



ROYAL HOLLOWAY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

**HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH: FOUR YEAR EXTERNAL REVIEW**  
(November 2021 – November 2023)

**1. Introduction**

Royal Holloway's research is motivated by social purpose. Our researchers transform culture, stories and systems, and seek creative solutions to complex challenges, including alleviating inequalities and living sustainably. We support world-leading research and encourage ambition and intellectual risk in extending knowledge. We foster transformational impacts for individuals, society, and the environment as part of our civic and global responsibilities as a university of social purpose. We also aspire to give our undergraduate and postgraduate students an education that is informed by the highest standards of research and scholarship: an achievement of our inclusive research and education which was commended in TEF2023.

Our community of researchers is key to these aims, and we endeavour to provide an intellectual and physical environment that supports the highest level of academic research. We aim to provide clear advice, guidance, training and support to enable staff to maximise their research potential and progress through their careers, with the Concordat providing an essential framework for developing and assessing our approach. HR Excellence in Research is an excellent opportunity for review of this approach, in support of our overall research strategy.

The University continues to define researchers as individuals who are employed to conduct research or scholarship and who would be expected to develop their research identity as part of their career progression. This includes staff on research only, teaching and research, teaching-focused or professional practice contracts, professional support staff and technicians, regardless of contract type, level of training, experience and responsibility. We consider that all are target beneficiaries in our work on the Concordat. Our REF 2021 submission demonstrated our commitment to including a diversity of staff in outputs, impact case studies and research environment statements.

We consider Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to be a key part of the target group, and a similar inclusive definition is applied here, allowing individuals to opt into the definition regardless of their role. Staff numbers for ECRs are therefore difficult to define, but as a guide, Research-only staff make up 12% of our overall Concordat beneficiaries (119 colleagues), and lecturers a further 21% (213 colleagues). Therefore at least a third of our target group are at the early stages of their research career.

**2. Institutional context 2021 – 23**

Our most recent 3-year strategic plan for the University – and its focus on 'Research Recovery' in the context of Covid – is coming to an end. We are now shaping a vision for the 2030s which builds on what has been achieved but visibly embeds people and skills into our research strategy. 'Inclusive Education and Research' is the leading strand in the development of this vision for the 2030s, with the conscious pairing of both education and research designed to reflect and support the experience of staff and students in what will continue to be a student centred and research-intensive University. We will continue to identify and resource new opportunities to catalyse collaboration around the complex challenges of the present and align those initiatives with our renewed focus on open, inclusive, outward-facing development opportunities for all researchers.

This HR Excellence in Research review is timely alongside the development of this new strategy. As an organisation we performed extremely well in REF2021 in research outputs and impact, however the outcomes in relation to research environment were less positive in many units of assessment. This demonstrated that there is significant potential for us to deliver innovative, collaborative and impactful research through development of the backdrop and context in which this work is done – our research culture. The obligations within the Concordat are essential to this development, and this review has enabled us to identify objectives

which will help us to drive forward our research strategy and which play a significant role in developing our research culture.

### **3. Governance**

HR Excellence in Research is overseen by the Staff Research Environment Working Group, chaired by our Associate Pro Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation, Professor Ruth Livesey. This group reports to the University's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, and Professor Livesey reports regularly on progress both to the University's Executive Board, and to the Students, Education and Research Committee at Council level. These lines of accountability ensure that our commitment and actions in relation to the Concordat are visible and assessed at the highest levels within the University.

The Staff Research Environment Working Group has expanded since the REF outcome to enable broader focus and engagement on research culture. Collectively the group has considered what we would like our research culture to embody, reviewing our strengths and where we need to develop. It has identified that to support research excellence, our culture needs to be inclusive, enabling, collaborative, efficient and outward-facing, and these values have been foregrounded in the development of the new University strategy for Inclusive Education and Research. Our HR Excellence in Research action plan is essential in developing this culture.

### **4. Internal review process**

Our internal review has been undertaken by the Staff Research Environment Working Group. This group now has 25 members – a significant expansion since our last review in 2021. As well as Early Career Researcher representatives from across the University's six academic schools, the group also includes representation from mid-career and senior academics. One of our Technical Operations Managers is also part of the group, providing linkage with the Technician Commitment, as well as colleagues from Research and Innovation, HR Operations, Organisational Development, Educational Development and Library Services.

This group has been the focus for feedback and engagement with our research community since our review in 2021, and together we have developed a strong partnership approach. To undertake the internal review, in September 2023 we ran the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) and the outputs of the survey were reviewed by the Staff Research Environment Working Group to understand the impact of action already taken and identify further issues and priorities. Other mechanisms for feedback include our Vice Deans for Research and Knowledge Exchange, and our newly formed ECR Academy.

### **5. Key achievements and progress 2021 – 2023**

The key achievements and progress since our last internal assessment are outlined below. The outcome and impact of specific actions identified can be seen in our action plan review. Broadly, the review has identified that we have made progress in the following areas:

- Research leader/manager confidence and training
- Fair and inclusive recruitment and selection
- Awareness and training in equality, diversity and inclusion
- Support for Early Career Researchers, including the ECR Academy, a new internet hub and a mentoring scheme

We have ongoing challenges in relation to our research culture, including a need to focus on workload, wellbeing and mental health, and survey results in relation to bullying and harassment were also of concern.



We are now also undertaking a major review of our academic promotions process following extensive engagement and feedback, and there is evidence that we need to strengthen our approach in relation to supporting career and professional development. This includes appropriate reward and recognition for contributions to positive research culture as well as excellent individual outputs and research outcomes.

## Environment and Culture

The University has made a visible commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), formally introducing a remunerated role of Vice Dean for EDI (0.4 FTE) for each academic School in 2023. They lead on school-based approaches and contribute to EDI leadership at University level. In June 2023 we launched our [EDI Framework 2023-2028](#) marking a shift towards community building, visible EDI leadership, championing and role-modelling, accessibility and inclusion by design, and empowering confidence and action at a local level across academic schools and professional services.

In 2022 we implemented a comprehensive review of central EDI training. We procured a new EDI Essentials e-learning package as part of a wider approach to mandatory training for all colleagues. This package comprises training in allyship, bullying and harassment, unconscious bias and diversity and inclusion in the Workplace. We consider this training to be a baseline, which must be followed up with dialogue and discussion. We will complement this training with micro-learning videos and recordings which are currently being produced to support colleagues to embed EDI thinking into regular activities.

One area where our forthcoming action plan needs significant focus is in relation to bullying and harassment. Indicators from both the CEDARS survey and our People and Culture Survey, conducted early this year, suggest that there are issues which need to be understood and addressed. These indicators relate both to experiencing bullying and harassment in the last two years (28%), and understanding of how to report it (64%). This is currently a key focus with a suite of actions planned around prevention, report and support, and incidence management.

Part of our action plan in 2021 was to put together a full wellbeing strategy for the University. In the last year mental health awareness training has been implemented for line managers, and this popular course is helping managers to understand how they can support staff with wellbeing and mental health at work. Although a varied wellbeing provision is in place, there is no written strategy, and feedback from CEDARS suggests that it is needed. Just 28% of respondents agreed that their working environment supports their mental health and wellbeing. This area will be a key focus for our forthcoming three-year action plan.

## Employment

We have improved guidance and EDI training in recruitment, including on writing inclusive job descriptions. We have also updated our recruitment applicant tracking system so that it now requires recruiters to confirm that they have completed recruitment training, with a link to the relevant training, and to mandatory EDI training. 85% of managers who responded to CEDARS reported that they had completed recruitment and selection training.

Responses to CEDARS generally suggest that research manager confidence has significantly improved since 2021. We attribute this to development for line managers, which can be seen in detail in our action plan review, and strong support from HR Business Partners. One area which still needs significant focus is redeployment, in which line research managers continue to report low confidence. Greater line management confidence has not yet translated into staff satisfaction, with CEDARS suggesting that we have more work to do particularly in areas such as timely and effective feedback for colleagues.

We have established a new academic promotions workshop incorporating a greater focus on acknowledging leadership within the promotion criteria. We have also ensured that promotion panels are as diverse as possible, have received tailored Unconscious Bias training, and are reminded of EDI principles at the start of panel meetings. We incorporated a greater focus on individual circumstances during the promotion process especially in the light of the impact of Covid-19.



Academic promotions are now subject to an extensive review of the process and criteria, to allow more flexibility and transparency, focus on equality of application and ensure accessibility for all. An initial review is now complete, including engagement sessions with over 130 colleagues, and a benchmarking survey with 49 UK universities. Working groups will be established to focus on the pathways and criteria for assessment, arrangements to ensure fair and consistent decision making and user experience.

### **Professional and Career Development**

We are currently reviewing our researcher development programme, previously known as "Advance". In the last two years course occupancy fell to 63%, having peaked in 2021. We are aware that we are not alone across the sector in facing real challenges in re-building attendance and engagement in researcher development activities in the contexts of both Covid and sustained industrial action. Reflecting on this new reality has led to a strategic decision to redevelop our offering into three parts – an intensive one-day orientation in Royal Holloway research support and research culture for new staff led by the Research and Innovation team; a reorganised offering of training, resources, and guides available on need, rebranded as the 'Researcher Development Programme for Staff' and bringing parity of esteem and cohesion with our PGR RDP; and a forward plan for new, intensive cohort programmes focused on particular career stages with an initial emphasis on mid-career colleagues and moving into research leadership. We have now also established a new ECR Academy to provide an environment where ECRs can develop their career and a sense of community by fostering collaborative relationships to address key challenges and share best practice with peers. Designed and led by ECRs, the academy will give them a voice to constructively contribute to the University's strategy, empower them to co-develop initiatives beneficial to their career development, and support them to realise their leadership potential, creating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. The Academy's launch event is on 2 November 2023 and we look forward to its growth and development.

The University has also recently implemented a centrally co-ordinated mentoring scheme in which every School offers the opportunity to either become or to find a mentor. It is open to all colleagues, irrespective of discipline or career stage, who can request a mentor, volunteer to be a mentor, or both. Mentees choose areas of professional development in which they are seeking support, including specifics such as writing grants or publishing, as well as more general professional development such as preparing for promotion. Mentoring pairs are matched as closely as possible according to preference requests and expertise offered. A forum open to mentors and mentees will be held by each School on a termly basis to provide an excellent networking opportunity and build a sense of community for mentors and mentees.

Whilst we have career development conversations within our annual performance development reviews, feedback from CEDARS suggest that just 57% of colleagues consider these reviews to be helpful. Training is planned for reviewers next year to help them to conduct more effective career development conversations with colleagues. This is co-designed and will be co-delivered by Organisational Development alongside the APVC Research and Innovation, signalling this as a crucial part of our institutional research ambitions. Since the 2021 review we have also implemented career development workshops for ECRs, to help them to be more proactive about planning their own career journey.

In the last two years we have found ways to support the development of new research and the skills and career development of our researchers through strategic use of QR funding. The Research Application Support Programme (RASP) is designed to support colleagues with excellent ideas for research projects to develop them into high quality research funding bids, whilst building up external networks, generating preliminary data and developing essential research funding skills. It is intended for academic staff across the University who have yet to establish a strong track record for externally funded projects but show some evidence of securing research funding, leading a team and working with external partners. Successful applicants receive up to £5k each, and they participate in a research funding skills development programme.

We have also used funding from UKRI to support participatory and policy-related research projects and related initiatives, and in doing so enabled our researchers to develop their skills and their research identity. In

2023-24 we are using this funding to help to consolidate our role as a Civic University. Expressions of Interest were invited in October 2023 for projects and initiatives which are co-created with regional partners, use innovative models and methodologies for participatory research, work in partnership with policymakers to have a regional outcome, improve dialogue and facilitate the use of existing research and exchange of knowledge between universities and policies makers, and regional partnerships and collaborations which are aimed at supporting evidence-based policy making. The internal competition has served as a case study for how strategic, open and inclusive internal awards can bring researchers together in new networks and identify excellence from across the disciplines, providing a sense of recognition as well as the development of our identity as a University of social purpose.

The [Social Science Impact Accelerator](#) (SSIA) programme enables collaboration and knowledge exchange to maximise the real-world impact of Royal Holloway's social science research for our region, the UK and internationally. It is funded by a 5-year ESRC Impact Accelerator Account grant (2023-28) and match funding from Royal Holloway, University of London. As part of the programme, we offer [a residency scheme](#). Residencies are opportunities for researchers to spend time with partner organisations or for partners to spend time at Royal Holloway, to develop the impact of social science research. Residencies can be between 12-30 days (part or full time). So far, we have funded 4 residencies with organisations including, the Greater London Authority, Every Casualty Counts, Parents for Future UK and Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust. We will fund a minimum of 10 residencies per year.

## 6. Next steps and strategic focus – 2023-26

Our aim is to develop an inclusive, enabling, collaborative, outwardly facing and efficient research culture, and this will be embedded through our research strategy and our three-year action plan for HR Excellence in Research. Our priorities for the next action plan are to

- Build further awareness and engagement with researchers and their managers
- Promote wellbeing and effectively manage workloads
- Address bullying and harassment
- Ensure that we promote and maintain high standards of research integrity
- Implement a review of our academic promotions process and how we support career development
- Build a new cohort-based approach to professional development, ensuring that it is relevant and well-targeted.

An important step in this development is the creation of a new post of Research Culture Development Manager, within Organisational Development. In addition to sharing deeper expertise in excellence in research across the HR team, the post holder will establish our cohort development programme for mid-career researchers. To complement this appointment, Research England Enhancing Research Culture funding will chiefly be dedicated in 2023/24 to University-wide programmes addressing key areas of need identified in CEDARS and other staff data – namely enhanced Mental Health training for managers and our inclusive leadership programme.

Like many other institutions, we recognise the challenge and welcome the increased emphasis on the assessment of research culture on the part of many funders, and we see HR Excellence in Research as essential to support us in achieving this. This shift in balance from excellent results to the wider agenda of people, skills and culture is a significant change for many established research staff at Royal Holloway which will work in conjunction with our new vision for the 2030s. It will be important for us to develop our community of practice to join up to this as an aspiration and as culture in which research thrives. We will invite colleagues to come with us on this journey, so that we can embrace our University identity as both student centred and research excellent.