

HR Excellence in Research Award – Four Year Review

University of Westminster successfully attained the European Commission HR Excellence in Research Award (HR EIR) in February 2016. The award was reviewed internally and reconfirmed in 2018. This report details the progress the University has made against its previous action plan and highlights main achievements in aligning policy, process and activities at the University with the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. To review the success of our [original action plan](#) and the 2018 updates outlined in our [two-year review](#), we have updated our initial plan with progress made against each action point, carrying over actions not yet completed to a new plan for 2020-24. This new plan is shaped by the values espoused in our [‘Being Westminster’ 2018-23 institutional strategy](#) - progressive, compassionate and responsible with a strategic commitment to developing a unified, interdisciplinary community of researchers.

Institutional Context and the Internal Evaluation Process

Owing to a significant re-organisation of its academic structures from March to August 2018, which saw several former departments merging to form new Schools and a significant reduction in professional services roles across the university, working practices and relationships across the institution have had to change. Support for researcher development and oversight of the Concordat was moved from being part of Organisational Development to the [Centre for Teaching Innovation](#) and, since August 2019, has been the responsibility of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Office (RKEO). While the institution’s ability to provide support and regular monitoring across a number of areas aligned to the Concordat was impacted by these changes across the period, oversight was supported by regular meetings of the grass roots “Researcher Network”, supported by staff in the Centre for Teaching Innovation. For the academic year 2019-20 the University Research Committee recommended that a Researcher Development Working Group (RDWG) be established to manage the Concordat action plan. This group held its first meeting in December 2019. The RDWG is chaired by a senior professor nominated by the PVC Research and reports into Research Committee - the University’s highest reporting body for research, chaired by the PVC (Research). Research Committee in turn reports into Academic Council, the University’s highest decision-making body, which is chaired by the VC.

The RDWG now monitors and updates the University’s action plan and is responsible for its implementation and approval. The group’s membership reflects the positive changes to research at Westminster with representation from the RKEO - including our recently appointed Researcher Development Officer and the Head of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Office - colleagues from each College on research-only contracts, from our 2 elected early-career researcher representatives (who are both also members of Research Committee), from the leadership of our Research Communities, from Human Resources (HR), our community of professors and one of our College Research Directors. The amplification of voices from all across research at Westminster goes hand in hand with the conception of the University’s new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Working Group. The EDI group’s reflections on our action plan going forward will aid us in seeking to achieve the institution’s wider strategic objectives of creating a positive place and culture so all our people are ‘supported and encouraged to realise their ambition’, ‘creating a physical place that inspires learning, (and the meeting of) current and future needs’, as per our *Being Westminster* strategy. Data and feedback from our [Research Communities](#), [recent researcher development events](#), from our pilot researcher mentoring circles, HR and updates to various institutional policy have informed this internal evaluation, alongside previous figures from CROS and PIRLS as signposts for areas requiring continuing attention.

Achievements and Progress Since Receiving the Award

Principle 1 - *Recognition of the importance of recruiting, selecting and retaining researchers with the highest potential to achieve excellence in research.*

- A key objective set out in our 2018 internal review was ensuring that staff are valued and recognized in an ever shifting educational and research environment. To ensure this, we undertook to revise and implement a new career progression framework which documents and implements clearer processes for researcher advancement and progression by 2020. This framework is now available on our internal webpages for all research staff.

- The University's recruitment and selection procedures ensure that the best applicants are appointed by a fair, transparent and appropriate selection process. Interviewing panels are mixed gender, with diversity considered. All panel members must have completed the University's Recruitment and Selection training workshop and also completed a Recruitment and Selection e-learning module.

- Between January 2018 and January 2020 two individuals have progressed from fixed term researcher to permanent researcher at the University. This is an area that will be subject to review and monitoring. Of the University's 83 research only staff currently employed, 21 are on permanent contracts.

Principle 2 - *Researchers are recognised and valued by their employing organisation as an essential part of their organisation's human resources and a key component of their overall strategy to develop and deliver world-class research.*

- This year has seen the launch of College mentoring circles. This is in line with our 2018 internal review's commitment that the University would pay specific attention to the introduction of an institutional research mentoring policy and associated guidelines. Each college has a group consisting of two mentors experienced in research and eight to ten mentees at early stages of their research careers. The groups met four times throughout the year, discussing, with guidance and input from mentors, their experiences and thoughts on topics set in advance. Topics varied between Colleges as appropriate from networking, grant writing and promotions to career planning, work-life balance and getting published. This first iteration of the initiative was a pilot. The way the groups operate is to be reviewed and amended at the start of the next academic year. A report on the effectiveness of the initiative will guide how we take it forward and seek to build a cohort mentality of peer to peer accountability in our ECRs.

Principle 3 - *Researchers are equipped and supported to be adaptable and flexible in an increasingly diverse, mobile, global research environment and Principle 4* - *The importance of researchers' personal and career development, and lifelong learning, is clearly recognised and promoted at all stages of their career.*

- In our 2018 internal review, the University undertook to streamline administrative research processes across the institution by establishing a virtual 'Research Hub'. The University's VRE (Virtual Research Environment) has since been established, connecting the Graduate School, Research Communities and Research Office through its various administrative processes. The VRE serves as an online tool for managing all elements of the research lifecycle and the doctoral research experience, providing access to support with research ethics, the university repository and with research funding. The ethics module processed 342 ethics applications during 2019/0 for instance and 162 bids have been submitted through the VRE funding module.

- The University's two-year internal review also prioritised development opportunities around the concept of 'the digital researcher', strengthening colleagues' familiarity with data management planning, the General Data Protection Regulations, as well as providing training for social media, Twitter and other modes of connectivity. As a first step towards supporting 'the digital researcher', a workshop on 'embedding data management into your research' was delivered by the Research Office in November 2019. 67% of attendees said they were 'greatly' likely to recommend the event to a colleague and 80% of research staff in attendance described the event as 'greatly' relevant to the research they were conducting. Events like this one serve as an indication of how the plans we are currently making will positively impact research at the University. For the academic year 2020/1, the University will have in place a broad Researcher Development Programme shaped by Vitae's Researcher Development Framework (RDF) and the Researcher Development Concordat, supporting research staff under the structure of four over-arching themes – 'Impact and Engagement', 'Funding for Research and Knowledge Exchange', 'Publishing, Data & Integrity' and 'Taking Charge of Your Career', with provision for those at all stages of their career.

- Over the past year, the University has been working to put in place the foundations of the four Research Communities that were outlined in the University's Research Strategy 2018-23 and described in our 2018 internal review as, 'research institutes'. The Communities were set up with an aim to establish a more focussed and interdisciplinary position for UoW research. After launching the four Communities at the beginning of academic year 2019/20, the University has supported their respective leads in promoting their strategies and engaging with their academics. 30 awards have been made, totalling £220,221 across the Communities. A [written report](#) detailing the Communities' activities and success in supporting an excellent, diverse, interdisciplinary research environment during the first four months of their existence is available on our website. In strengthening our research environment, showcasing and engaging with stakeholders, the Communities will continue to provide a mechanism which, together with our Colleges, Schools and other groupings, will support the drive forward towards the strategic goal of doubling research and related income by 2023 as set out in our 'Being Westminster' strategy.

Principle 5 - Individual researchers share the responsibility for and need to pro-actively engage in their own personal and career development, and lifelong learning.

- The reorganisation of research at the University has led to support structures becoming broader and researchers being able to seek guidance with their personal and career development from more places than before. This relates directly to our 2016 assessment of the importance of reviewing support needs associated with academic roles. Encouragement to attend training events no longer comes from the Research Office alone or from fragmented communication from former Heads of Department/Faculty but from dedicated Research Leads in our new Communities, from College Research Directors to the Schools and Research Centres they oversee and from the several groups within the new RKEO. The RKEO seeks to provide comprehensive support for all researchers and is comprised of three teams - the Research Development Team (providing support for all funding bids, contract set-up and post-award), the Partnerships Development Team (ensuring a joined-up and strategic approach to developing and using partnerships in a way that unlocks the value held in our research base) and the Research Environment and Scholarly Communications Team (supporting in information systems, national policy & research and innovation environment, and international policy environment across all areas of research). We can ensure that researchers appreciate their responsibilities to pro-actively engage in their own development by bringing together all the relationships forged with staff before these teams were united to encourage engagement from different angles. Pro-active engagement is stimulated further through our increased online presence – on Twitter, the University's internal pages and on our Research Office blog.

Principle 6 - *Diversity and equality must be promoted in all aspects of the recruitment and career management of researchers.*

- Our new Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Research Community has further strengthened the University's existing commitment to the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda. The Community is forging new interdisciplinary collaborations with the aim of successfully promoting inclusivity as one of the crucial components of every scientific, political and broader social effort. For further information on the work of our D&I Community, please see our case study.

- An action in our original action plan, to launch staff networks to support and develop underrepresented groups with career progression and engagement in the university community, has been met and these networks, namely the [Women of Westminster](#), [LGBTQ+ Network](#) and the University's [BME network](#) are continuing to grow with support from the EDI Working Group. Our BME network fed into the publication of the University's recent [Black Lives Matter Commitment Plan](#) and will continue to play a key role in the development of our approach to these issues.

Principle 7 - *The sector and all stakeholders will undertake regular and collective review of their progress in strengthening the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK.*

- The formation of the RDWG and its efforts to align the new Researcher Development Programme with Vitae's RDF, as well as to continually evaluate our improvements in line with the Concordat is a promising insight into how collective review of progress will look going forward. Our 2018 internal HR EIR review highlighted the need to maintain an operational review group that monitors and comments on HR EIR action points in relation to on-going changes. The RDWG is doing this through its regular meetings and its work with other new groups and networks at the University.

Looking Forward

The University's long-term strategy seeks to nurture and develop a unified, interdisciplinary community of researchers with a high and consistent quality of outputs with an increased impact on business, industry and wider society. Our 2020-4 action plan, which will be monitored and updated by the RDWG as we progress, is the first step towards achieving our goals. The main focuses of the plan are:

- The University's re-imagined Researcher Development Programme and its provision for researchers at every stage of their career, through which we aim to see at least 50% of research-only staff engaging in 10 days CPD per year by the third iteration of CEDARS.

- Further improving our channels of communication and engagement with researchers, namely through an online space for development resources and opportunity updates. Our aim is that this space will increase the visibility of policy and procedure, increase engagement with CPD and foster a more unified research culture at Westminster, especially amongst ECRs and MCRs.

- Rigorously monitoring the University's progress in aligning with the new Concordat in order to ensure we continue to move forward.

- Using data from planned runs of CEDARS and voices from within our networks, groups, centres, school and colleges as effectively as possible to improve the research environment where our researchers need it the most. These improvements will be measured by attendance at development events and through CEDARS responses and reflected in the growing influence and voice of research staff at Westminster.