research sector, albeit potentially exacerbated by current pressures. Others, such as an apparent weakening of community seem to be reflective of the post-pandemic environment. Addressing these concerns lies at the heart of our new action plan.

**Governance Structures**

The main University committee currently responsible for planning, coordinating and implementing the Researcher Development Concordat and the HR Excellence in Research Award at the University of Dundee is the Career Development for Research Staff Steering Group (CDRS). This committee includes representatives from key units and directorates across the University as well as research staff. CDRS is normally chaired by the Vice Principal for Research (VPR). The steering group is being chaired on an interim basis by Professor Michael Gratzke, Director of the University’s Doctoral Academy in anticipation of the appointment of a new Assistant Vice Principal for Research Culture and Environment in 2024.

CDRS reports to the University’s Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee which is chaired by the VPR. RKEC reports to Senate. Other relevant governance functions in the general researcher development space are exercised by the Professional and Organisational Development Committee, the Research Governance and Policy Sub-Committee and the Postgraduate Research Sub-Committee.

At the time of writing this summary report, a proposal to split RKEC into two committees for research and economic transformation respectively has been endorsed by RKEC and forwarded to Senate for approval. The underlying governance structure of the new University Research Committee will include a dedicated sub-committee for Research People, Culture and Environment (RPCESC) which will be chaired by the new AVP Research Culture and Environment and have representatives from staff groups including Research Staff. RPCESC will take over the oversight of the Researcher Development Concordat from CDRS which will be disbanded.

At School level, researcher development is typically overseen by the Associate Dean for Professional Culture (where applicable) and by the Associate Dean for Research. The recently formed School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law has also appointed a Staff Development Lead. The Schools of Medicine and Life Sciences also have Research Culture steering groups. From 2024-25 all Schools will have an Associate Dean for People, Culture and Performance.

**Past Progress and Achievements**

As is likely the case with many institutions, the University of Dundee’s previous action plan is reflective in some ways of the disruption and uncertainty associated with lockdown and the global pandemic. While in some ways this had the short-term effect of causing researchers and professional services staff to work harder on attempting to mitigate the most obvious impacts, it also disrupted the normal progress of researcher development activities and made community-building and engagement more of a challenge, as well as leading to (anecdotally) a sense of fatigue and consequently reduced social capital. The process of rebuilding from this has begun and will continue into the new planning period.

Nevertheless, there are significant achievements to point to from the 2021-2023 action plan. For example:

For managers of researchers:

* The People Manager Resource SharePoint now represents a one-stop-shop for most of the key information required by managers in relation to HR processes, replacing complex, multiple and sometimes opaque pages on the HR website, and including a dedicated section for managers of researchers. The resource, which has been heavily promoted in newsletters since being launched in September 2022 addresses a key need among managers of researchers for easy-to-locate, timely information in place of lengthy training sessions on compliance issues.
* The AEW (Academic Excellence Workstream) Inductions Working Group brought together professional services, academic and research staff to review best practice in inductions and create a series of recommendations. These are in the process of being consolidated into an easily accessible step-by-step guide accessible to managers across the university.
* A new guide on holding careers conversations has been created, in collaboration with the Careers Service and the Doctoral Academy, offering a handy resource to support and help normalise this practice among managers of researchers as well as the research staff they manage.

For researchers:

* Spinout Academy – a collaboration between the Research and Innovation Services directorate and the University’s Centre for Entrepreneurship offers researchers a major new training programme in commercialisation of research. At the time of writing, 16 researchers have joined the current cohort, and it is hoped that more will sign on before applications close.
* The researcher development policy has been thoroughly reviewed and updated to bring it in line with the expectations set out in the revised Researcher Development Concordat.
* In response to demand from the research staff community, a new research staff SharePoint has been created. The SharePoint incorporates a section for PIs which houses a new “Statement of Expectation” page setting out expectations for managers of researchers under the RDC and signposting resources to help managers fulfil these. This page is also linked to by the People Manager Resource.

**Strategic Objectives and Implementation**

Scottish universities face a particularly difficult funding environment over the near term, with inflation eroding block grants, cuts to Scottish Funding Council funding, and the failure to match new research culture funding available to universities in England. It is therefore important that our new action plan sets out ambitious but realistic and achievable actions taking account of these constraints, seeking to obtain maximal impact from careful use of existing resources.

The overall strategy for achieving this can be summarised by three main principles:

1. Ensure that the action plan is coordinated with and tied into other strategic actions by the University, in particular the People and Talent Enabling Strategy and Implementation Plan as well as other relevant concordats and agreements.
2. Promote more joined-up messaging and service delivery by relevant professional services units while reviewing the centre of gravity for researcher development provision within the institution.
3. Empower research staff by strengthening representation and recognition.

The People and Talent Enabling Strategy and Implementation Plan sets out ambitious actions over the relevant timeframe for the HR Excellence in Research Award planning period which are of direct relevance to strengthening research culture and researcher development at Dundee. These include internal projects leading to valuable new resources such as the creation of an institutional leadership framework as well as work on key processes such academic promotion criteria and workload allocation – which have the long-term potential to re-emphasise expectations around management practices.

Key highlights of the People and Talent Enabling Strategy and Implementation Plan include:

Staff engagement – delivering our baseline staff engagement survey in 2023 saw the beginning of our new approach of engaging with all our staff as we work towards our outcome of developing a listening and actively responsive culture. A baseline and subsequent SMART measures specific to our researchers have been established (see Action Plan), with the next staff engagement survey running in 2025.

EDI - Implementation of a new online reporting mechanism for staff, including researchers, to report instances of discrimination, harassment and bullying in 2024 is anticipated to result in an increase in reported cases and enable targeted interventions to address these issues effectively. A baseline and success measures will be established in 2025. A subsequent SMART measure for this action is included in our staff engagement survey (Action Plan – ECR4).

Leadership development for researchers – Beginning in 2024, three leadership programmes for our research community will be running, sponsored by the Wellcome Trust with the specific aim of exploring research identity and leadership skills. The programmes will be evaluated and their impact measured by a social scientist (Action Plan – PCD14) and reported to Wellcome Trust in 2026 and used to inform further initiatives we develop to support researchers.

To respond to specific feedback in the 2023 staff engagement survey, and our gap analysis for the Concordat in 2020, a new Management Capabilities Pathway for staff is being developed in 2023/24. One focus is on building skills in our managers to engage in more meaningful career development reviews with their teams With SMART measures included in the staff engagement survey (Action Plan – PCD12).

More immediately, there are significant actions which have been taken to offer a more integrated and seamless approach to supporting research staff and their managers. In particular, bringing the functions of research development and researcher development closer together in the Research and Innovation Services directorate. This will ensure that new or soon-to-be PIs are signposted towards support and expectations in relation to management and administration.

The University has already appointed a new Head of Research Culture and Environment at Grade 9 who will soon be joined by a Researcher Development Manager at Grade 8. These two professional-services colleagues will work closely with the incoming Assistant Vice Principal for Research Culture. We expect this investment to have significant positive impact on promoting a shift in institutional culture.

The new Associate Vice Principal for Research Culture will chair the new Research People, Culture and Environment Sub-Committee. They will work closely with the new Research Culture team in RIS, the Library Services Research team and the People Directorate, as well as many of the other Directorates and Schools to take forward a new whole-university Research Culture and Environment programme.

**Conclusion**

We are confident that the approach set out in the University of Dundee’s new HR Excellence in Research Award submission represents a genuine step forward for researchers at our university, linking their development and the culture in which they work to larger strategic ambitions for institutional change. We are fully committed to delivering this plan and are confident that it will lead to researchers who are more fulfilled, better represented, more uniformly well-supported by line managers and ultimately better equipped to progress their careers.

1. Triple intensity refers to an approach which aims to excel simultaneiously in research, teaching and knowledge exchange. For more information, see [Our triple intensity | University of Dundee](https://www.dundee.ac.uk/strategy/triple-intensity) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)