

HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award: Ten-Year Summary Report

Institutional context

Teesside University (TU) is a post-92 institution with a growing research presence. Our vision is to be a “leading University with an international reputation for academic excellence that provides an outstanding student and learning experience underpinned by research, enterprise and the professions”. We have 77 staff on research-only contracts including research assistants, associates and fellows. We also include our 645 teaching and research academics and 575 postgraduate researchers in our target audience for the Researcher Development Concordat. Our ECR population, using the REF 2021 definition and at the census date of 31 July 2020, was 26%. However, we use a broad and inclusive definition of ECR which means our population in practice is larger, though difficult to quantify. For example, due to having many large, vocational programmes (e.g. nursing, education) we have a significant number of academics with a professional background and significant teaching experience, but who are new to academic research and therefore ‘early career’ in terms of their research.

The University has five academic Schools: Computing, Engineering and Digital Technologies; Health and Life Sciences; Social Sciences, Humanities and Law; Teesside University International Business School; and Arts and Creative Industries, linked to the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA). Research is organised under eight research centres aligned to the schools: the Centre for Applied Psychological Science; the Centre for Culture and Creativity; the Centre for Digital Innovation; the Centre for Public Health; the Centre for Rehabilitation; the Centre for Social Innovation; the Centre for Sustainable Engineering; and the Centre for Biodiscovery at the National Horizons Centre.

Governance and implementation

Responsibility for the action plan and implementation sits with the Research Culture and People Sub-Committee (RCPSC), chaired by a member of the professoriate, and deputy chair is Director of the Research and Enterprise Office (REO). Membership includes academic leads for research culture from each of the schools, chairs of the ECR and PGR fora, and staff from relevant professional departments supporting the implementation, including HR, the library, careers service, and REO.

RCPSC meets four times a year and reports to the Research and Innovation Committee (RIC), which is chaired by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation. The ECR Forum and PGR Forum are also directly represented on RIC and able to voice issues to this senior committee independently. As well as being formally constituted sub-committees, these researcher fora provide informal networking and peer support to the research community, through regular meetings, events and activities. A priority in our future action plan is to monitor and increase the engagement of research-only staff in these committees. Due to the smaller and more transient population, compared to ECRs among our academic teaching and research staff, we recognise that research-only staff have not always been well-represented.

RCPSC members provide feedback from and input to the university’s Equality Objectives, Athena Swan, and the Research Integrity Concordat, as reflected in our action plan. RCPSC has also recently agreed to incubate a sub-group working towards our signing of the Technician Commitment. If the Technician Commitment group reports elsewhere once fully established, reporting and input on research culture related aspects will continue.

Internal evaluation

Progress was reviewed regularly at RCPSC meetings, and by working groups for specific actions between meetings. In July 2022, following the appointment of a new Research Culture and Policy Lead, a significant interim review of progress was undertaken by the committee, leading to a revised action plan being developed by April 2023. Following

encouragement from the peer review panel in 2021, we have approached our HREiR action plan as a living document. Revising the action plan following our internal interim review has enabled us to have greater depth of progress against a smaller number of actions that are closely aligned to our research culture priorities (as detailed below) and institutional strategies. As noted by the peer review team, our 2021 action plan was extremely ambitious, with many actions anticipated to take longer than the two-year time frame. Some actions therefore have been postponed to our 2023 action plan. As a result of the interim review, we were also able to capture new actions planned since the previous award so that progress can be represented more fully in the backwards action plan, which we have also transposed onto the new reporting template. The new template allowed us to consolidate actions that were previously spread throughout the plan, enabling us to work towards more significant and impactful activities.

Our primary quantitative instrument for evaluation was the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS), which we ran during the sector benchmarking period in 2023. We also took part in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2023. Although the findings have informed our evaluation of progress and development of future priorities, with both surveys we had relatively low response rates. Despite significant efforts to promote the survey, we had only 103 respondents to CEDARS, and only 8 of those from research-only staff. Since many of our previous measures of success were mapped to CEDARS, we have reported the findings in our action plan, however they should be read with this caveat in mind. Caution is needed when drawing comparisons between research staff and other academic staff responses, however overall responses by research staff tend to be more positive than for other academic staff. This further reinforces our intention to address our concordat-related activity to our broad research and academic community.

We have undertaken significant qualitative evaluation over the two-year period. Most notably consulting on our research culture, including externally facilitated culture cafes and a commissioned external review by Vitae, which included focus groups and interviews as well as desk research. The outputs of these reviews, together with regular feedback from researcher forum meetings, staff pulse surveys and feedback forms from attendees on our Researcher Development Programme (RDP), have been used by the RCPSC in a series of workshops to generate a theory of change model for transforming our research culture.

The research culture themes identified through this process have been shared widely with the research community through our annual research week in May 2023. The themes have been formally approved by RIC, which includes all Associate Deans for Research and Innovation, and other senior stakeholders in the university's research environment.

Progress and achievements

Environment and Culture

Consultation and review of research culture (2021 actions 1, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 22)

Reviewing the quality of our research environment and culture has been a priority for TU over the two-year award period. Over this time, the RCPSC has matured as a committee and been able to bring alignment to our Researcher Development Concordat, HR Excellence in Research Award, and research culture activities. Consultation with and by the committee has become more meaningful due to expanded membership and deeper understanding of the issues. Significant consultation has taken place, both formally and informally, with the broader research community, including through researcher networks and events. As a result, both our backwards and forwards action plans are better aligned to our institutional strategy and to the external context for research.

Embedding the Researcher Development Concordat (2021 actions 1, 2, 27, 28)

We refreshed our research induction in 2022 and 2023. Our induction now includes an overview of the Researcher Development Concordat, its links to other concordats,

agreements, and frameworks in use by the sector, and the UK policy context for research culture. Refresher sessions on research culture and the Concordat were also run specifically for the ECR Forum and the RCPSC. Awareness levels of the Concordat are still lower than hoped, according to CEDARS, so this will remain a priority for future action.

Mentoring for those 'new to research' (2021 actions 12, 30)

Our review of research culture revealed a gap in support for academic staff at any stage in their career who wish to become more research active. Staff engaged primarily in teaching can find it difficult to either initiate or maintain their research portfolio, and have varying levels of prior experience, including those working towards a doctorate. Therefore, a project team was set up to design and implement a new mentoring scheme for staff who feel they are 'new to research' or have had a significant break in their research career and need support to restart it. The first cohort of 18 mentees were matched with 6 research professors in April 2023, and will continue their mentoring relationships until April 2024. The scheme is being piloted in one school initially and will be evaluated for potential wider roll out in 2024.

Employment

Refreshed research induction (2021 actions 27, 28)

Our online induction now runs twice a year, but we have recorded the session, so it is available to researchers joining the university at any time. The session has been revised to include contributions from the library's academic research support team and makes use of interactive tools to provide an engaging experience. Collaboration with colleagues across the university who deliver inductions to researchers and academics from different perspectives is coordinated through a new Organisational Development and Learning Networking Group. These improvements are not yet reflected in our CEDARS data, however feedback from our most recent research induction session in October 2023 included:

"Very engaged staff who were happy to answer questions. Lots of useful information."

"Information presented in an accessible way and all my questions put into the chat were picked up and actioned."

"Just wanted to pass on my thanks for the Research Induction this morning. Staff were very attentive and supportive. I found it very informative and, as a new research associate, it was great to know about options available within the university moving forward."

Enhancements to Professional Development Planning and Review (2021 actions 34, 38, 39)

Our annual PDPR process has been updated to better integrate reflection and planning for research, enterprise and knowledge exchange objectives and activities. These activities are now referenced more explicitly as elements of the academic portfolio to be discussed during the review. This streamlined process removed the need for separate reporting on research planning, as was the case previously, and paves the way for a new online PDPR process, which is planned for 2024, and which will enable more effective monitoring of engagement.

Datasets for monitoring academic promotions (2021 action 29)

Data and monitoring processes for academic promotions have been explored through our Athena Swan Bronze renewal self-assessment. Although we have information about applicants and successful awards (and therefore success rates for applicants), we have a gap in knowing the eligible population, and therefore pipeline for promotion at each level. Exploration of these datasets in the context of HREiR and Athena Swan has led to the development of new actions in our next Athena Swan action plan (2023-2028) which will map out our promotions pipeline at each level in relation to protected characteristics. This will help us better identify any career progression barriers for, for example, women and staff from ethnic minority backgrounds. Research fellows are able to apply for promotion under the Academic Career Framework, which includes tracks for research, teaching and enterprise.

Professional and career development

Enhancements to the Researcher Development Programme (2021 actions 32, 41, 44)

We have made significant improvements to the management and logistics of our RDP over the past two years. Having transitioned to online delivery and then to a combination of online and in-person delivery over our previous (2019-2021) action plan, we have undertaken further work to understand the preferences and behaviours of researchers engaging with the RDP. As a result, we have implemented a new booking system which automatically generates calendar invitations, email reminders and feedback forms. The system makes use of Microsoft 365 tools, which are widely used across the university. Researcher feedback indicated that the Eventbrite system previously used was off-putting due to being external to the university, and difficult to use. RDP session facilitators, including professional and academic staff from across the university, have been engaged in trialling the changes, and attendee feedback so far is positive. Overall, RDP sessions since September 2023 are rated 4.7 out of 5 and 100% of respondents would recommend the session they attended to a colleague (feedback from 9 sessions as of 21.11.2023). We will continue to monitor registration and attendance rates throughout the academic year.

Career Accelerator Programme (2021 action 42, 44)

New topics provided on the RDP include a new Career Accelerator Programme for ECRs. This was a new action planned following a discussion at the ECR Forum of researchers' challenges around prioritisation, dealing with competing demands for time, and knowing what is (and is not) important for career progression. The bespoke programme, developed with these challenges in mind, comprises four online two-hour sessions 1. High intensity productivity: Maximising the impact of short time periods or opportunities for productivity, 2. Getting your point across: Communication skills for career development, 3. Thinking strategically – your future career and how to get there, and 4. Coach yourself through impostor syndrome. Researchers could sign up for the whole programme, or just for the sessions they felt they needed. Feedback was extremely positive, and a second iteration of the programme is planned for 2024, with input from the ECR Forum planned in December 2023.

“It really makes you think about what you can do and what it is that prevents you from being productive.”

“Achieving a task that I am motivated to work on – gives me confidence that research work can be embedded into my working week more efficiently.”

“Today I felt productive again and I learned a methodology on how to assess and guide my energy towards work and productivity.”

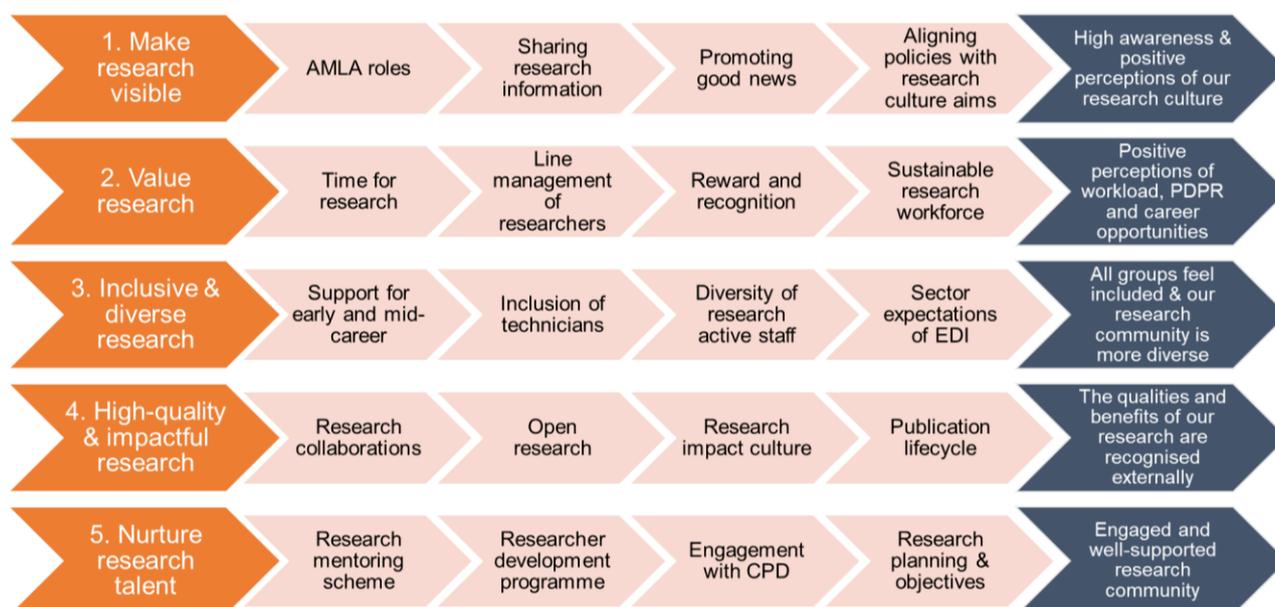
Strategic objectives and 3-year implementation plan

Our research culture aims, actions and outcomes for the next three years are shown in the figure below. These have been developed following extensive consultation on our research culture and environment (as described above) and alignment with our institutional strategies. All the actions presented in our HR Excellence in Research forwards (2023-2026) action plan have been developed from this understanding of our research culture and are mapped to the five aims.

Several actions rely on collaboration with other areas of the university to achieve our research culture ambitions and further implementation of the Researcher Development Concordat, and our governance and reporting structure through the Research and Innovation Committee (RIC) will enable us to achieve this. The RCPSC will monitor progress through four meetings per year, which are reported to RIC. In addition to implementing our HREiR action plan, the RCPSC will also have input into relevant initiatives elsewhere in the university and will bring insights back into the plan's delivery. For example, the committee

are contributing to a strategic review of academic workloads led by our Business Change and Improvement Projects department with HR.

Figure. Summary of research culture aims, actions and measures of success



The starting point for action by the RCPSC will be to establish two working groups. An 'evaluation' working group will map out a robust evaluation methodological framework for the next 3-years, ensuring all our measures of success are captured and that we have appropriate instruments in place. Since the response rate to CEDARS has been low, this group will make recommendations on future use of surveys and explore potential alternatives. A second 'communications' working group will draft a comms strategy to support the work of the RCPSC and ensure wide visibility and engagement by internal stakeholders. In particular, we will prioritise reaching and engaging research-only staff more effectively and ensuring their needs are met through our planned actions, which are discussed briefly by Concordat principle below.

Environment and culture

We aim to improve the visibility of research (research culture aim 1) and create more opportunities for staff to feel engaged and included in our research environment (research culture aim 3). For example, we will establish a mid-career researcher community for support and representation and ensure research-only staff are included in our researcher networks.

Employment

The reward and recognition of research (research culture aim 2) within our policies and processes is a focus for the committee, including how research and researchers are managed. For example, we will audit our current reward and recognition opportunities, and consult the research community on what they perceive is valued and should be valued, leading to recommendations for improvements.

Professional and career development

We will continue to enhance and embed opportunities for researchers at all career stages, including those new to research, to develop their research quality and impact (research culture aim 4) and their career (research culture aim 5). For example, we will further develop our annual sabbaticals programme and targeted internal and external mentoring schemes.