# University of Exeter - HR Excellence in Research: 8 Year Review 2018

A review of the University’s HR Excellence Award was undertaken in 2018 to assess the continued performance in meeting its obligations under the Concordat and to gauge progress against actions arising from the review in 2016. The 2016 review resulted in a consolidated Vitae Concordat Action Plan, co-ordinated by a newly formed, multi-disciplinary group, the Vitae Concordat Working Group. Membership comprises representation from: Research Services; People Services (People Development); Doctoral College (DC); Equality, Diversity & Inclusivity; the Early Career Researcher Community.

Progress against each action plan target is monitored, and has been evaluated, using information and data from multiple sources: the 2016 & 2018 Staff Engagement Survey; 2017 CROS & 2017 PIRLS surveys; feedback from HR Business Partners aligned with our Academic Colleges; feedback from ECR Liaison Forums (ECRLFs); consolidated output and feedback from the first ePDR (2018); input from the University’s Gender Equality Group; feedback from the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research & Impact and discussions at the newly formed Research and Impact Strategy Working Group.

# Key achievements and progress against the strategy

## Employee Engagement Survey (EES)

In 2016 and 2018 the University conducted full Employee Engagement Surveys to assess a range of issues affecting both academic and professional services staff. Results show that 70% of Research job family were offered a PDR in 2018, an improvement on the 68% in 2016. The 2018 survey also showed that 69% of Research staff felt that “there are sufficient opportunities to learn, develop and improve my skills in my current job”.

## CROS and PIRLS Surveys

The CROS and PIRLS surveys were both run in 2017 having had a year’s break to take the Employee Engagement Survey in to account in 2016. The CROS Survey achieved a 32% response rate with PIRLS achieving 44%. The data was analysed and initially distributed on the 12th July in 2017. Highlights from CROS were that 83% of staff reported that they had received an appraisal, with 70% of respondents feeling it was useful and allowed them to highlight issues and review their progress and developmental needs. PIRLS revealed that 80-90% of PI’s felt that the University recognised their contributions to advancing their field (collaborations, conduct, outputs and securing funding); all agreeing that these were important activities for PI’s/research leads. 88% also reported having received an appraisal during the reporting period, with 70-80% reporting good levels of job satisfaction, feeling integrated and understanding how their research was aligned to University strategy. These actions are routinely monitored at the ‘Vitae Concordat Steering Group’ that has been established within the University during the reporting period and features representation described above.

## Athena Swan

The Gender Equality Group is the University strategic lead for gender equality issues, chaired by the Chief Director of College Operations and meets monthly with the Head of RD and academic representation from all STEM/M Colleges. All STEM/M Colleges have their own Athena SWAN Working Groups to drive forward and monitor progress at a local level.

Since 2016 all Colleges have broadened their remits to become Inclusivity Groups. Geography has achieved a Silver Athena SWAN award in April 2018, there has been an overall increase in the number of Silver awards, including those progressing from Bronze to Silver and the whole University achieved an Institutional Silver award in 2018.

## ePDR

Engagement with the new ePDR system launched in 2018 has been very good for the Research job family with 70% of ECRs being offered a PDR and 75% of reviewers of Researchers undertaking the new and improved PDR and mentoring training. The new training features Vitae resources and the Vitae RDF prominently, signposting opportunities for discussion at PDR and encouraging reviewers to focus on ECR career development and support.

## Researcher Development Position Document and Plan

The review of the Researcher Development (RD) provision within the Doctoral College took place in 2016 and both PGR and ECR programmes were adapted to continue to meet the needs of the University and adhere to the Researcher Concordat and the RDF. Following the end of the Robert’s funding, the revised RD programme included recommended induction activities, building ECR networks, a wide range of core optional courses and a small amount of funding for ECRs (and some PGRs) to bid to develop specific ‘researcher-led’ training, not otherwise on offer through the generic core programme.

An approved structure was developed for ECR representation within the DC, which feeds back and forth from newly established ECRLFs which are formalised and have agreed membership and TOR. ECRLFs are now routine in Exeter and Cornwall and feed to and from the DC Strategic Board.

The action plan for ECR / Research Staff Development is monitored annually by Research and Impact Executive Group (RIEG) (formally Research and Impact Strategy Management Group) and updated accordingly. In total, across the whole portfolio, there has been a 12% increase in engagement with ECR related activities across the reporting period.

**PGR Researcher Development Provision**

We have continued to deliver a range of events and programmes that promote opportunities and support the PGR experience including researcher development and health and well-being. The content and topics are informed by feedback from PGR/ECR LFs, PDR outputs and feedback from Colleges (via several sources including Directors of Research, Academic colleagues and HR Business Partners and feeds into a PGR Researcher Development Steering Group which assesses, and sanctions changes to the programmes and provisions.

59 PGR training sessions ran across 2017/18, 99% of PGRs would recommend our sessions and rated them 4.6/5 on average. Additionally, 94% of respondents would recommend our sessions to a fellow researcher and 93% of respondents rated our sessions as good or excellent.

Writing Support in the form of regular Write Clubs and Writing Retreats were added to provision to support writing, completion and community building, in addition to participating in ‘Write Fest’.

We continue to develop the careers training programmes with equal emphasis on academic and non-academic progression. PGR Inductions take place at regular intervals on the Exeter and Cornwall campuses. All new PGRs are required to attend.

## Webinars for PGRs

With the specific aim of improving provision for part-time and distance learners, the webinars programme offered through the GW4 partnership has increased significantly from 9 events covering 9 topics in 2012-13 to 25 covering 23 topics in 2015-16. Exeter is the key delivery partner and all webinars have been well-received across the GW4 PGR community.

Engagements have increased by 57% in 2018, compared to 2017. This does not reflect lack of access to workshop training, as our workshop and webinar programmes mirror each other. Webinars are increasingly a preferred form of engagement, supporting this move towards a 'blended learning’ model for the RD programmes. Our feedback averages remain high at 98% of attendees would recommending webinars to other researchers, with an average session rating of 4.45/5.

**Peer-to-Peer Mentoring**

PGR peer to peer mentoring has been piloted in Penryn and UEMs, typically having c. 30% of the available cohort engaging. These models of mentoring are being evaluated with the intention of being rolled out across the remaining Colleges. Discussions have begun with colleagues in Academic Development (who lead similar programmes for UG’s) and the leads of the Penryn and UEMs pilot peer mentoring groups, to take this forward.

**ECR Researcher Development Provision**

There was a total of 621 engagements in training as part of our ‘Researcher-led Initiatives’ in 2016-17, which increased to 745 in 2017-18, a 20% increase. The participation on the ECR ‘core’ programme of development was 696 in 2016-17 and 650 in 2017-18. Absenteeism from sessions was reduced from 12% to 7%, over the same reporting period. The percentage recommending the sessions to other ECRs remain high at 98% for both reporting years. There was a total of 59 entries to the ‘Images of Research’ competition and 104 engagements with the newly formed (in late 2017) ECR LFs. In total the engagements for combined ECR training and development provisions were 1, 357 in 2016-17 and 1,511 in 2017-18, which represents a 12% increase, over the reporting period.

A key theme that came out of the ‘HR Excellence Action Plan’ (considering the feedback from the CROS and PIRLS) is that a focus on careers and careers development for ECRs is critical. Appropriate representation is evolving, including the formation of the ECR LFs, and the further expansion and support of the networks.

**Well-being**

PGR and ECR well-being has been highlighted as an ongoing issue at both an institutional and national level and there has been substantial shift in the wider Higher Education community (and beyond) since 2016 to focus on wellbeing issues. Around 40 staff have been undertaking mental health first aid training during Autumn term 2018, including most of the DC team. We are working across the institution and in partnership with PGRs, initially through focus groups held in Cornwall in April and Exeter in July 2018 and through new PGR mentoring and peer support projects. We are also working closely with the Guild VP Welfare and will link into a forthcoming review of student wellbeing. Finally, we are working with and funding students in Cornwall and UEMS to support a new PGR Peer support scheme led by PGRs, piloted through summer 2018 to be rolled out through the current academic year.

The Doctoral College website and communications are used to promote the pan-University Positive Working Environment initiative with a member of the ECR community sitting on the PWE Personal Development Group that took forward the actions arising from the 2016 Employee Engagement Survey. We also work hard to signpost the Inclusivity tool and wellbeing opportunities and events both formally and informally.

Regular PGR and ECR updates focussing on wellbeing support and PWE issues are also linked from both PGR and ECR sections of the Doctoral College website. A dedicated web page for Wellbeing and PWE is part of the Doctoral College website links directly to Carefirst, FXPlus Student Services, FXU, Guild, Inclusivity toolkit, SilverCloud, Wellbeing Services and to PWE Wellbeing maps of the campuses. There are also links to wellbeing apps: Calm, Headspace, Stressfree and You. The site contains wellbeing support videos, wellbeing contacts and a PGR wellbeing support PDF.

Finally, all PGRs are required to attend induction, in 2017-18 279 PGRs were in attendance. Information about wellbeing and ~~the~~ Inclusivity slides provided by the Provost Commission are included in every PGR Induction.

## Management of Provision – Working with Colleges and external partners

The creation of the Doctoral College Strategic Board and Management Group have improved the interface between the Colleges and centralised training provision by providing strategic and operational leadership for PGRs and ECRs across the University. A larger group of stakeholders is engaged through the termly Doctoral College Forums through which colleagues share good practice and disseminate information. Work was started in 2015/16 to support the ECR Networks, the ECR and PGR LFs at discipline level and this work continues across all campuses.

ECR LFs are now part of the overall University governance as they have agreed membership, TOR and representation on the Doctoral College Strategic Board, as well as the GWP, Athena SWAN and Equality and Diversity groups. This ensures that not only ECR development and promotional criteria are appropriate but also gives ECRs a voice across the strategic development of key areas of the University and has involved a collaborative discussion with the University of Cambridge Office for Postdoctoral Affairs.

Finally, the ECR Networks and ECR LFs were an integral part of developing the new training programme and content, linking it to the ‘Exeter Academic’ programme and the orientation event. Collectively, we also have written the ECR response as part of the institutional response to the evaluation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Early Career Researchers.

**Doctoral College**

The Doctoral College was formally established in autumn 2015 and works closely with Directors of PGR and other ECR/ PGR-facing staff through the governance groups, DC Forums and other groups. Key researcher development themes are identified in the DC Strategic Objectives including PGR mental health and wellbeing, defining and enhancing research cultures and communities. Priority has been given to building capacity for attracting and delivering externally funded DTEs and Exeter now has at least one doctoral training programme with each of the research councils and have been particularly successful securing ESRC fellowships.

## Researcher Development Community

The establishment of the PGR and ECR networks and associated LFs have helped to promote a more active community of researchers and their development. Our ‘Researcher-led initiatives’ awards are intended to enable PGRs and ECRs to be proactive and empowered to deliver new professional development activities for their peers that will develop the skills and experience needed to progress their careers. Collaborative applications are encouraged and help to develop a strong research community, particularly those aimed at establishing or strengthening the research networks.

We have enhanced PGR Inductions, developed bespoke events for dissemination of research via the ‘Research Showcase’ and ‘Images of Research Competition’. The Doctoral College Induction continues to develop, with engagement up by 37% in 2017/2018 and an increase of engagement with Health and Safety training of 7%. The ‘Research Showcase’ was developed to incorporate the existing ‘Three Minute Thesis’ competition and a new ‘Tweet Your Thesis’ competition. As a result, engagement in our competitions rose by 111%, with a total of 613 retweets and 1847 likes across all entries.

Finally, to compliment out ‘Researcher-led Initiatives’, we have recently established a ‘Research Culture Fund’ to support activities which are key to developing cultural aspects more than developmental ones (e.g. a communal garden at the St Luke’s campus and ‘International Women in Engineering Day’. These activities are now co-ordinated by our dedicated PGR and ECR Experience Officer.

**Researcher Development Website**

The RD website has been extensively restructured following the creation of the Doctoral College and in light of feedback received during the 2015-16 researcher development review. The priority has been to articulate a clear narrative around effective professional development and possible career options and to provide access to appropriate online tools and resources. As such, the website is more graphical and has been broken-up into clear areas of support.

There is a new front end, which has a new themed identity for the Doctoral College, the home page includes links for current PGRs, the new ‘ECR Hub’, pre-arrival information, newsletters, the DC blog, wellbeing support and context sensitive current events. There are drop down menus from all pages that link to an ‘about us’ page (containing staff details and contact information), prospective PGRs, Researcher Development, Early Career Researchers, general support, funding and events.

We have dramatically expanded our blog activities and links via newsletters and updates, with a dedicated member of staff (the PGR and ECR Experience Officer), recruited to support them.

## Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) Programme

The University’s LTHE Programme is an introductory programme primarily aimed at PGRs and ECRs preparing for teaching and assessing, which is accredited by the Higher Education Academy (those successfully completing assessment receive AFHEA status). We continue to receive excellent feedback from PGRs and ECRs. We have been pleased to record that 32 “Research job family” colleagues attended LTHE in 2016/17, with an increase of 65% in 2017/18 to 53.

## GW4

We have continued to work actively within the GW4 partnership to develop shared and joint training programmes and resources. The relationships with partners are strengthened through the work of the Building Capacity and Developing People Workstream and the Developing People and the PGR Working Groups.

This has involved a Medieval Studies Network Event at Exeter leading to an AHRC submission, in addition to developing and offering key opportunities for researchers such as the ‘GW4 Crucible’, ‘GW4 PGR Wellbeing Sandpit’ and ‘GW4 Doctoral Student Training Schemes’, for the ECR and PGR cohorts, respectively. Working with our GW4 partners has also helped us to prepare our new ‘Early Career Research Staff Orientation’ events, which are now taking place as part of the wider ‘Welcome to the University’ staff welcome event.

All four GW4 institutions’ provision is open to PGRs and ECRs across the partnership, facilitated by a travel bursary fund, and Exeter RDT managed the GW4 RD Webinar Programme for PGRs in 2015/16.

# 2018 – 20 HR Excellence in Research action plan and priorities for the future

# Whilst a substantial amount has been achieved to support researchers to be the best that they can and to ensure consistent high-quality training and development throughout their careers at the University on all four campuses, there is further development and enhancement work needed. The top priorities are:

## Early Career Researchers

* Active participation of at c. 20% of the applicants from Exeter on the new GW4 Crucible for ECRs, which started on the 6th February 2019. 20% of those who applied for the GW4 Crucible from Exeter in 2018 were accepted onto the programme, making 12% of the overall cohort.
* Increase and enhance academic support and development for the next REF, through integration of the ECR Development Programme with the ‘Exeter Academic’ provisions for support, development and criteria for promotions.
* Run the CROS and PIRLS surveys in 2019 with an aim to improve on scores across the board compared to the previous surveys in 2017.
* Introduce new induction resources and a bespoke ‘Early Career Research Staff Orientation’ event, to enhance familiarity with developmental offerings, the ‘ECR Hub’ and the ECR Networks.
* Ensure access to learning and development, career pathways advice and support, and effective PDR processes. To continue to provide 1-to-1 careers coaching for ECRs and careers planning tools, such as ‘Profiling for Success’.
* Encourage and support full engagement with ePDR process and enhance training for their reviewers to ensure career and development are discussed and objectives set.
* Increase the interaction between ECRs via the ECRNs and the ECR LFs, allowing the ECR community to flourish and have an input into strategic developments across the University via the ‘Exeter Academic’ and the ‘Unified Approach to Learning and Development’ steering groups.
* Enhance diversity and inclusivity in our ECR community via the ECR LFs and the use of the ‘Researcher-led Initiative’ and ‘Research Culture’ funding and support. We will also pilot networking opportunities, for example, Doctoral College ‘coffee mornings’, and enhance and develop our blog and social media presence.

**Postgraduate Researchers**

* Further increase access to and participation in high-quality L&D opportunities, and career pathway advice and guidance.
* Develop PGR mentoring programmes to ensure that PGRs are independently supported and have a ‘voice’ across their academic college. To expand the pilot schemes in Penryn and UEMS to the other academic colleges, with an aim to maintain engagement at c. 30%.
* Continue to develop and extend development opportunities for PGR Supervisors (eg the PGR Roundtable)
* Run the PRES survey in 2019 with an aim to improve on scores across the board compared to the previous surveys in 2017 and 2018.
* To develop the role of the new PGR Pastoral Tutors via the Academic Development team.

**University Researcher Community**

* The Academic Development Steering Group to be established, chaired by the DVC Education with membership from across the University Professional Services and Colleges involved in development provision for academics
* Concentrated effort on gender equality (through the Gender Equality Group), Inclusivity and Diversity (through Athena SWAN working groups including further institutional College submissions)
* Continue to clarify and develop the remit and contribution of the Doctoral College as a champion of the PGR and ECR experience at Exeter
* Continue 'Unified Development’ initiative incorporating Innovation, Impact and Research Services development opportunities into our centralised catalogue and ‘one-stop shop’ approach co-ordinated via the ‘Exeter Academic’
* Continue developments within our ‘Exeter Academic’ project with the inclusion of ECR provisions, including refinement of the promotion/progression criteria to include clear and explicit REF/TEF/KEF reference

## New Research and Impact Strategy (AW to comment)

* Contribute to the new Research and Impact Strategy including:
	+ how we support and develop our researchers
	+ how we develop and support our research leaders
	+ how we can grow a leadership pipeline for talented future research leaders