

HR Excellence in Research Award: Twelve-year report January 2023

Edinburgh Napier University received the HR Excellence in Research Award from the European Commission in December 2010 and retained it in 2018 after an external review. This document summarises our progress as part of our external 12-year review.

When the revised [Concordat to support the Career Development of Researchers](#) was published in September 2019 we reviewed its principles and our Senior Leadership Team approved becoming a formal signatory to the revised Concordat in December 2019.

1. Context

Edinburgh Napier University is [the #1 Modern University in Scotland](#) (THE World University Rankings 2023) and a [Top 10 UK Modern University](#) (Times/Sunday Times GUG 2023). We have over 21,000 students studying with Edinburgh Napier, across our three campuses in Edinburgh, as well as through international and online delivery of our programmes.

We have been focused on growing our research activity over the last decade and this has been recognised in [our recent Research Excellence Framework \(REF\) results](#). The activity at the University assessed as “internationally excellent” and “world-leading” by the REF2021 leapt from 53 to 68 per cent since the last time the exercise was conducted in 2014. Our submission to REF also grew to represent the work of more than 250 researchers, up from under 100 in 2014.

Our primary audience for our Researcher Development Concordat Action plan has always been our contract research staff. We currently employ 72 contract research staff (CRS, at Jan 2023). This includes Research technicians, Research Assistants, Research Fellows, Post-doctoral research associates, Senior Research Fellows, and Principal Research Fellows. We have 46 members of staff who act as Line Managers for our contract researchers (LM of CRS).

We recognise that many of the initiatives in our Concordat Action Plan have potential benefits for our wider research community of PGR students (we currently have 246 PGR students) and our research-active academic staff. Our researcher development activities have always taken an inclusive approach running many events for anyone who identifies as a researcher. Our current [University Strategy: Shaping Our Future](#) which was launched in March 2020 has ‘*Build Careers: Create Opportunities*’ as one of our strategic objectives, illustrating our commitment to staff development across the university.

2. How the review was undertaken

The internal review was led by the Head of Researcher Development within the Research, Innovation and Enterprise (RIE) team, working with staff within the five academic Schools and other Professional Services including HR, our Health and Wellbeing and Inclusion

teams, and our Department for Learning, Teaching Enhancement (DLTE). Working with staff representatives on our committees helped capture views from the research community as part of the review process. We also considered data from our 2021 CEDARS survey and an internal Research Culture survey in 2022. Feedback submitted to RIE about recent development events and initiatives was also drawn on for the review.

3. Governance Structure

Work to implement the Researcher Development Concordat is regularly discussed at the University Research Innovation Committee, which is chaired by our Vice Principal (Research and Innovation). The committee has a representative from the contract research staff community and there is a standing item at each meeting to receive updates from the staff rep. This process also allows for the Researcher Development Concordat work to be coordinated with other initiatives such as the KE Concordat, work from the Research Integrity Committee, and EDI in research activities, that all report to the same committee structure. The University Research and Innovation Committee is responsible for formally monitoring research activity and quality within the university, and reports in turn to our Academic Board.

4. Ongoing Impact of Coronavirus pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic led to significant disruption to both working and day-to-day life, and while we have moved past the peak of disruption there have been ongoing impacts. Edinburgh Napier, like most organisations, moved to a model of working from home for most of its staff from mid-March 2020. During AY2021/22 there was a gradual return to hybrid campus working at different speeds and times for different areas of the university.

While some of our planned Concordat actions had to be paused or happened to different timescales than originally planned, our aim to support our researchers as much as possible throughout the pandemic aligns with the ethos of the Concordat, to create a culture where our researchers are supported and can thrive. Throughout the pandemic our focus has been to support our research community during the disruption; through considering impacts on research staff employment, making best use of '*Covid-19 response funding*' from the Scottish Funding Council to support researchers and their research projects, and supporting researchers to work remotely through online training and workshops.

During the covid lockdowns we prioritised the use of '*Covid-19 response funding*' from SFC to protect the employment of our research community. All active research projects were rapidly reviewed, and where needed, staff employment was protected by supporting research staff through the additional SFC funding received. 27 researchers at different career stages (research assistants, research fellows and senior research fellows) were supported in this way to avoid any negative impacts of the lockdowns on their employment.

Another significant, but unplanned initiative, was the creation of a cross-university mentoring scheme to support researchers at Edinburgh Napier and Queen Margaret Universities during the covid lockdowns. The scheme was created to provide opportunities for mentoring support for contract research staff which as a group tend to be in short-term employment and are vulnerable to some of the negative impacts from the pandemic. The scheme ran until July 2021 and established 18 mentor-mentee and 4 additional peer matches (where staff were at similar career stages). A full external evaluation found that both mentees and mentors experienced benefits to being involved in the mentoring scheme. The cross-institutional aspect of the scheme created opportunities for mentees to speak with researchers based at other universities that would not have happened otherwise. This exposed the mentees to new ideas and viewpoints helping them to develop their own research careers, through

development of their CVs, advise on preparing funding bids and writing for publication. The evaluation also identified that the scheme created a point of personal connection during the pandemic, which due to home working and other disruptions had been harder to achieve for research staff. All these points indicate that the scheme was successful in its aim to support our research staff during the disruptions caused by Covid-19.

5. Key achievements and progress

Specific progress against each Concordat Principle over the two years of the award is described here and in the updated 2021-2022 action plan available online.

Principle 1: Environment and culture

We have worked to increase awareness of the Researcher Development Concordat, through highlighting it at induction events and through targeted communications about it as new staff join the university. Our commitment to the Concordat (and others such as the KE concordat and Research Integrity Concordat) have been highlighted within our current Research Strategy.

We have created new [Equality, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Research guidance](#) to help researchers be aware of how EDI can be integrated into research activities and also provides guidance on how RIE will run any internal funding competitions. We have started to collect EDI information during these types of funding competitions to identify if there are any barriers to success for people with protected characteristics. This work is ongoing and requires us to understand the context when working with small numbers of applicants. We are working to ensure internal funding panels are gender balanced where possible. We continue to collaborate with colleagues on the implementation of our [Gender Equality Action Plan 2021-25](#). We also published our Safeguarding in Research policy in 2022.

Our Staff inclusion networks (BAME-ish, Armed Forces, Carers, Interfaith, LGBT+, and Woman's) continue to be active and hold regular in-person and virtual events. The networks have also been involved in our annual Inclusion Weeks (held in [Sept 2021](#) and [Sept 2022](#)) helping to create an inclusive culture where everyone feels supported.

Our Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021-22 had contract research staff as a key audience, based on information in CEDARS2021 where we saw a need to provide clearer signposting of Health and Wellbeing support for CRS. Alongside tailored communications about training and support for mental health and wellbeing, focus groups were held to further understand the needs of the CRS community, as well as establishing a CRS rep on the Special Interest Group to improve communications. Work was also conducted to ensure line managers of CRS were aware of what support was available to staff.

We continue to work closely with the University Research Integrity Committee to support embedding research integrity into our research culture. A self-assessment against the RI Concordat was conducted; with increased training and development events on RI developed as a result. We have also increased our engagement with external organisations supporting RI, such as UKRIO and the Scottish Research Integrity group to help learn more about good practices across the sector, and these events have been well received by the research community.

We ran PRES and CEDARS in 2021 and the data and trends were reported and discussed at our University Research Innovation and Research Degrees Committees. We plan to run CEDARS again in 2023 and this will allow a comparison on our progress in the last two years. In addition, in 2022, for the first time we ran an internal Research Culture survey

which received over 120 responses and has helped inform this review and other activities run by RIE.

Principle 2: Employment

Our institutional induction processes had to be adapted to working patterns during the pandemic and were moved to an online format from March 2020. Since May 2022 they have returned to being in-person and are being held in person. Increasing CRS engagement with university induction continues to be challenging but CEDARS data shows that when staff have engaged, they have found it a useful experience.

We increased workshops within the [Researcher Development Programme](#) that raised awareness of the external research environment, with topics such as REF, research integrity, talks from external funders (such as Leverhulme, Innovate UK, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships) to help our research community to more aware of some of the external drivers within research. There has been good engagement with these topics, and we have received feedback that further sessions would be welcomed.

In Feb 2019 we launched a new Research Career promotions framework, and during 2021-22 targeted communications from our Vice-Principal (Research and Innovation) have been used to raise the visibility of the promotions framework. 4 members of staff were promoted to Senior Fellow during this time, and we continue to raise the visibility with CRS and their line managers through regular workshops on the promotions framework and guidance on how to apply.

We have worked with HR to develop reports on CRS engagement with MyContribution (our annual review process). This remains an area for improvement, as our CEDARS data suggest our CRS are less likely than across the sector to have an annual review (56% versus 72%), and our own internal data shows a large variation in completion rates for CRS across our Schools. We will continue to work with HR to encourage CRS engagement with the review process.

Principle 3: Professional and career development

We have expanded our training and development on Knowledge exchange, through sector wide initiatives such as the Converge Challenge training and KTP networks and also through work being carried out as part of our commitments in our [Knowledge Exchange Concordat Action plan](#) – where training is one of our 5 current work streams.

We now offer access for CRS and their LM's to Vitae's online Researcher Development Framework planner – to help with career planning. Uptake is still low, and we will continue to promote the RDF as a useful framework for professional development.

We continue to build our collaboration with Queen Margaret University (QMU) to provide joint professional and career development events and support to our CRS across both universities. Since 2020 we have offered a number of joint workshops on career planning, research leadership, and applying for fellowships. This allows both institutions to benefit from a wider range of workshops when we may not have had enough participants to run a workshop as a single institution. It also has the benefit that our researchers get to meet peers at a different organisation to help with network building. We have also worked with ScotHERD to share places on training events where possible. In 2022 we became a member of the Scottish Hub of the [British Academy ECR network](#) – again helping our researchers gain access to external training and networks to support their careers.

We had a further mentoring pilot programme in our Business School that helped us establish a mentoring platform to help with matching. Our timescales to launch a university-wide mentoring scheme for research and academic staff had to be paused, but we are currently working to launch later in 2023. Ongoing requests for mentoring are matched on an individual basis with input from HR and RIE to identify relevant mentors for CRS requests.

6. Strategies for 2023-2026

The Research Development Concordat has connections to other strategic initiatives and action plans, including our KE Concordat Action Plan, our Public Engagement Strategy, and the work of our Research Integrity Committee. Our Researcher Development Concordat Action plan also connects to our new research strategy and its transformational action to '[Build Research capacity and capability](#)'.

The other initiatives mentioned are aimed at driving change for all researchers at Edinburgh Napier, while the Researcher Development Concordat continues to have contract research staff as its key audience. We have identified **job security** and **career progression** as key priorities to enhance the experience of our contract research staff and over the next three years we want to make a step-change in these areas for our contract research staff.

Within these broad priorities we have established that we need to address:

1. **Barriers to job security:** we need to have a clear, shared understanding of the types and lengths of contracts used to employ researchers and explore the feasibility of other models
2. **Retention and recognition:** we need to explore and remove any barriers to retention and recognition of researchers
3. **Access to opportunities:** we need to ensure that there is equity of access to opportunities for contract research staff to develop their own research identity and leadership skills
4. **Valuing professional development:** we need to ensure contract research staff and line managers understand the requirement for research staff to undertake 10 days of CPD per annum, and we need to raise awareness of different types of development for contract research staff
5. **Promotions pathways:** we need to ensure contract research staff and their line managers understand the current processes for promotion of research staff and ways to progress towards promotion

While we have some clear actions identified in our new action plan, we see this as a live document, to be updated as more detailed actions and measures emerge. Our first steps in 2023 are to scope out these five priority actions, consider our current data and baseline information, alongside developing and piloting initiatives. We will continue to bring updates and discussions about the Concordat Action Plan to our Research Innovation Committee, and will continue to receive feedback from our contract researchers and their line managers, including through running CEDARS 2023, to gain their insights into our priorities and action plan.

7. Success measures

Our success will be measured against specific actions as outlined in our Action Plan 2023-2026. Some general indicators of success for the next three-year cycle include:

- Engagement of contract research staff with our current research strategy

- Evidence of progress in CEDARS data
- Evidence of progress in our Research Culture Survey
- Continued engagement with an annual MyContribution review by research staff
- Successful engagement with our Research Career promotion framework by research staff
- Increased numbers of staff holding external research funding
- Increased research student numbers
- Increased completion rate for PhD students
- Increased external recognition of our staff through professional awards, memberships.