

Staffordshire University HR Excellence in Research Award: Two-Year Internal Review (August 2018-January 2021)

1. Institutional Context

Staffordshire University's 2018 application for the HR EiR Award outlined how our researchers were vital to the delivery of the then newly established 'Connected University' strategy. Our gap analysis recognised that our research environment was at the start of a transformation and period of growth. Research at the institution was afforded greater prominence and focus through the Research, Innovation and Impact Strategy (2018-21), approved in July 2018.

Since the Award, the University has undergone a maturation of research culture, environment, and governance. Substantial structural changes have taken place and significant progress has been made towards fully implementing the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. Our 2018 action plan was ambitious in the breadth of activity we sought to undertake in the first review period. We have prioritised the strategic areas as our focus and have made several significant gains as outlined below. However, a number of operational actions have not yet been fully implemented. These have been rolled over into the action plan for the next period of the Award and will build on the foundations laid in this review period. Engaging researchers in discussions over the action plan has been challenging over the review period, particularly with the COVID-19 lockdown for sustained periods of 2020. However, we believe good progress has been made in delivery of the action plan in several key areas including:

- The **recruitment of Associate Deans for Research and Enterprise (ADREs)** in each Academic School in 2019 to develop the research environment across the institution and embed research into the School Management Teams
- The creation of **two distinct pathways for staff** in 2018/19 - the TRI (teaching, research and innovation) and TASKE (teaching, enterprise and knowledge exchange) pathways will allow excellent and aspiring researchers to focus on their research career with a minimum of 20% research time.
- Accompanying Academic Staff Profiles and Career Pathways information provides greater clarity on role expectations and details requirements for career development.

School-based research communities have emerged, and several new research centres have been approved which have contributed to the action plan delivery. The revised 'Connected Professoriate' strategy is also indicative of this culture change evidenced through their 'Research, Enterprise and Innovation' working group which focusses on research culture and staff development. This 'bottom-up' approach has shaped the institutional research culture over the action plan period.

2. Internal evaluation

Internal evaluation of progress against the action plan has been undertaken in three main ways. Firstly, **regular reporting to the Research and Innovation Committee (RIC)** where the HR EiR Award action plan is a standing agenda item. Researchers are represented via their ADRE, the Head of the Professoriate, an Early Career Researcher and two PGR representatives. Secondly, via **Interworking between RIIS (Research Innovation and Impact Services) and HR**. RIIS have led on the review of the action plan and have consulted a range of academic and professional support stakeholders. A senior member of HR has been assigned to work with RIIS on the action plan and, coupled with regular and close engagement with the Head of Equality and Diversity, has promoted mutual sharing of good practice. Finally, **Institution-wide and School-based staff consultation events** have been undertaken. The University ran CEDARS (Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey) for the first time in 2020 (response rate =61%). This has provided an evidence base to inform our review of the 2018 action plan and target setting for the next two-year cycle. The CEDARS results were discussed in consultation events in all five academic Schools and directly informed the updated HR EiR action plan. A University-wide event 'Research Culture: the way forward' led by members of the Professoriate and facilitated by RIIS was held in December 2020 and attended by 37 academics. The outcomes of this open discussion were presented to RIC and informed the institutional evaluation and action plan. This approach sought to ensure that the views of individual researchers, both via the anonymous CEDARS survey, and through open consultation discussions, were considered and reflected in the updated action plan and self-evaluation.

3. Key achievements 2018-2020

The CEDARS results show positives in several key areas related to the HR EIR Award, giving confidence that our research environment and culture is progressing towards the Concordat aims. Many staff agreed or agreed strongly that they were treated fairly by the institution within key aspects of their employment, including: Requests for flexible working (78% agree or strongly agree), training and development opportunities (70%), opportunities to contribute to the research culture of the University (65%), and fair opportunities for promotion and progression (65%). Moreover, the majority of staff feel they have a good level of job satisfaction (69%) and feel valued at work (69%). In several of these markers we are in line with the national benchmark and in some cases (such as fair promotion and progression) we considerably exceed it (65% compared to 50% for academic staff nationally).

Other highlights included:

- Successful applications in the annual Professorial Calls held in the review period (2019 and 2020), were 50% male and 50% female, which reflects the academic community (48.5% female as per November 2019)
- 97% of attendees to the RIIS staff training and development programmes in 2018/19 and 2019/20 rated these sessions as either 'excellent' or 'good'.
- Unconscious bias training was delivered face-to-face to 585 members of staff, targeted at all staff involved in student/staff recruitment and internal promotional opportunities (including all members of the PCC).

Achievements from the HR EIR action plan and progress towards implementing the Concordat are included below:

Principle 1: Recruitment and Selection: ADREs are part of all academic selection and recruitment panels and ensure research is considered as part of the selection process. ADREs also sit on the Professorial Conferment Committee (PCC) which oversees applications for promotion to associate professor and professor. This ensures that researchers with the highest potential to achieve excellence in research are recruited and retained. Unconscious bias training is mandatory for all staff involved in recruitment and promotion. In CEDARS, recently appointed staff agreed or agreed strongly that their recruitment had been fair (68%), inclusive (68%), transparent (64%) and merit-based (72%).

Principle 2: Recognition and Value: New Academic Staff Profiles and Career Pathways information provides expectations of staff at each level (from lecturer to professor) in terms of research, management, and teaching. This allows researchers at all stages of their career to progress and plan their career development. The framework will be provided to new starters as part of their induction from 2021. The CEDARS survey allowed us to better understand our researchers views on their recognition and value, and areas where improvement is needed.

Principles 3 and 4: Support and Career Development: The research training and development programme is shaped to support researchers to develop skills to meet the challenges of the external research environment. An initial mapping has been undertaken against RDF requirements. This training programme is regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that provision meets researchers' needs, including as expressed through the CEDARS survey. The University's process for promotion to associate professor and professor are reviewed annually to ensure the conferment criteria are clear and transparent, and recognising achievement in wider range of activities. In a bespoke CEDARS question, 68% agreed or strongly agreed that clear information is provided on what is required for promotion to professor or associate professor.

The University's Graduate School now work with the Careers Service to provide career development information and support for PGRs. Career development workshops have been delivered annually for PGRs and are also open to ECRs and a staff information page for career guidance has been launched on the intranet.

Steps have been taken to ensure there is appropriate representation of researchers on all committees and that researchers can input into policy and practice. This includes open calls for the ECR representative on RIC, the associate professor representative on the PCC and the PGR representative on the Ethics Committee. The Head of the Professoriate is a permanent member of RIC and the PCC.

Principle 5: Researchers responsibilities: The University encourages all staff to reflect on the skills and achievements they need to progress, and to pro-actively engage in their personal and career development. The annual PDR process

provides an opportunity for researchers to discuss their performance and career development with their line managers and senior academics and to identify training needs and opportunities. 93% of respondents to CEDARS reported having an appraisal in the last two years. All staff on the TRI pathways have had a PDR in the last academic year. Since their appointment, ADREs sit on the PDRs for staff on the TRI pathway to ensure these are tailored to researchers needs.

Principle 6: Diversity and equality There is compulsory equality induction for all new staff, including equality on-line training. From 2021 the University launched a mandatory Equality and Diversity E-Learning Module, which brings to life the legal context and the University's statutory obligations. The Head of Equality and Diversity attends all SMTs termly to provide training and guidance on EIA implementation and EIAs are completed on all policy implementations and review. In CEDARS, 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the institution is committed to equality and diversity.

An equality analysis has been undertaken of all professorial and associate professorial applications over the last five years and presented to the PCC. All applicants are invited to complete an optional anonymous EDI survey after submitting their application, to ensure the conferment process is equitable and fair.

Principle 7: Implementation and Review: The HR EIR Award is a standing item on the RIC agenda. Regular requests are made for volunteers to review compliance against the action plan. The revised action plan was presented to RIC in December 2020 for approval. RIIS recognise the importance of engagement in Vitae and sharing of best practice through other professional development forums. Attendance at external events are identified in the PDRs of key support staff and RIIS staff have attended events hosted by ARMA, Vitae, RENU, UUK, UKCGE, Impact Networks, the Wellcome Trust, and other professional networking events to support career development of researchers.

4. Next steps

As our Research, Innovation and Impact Strategy (2018-2021) draws to its conclusion, foundation work is being laid for the next phase of our Research Strategy. A commitment to the principals of the *Concordat* and in developing our HR EIR action plan will remain a cornerstone of this next phase in the evolution of the University's research agenda. However, we recognise that there is work still to be done to further strengthen our research environment and culture, as outlined below. Detailed success measures for the next two years are given in our updated action plan.

- Engaging researchers has undoubtedly been challenging over the review period and is a key area to address in the next two-year period of the award. Whilst engagement at School level has significantly improved, we recommend that an institutional-level **Researcher Development Working Group be established** to manage the Concordat action plan in the next review period. This group should be chaired by a senior professor nominated by the DVC and should report into RIC.
- The University is committed to continue to improve the career development support we offer to our researchers. We will **continue to review our training and development provision**, working with the ADREs, research centre directors and professoriate to ensure this meets researchers needs and the changing external research environment. Our provision will be mapped fully against the RDF requirements. Moreover, there will be **improved tracking of CPD activity** through CEDARS and a new institutional CPD framework.
- Steps will be taken to further **improving our channels of communication and engagement** with researchers, including through the continued development of an online space for development resources and updates.
- We will **run the CEDARS survey annually** to monitor our progress against the Concordat, and to ensure that our researchers feel their voices are being heard as we continue to develop and improve our research environment and culture. Interim surveys will also be issued to gauge engagement and feedback on specific issues.