# University of Exeter - HR Excellence in Research: 2023 Review

## 1 Introduction

A review of the University’s HR Excellence Award was undertaken in 2023 by the University’s Concordat Steering Group (SG) to assess the continued performance in meeting its obligations under the Concordat and to gauge progress against actions arising from the review in 2021. This review is set against a period of transition and changing academic structures (moving from 6 Colleges to 3 Faculties with new and realigned roles for many colleagues). The SG now includes increased Early Career Researcher (ECR) representation and our Researcher Wellbeing Champion. Feedback on our progress and forward plans has been received from a wide range of colleagues including: researchers at all levels (from ECRs to Senior leaders); those that support research and researcher development; Technical Services; and HR colleagues. Prior to submission a new Doctoral College (DC) strategy is under consultation which is reflected in our forward plan. For further context and details of research staff numbers please see our 2023-2026 Action Plan.

## 2 Research culture

2.1 Departmental workshops and action plans (2022/23)

Building on university wide consultation on research culture (2021/22), individual departmental action plans have been developed and are monitored as part of annual research reviews for all 26 departments (meetings chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor Research and Impact (DVC R&I)). Additionally, Research Culture focused meetings were held in December 2022 and January 2023 with a review in June. Key topics are being picked up by special initiatives summarised below (mentorship, communication, leadership, workload, precarity of contracts and wellbeing). The workshops have helped researchers shape departmental discussions, influence policy and processes, an example of which is an increasing focus on locally organised leadership mentoring.

2.2 Supporting research culture

The role of Technical Services

Since 2022 we have dedicated more time to ensure, as part of our Technician Commitment, that we recognise the contributions of *all* research staff, particularly technical staff, for example, via authorship and acknowledgement in grant applications and research outputs. In 2022 we have also launched Technical ‘lunch’ seminars, inviting ECRs and Post Graduate Researchers (PGR)s to talks by technicians on what they do, and we also support an [annual conference](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/departments/technicalservices/events/pastevents/).

Responsible Metrics (Declaration on Responsible Assessment- DORA)

The institutional commitment has been evidenced through a strengthening of the Responsible Metrics Champions group, which includes ECR and PGR representation. Our r[esponsible metrics guiding principles statement](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/services/governance/metrics/) was co-developed with the group. The group have established a roadmap of activity with the intention of informing policy decisions, increasing awareness about responsible assessment and supporting culture change. Guidance for external assessors of academic promotions on the use of responsible metrics was updated in 2021/22.

Tools to help researchers

In 2023 we launched the [Research & Impact Management Environment](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/RIME) (RIME), which provides quick link access to digital support tools and associated guidance pages, to help us sustainably grow and support our research and impact. This has significantly improved access to information and resources for all our researchers. A dedicated Research Culture website and toolkit has also been launched, developed with external consultants.

## 3 Developing our researchers

3.1 Career development

Since 2021 we have increased our staff resource to lead on career support for ECR and PGRs, featuring 1:1 career guidance appointments and specific career development opportunities. There has been a remarkable 312% increase in researchers attending career development workshops (2021=42; 2023=173). This has been partly due to an increase in number of workshops delivered (14 in 2023; 10 in 2021 – a 40% increase) and also improved communications with researchers.

3.2 Professional and technical skills

We have maintained the popular training from 2021, added new opportunities and replacing others to address changing working practices (e.g., hybrid working). Since 2021 there has been a small increase in engagement (3% increase to 356 delegates in 2023) reflecting an increase in opportunities (120 topics in 2021, 124 in 2023). We have also added new topics to address the increasing need for [digital skills](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/departments/it/digitalhub/). Our planned “book club” went ahead and we continue to develop community building activities such as ‘[Shut Up and Write](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/doctoralcollege/researcherdevelopment/training/writing/shutupandwrite/)’ (more than 3,000 interactions a term since launching in 2021).

3.3 Commitment to a healthy and safe environment

We continue to build participation and engagement in critical areas. The pandemic had a significant impact on training delivery since so much was delivered in-person. Numbers attending specialist Health & Safety training have been building strongly: from 9 researchers in 2021 to 31 in 2023. Mandatory health & safety training remains a key target area for improvement (76% compliance in 2023). Our Research Integrity mandatory training module is also being updated.

3.4 Equity, Diversity and inclusion

78% (R and E&R) staff have completed the mandatory EDI training (all staff rate is 83%). This remains a target for improvement.

In 2023 the University launched a [new scholarship programme](https://news.exeter.ac.uk/alumni-news/alumni-establish-phd-scholarship-programme-for-black-british-research-students/) that is supporting 4-year fully-funded PhD studentships for Black British researchers, supported by philanthropic donations from alumni. In 2023 we also joined the “[100 Black Women Professors Now](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/departments/inclusion/support/training/100bwpn/)” Women in HE Equality Network’s (WHEN) initiative. The University is supporting 7 academics to partake in the second cohort.

Since 2021 we have introduced SharePoint sites for [Research Culture](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/ResearchCulture/SitePages/2.%20Inclusively%20working%20together.aspx) and [Research and EDI](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/ResearchandEDI?OR=Teams-HL&CT=1674656995741) along with a substantially revised [EDI website](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/departments/inclusion/). This has greatly increased accessibility and range of resources to support EDI activities for researchers. The University achieved the Athena Swan Institutional Silver award in 2018, due for renewal in 2024, and has an action plan that is still current. We have 11 academic department Athena Swan awards. Other significant awards recognising real progress in EDI activity are summarised here: Stonewall - Gold Employer (2022); Race Equality Charter – Bronze (2022); Level 2 Disability Confident Employer status.

The university-wide [Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture Committee](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/departments/hr/wicc/) (WICC), launched in 2022, has enhanced our commitment to EDI across the University, focusing on various interventions addressing: safer campuses, allyship, bystander awareness, gender equality and neurodiversity.

## 4 Mentoring

4.1 Peer and micro-mentoring

A pilot programme of peer mentoring in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences (HLS) featuring 20 mentors was discontinued due to the impact of the pandemic. A small pilot of micro-mentoring was a success (10 sessions completed). Both schemes are now being revisited as part of a new strategy.

4.2 One Step Beyond (OSB) and the Senior Academic Mentor (SAM) role

The OSB scheme for academic mentoring (since 2017) is being substantially overhauled to accommodate the new department-based SAM role launched in 2022. We are now supporting a range of start-up schemes in different departments to meet their precise needs.

4.3 GW4 Connect Programme of Mentoring for Researchers of Colour & Coaching for Women with Caring Responsibilities

Since 2022 Exeter has been part of the GW4 Connect programme. GW4 Connect is a suite of EDI pilot programmes which will bring together PGRs from diverse backgrounds to form peer-to-peer networks of support for marginalized and underrepresented communities in higher education.

GW4 Connect includes: 11-month peer-to-peer mentorship programme for 30 postgraduate researchers of colour (with wrap-around support), or 10-month facilitated, group coaching programme for 12 postgraduate researchers with parental responsibilities. Exeter has 4 delegates (of 20 places) on the mentoring programme and 5 (of 16 places) on the coaching programme.

## 5 Research leadership and people management

5.1 PGR Supervision

A new programme has been agreed and designed by a new Doctoral Supervision Steering Group established in 2023. The training will be ready for delivery in September 2023, led for the first time by a dedicated member of staff, to support this activity and engage staff.

5.2 Research leadership and PDRs

The tailored [Research Leadership Development Programme](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/doctoralcollege/early-career-researchers/traininganddevelopment/rdprogramme/leadershipprogramme/) (RLDP), instigated in 2021, has had a total of 43 attendees. While the numbers have stayed constant in 2022, improvements in content have led to recommendations increasing by 17 percentage points (from 66% to 83%) since the first course.

Since 2021 we have also doubled the number of generic leadership and management development opportunities, resulting in a 61% increase in attendance by Researchers in 2023 (49 delegates in 2022/23). Since 2021 there has also been a 108% increase in researchers attending Induction for People Managers training (2021=12; 2022/3=25).

PDR progress: since 2021 there has been a 66% increase in attendance of PDR training by research staff (2021 =32; 2022/23 = 53).

## 6 Communication and the voice of the researcher

6.1 Engagement in key committees, groups, and support networks

All faculties have PGR and ECR networks, but we continually encourage specific disciplines to engage and form new networks with administrative support from the Doctoral College. There are currently 15 [ECR Networks](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/ECRresourcehub/SitePages/Early-Career-Researcher-Networks-%28ECRNs%29.aspx) (ECRNs) led by 24 ECRs. In 2022 we also increased ECR representation to 3 colleagues on our Researcher Concordat Steering Group.

The [Early Career Researcher Liaison Forums](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/doctoralcollege/early-career-researchers/support/ecflf/) (ECR LFs) are a fantastic opportunity for Early Career Researchers to meet and discuss what their community needs from the University. ECR reps, on various boards across the University, attend the ECR LFs to give updates and to get feedback from ECRs and to take ideas and requests forward. The forum is chaired by one of the ECR reps who sit on the university-wide Research and Impact Executive Committee (RIEC) and typically meet four times a year. Our [PGR LFs](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/PostgraduateResearchLiasionForums/SitePages/Home-Page.aspx) have seen increased engagement since 2021 with more regular meetings. All are fully supported by the Doctoral College. Liaison Forums based in faculties now follow the same format for both ECRs and PGRs.

Policy development that has led directly from the 'Big Conversation’ initiative in 2020 has involved researchers through the Research Culture Workshops in 2021/2022 and also through formal routes like RIEC. Impact of this work is measured through our annual PRES and CEDARS surveys and also feedback from ECR LFs and RIEC.

Since 2021 we have introduced dedicated RIEC meetings for ECR and PGR matters, with attendance from PGR and ECR representatives. RIEC is chaired by the DVC R&I and focuses on the management of research activity across the university, including research culture and key strategic areas, e.g., REF, impact, etc.

We now have an academic steering group consisting of Directors of PGRs (DoPGRs) to comment on strategy and direction of our Researcher Development programs.

In 2021/22, the University launched a set of thematic and inclusive [Exeter Research Networks](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/networks/), each typically involving 100+ researchers including ECRs and PGRs. In addition to the potential to build strong networks within an interdisciplinary context, the Exeter Research Networks have also given individuals at different career stages, the opportunities to demonstrate and hone leadership skills.

6.2 Surveys

Survey results have been difficult to report on and include in our submissions: 2021 CEDARS ran but was not reported in previous submission; 2022 CEDARS not run; 2023 CEDARS not available; PRES was run in 2021 and 2022 (2023 data are not available prior to submission). Employee engagement surveys were stopped in 2019. In 2023 we launched our [Culture Index tool](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/departments/hr/wicc/ourcultureconversation/) that replaces previous surveys with a more dynamic, more immediate measure of staff engagement and wellbeing.

## 7 Researcher wellbeing

Wellbeing services are signposted during all levels of induction to the university for all research staff, ECRs and PGRs. Newsletters to staff, ECRs and PGRs contain a wellbeing section and there are support pages, with links to services, on the [Doctoral College](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/doctoralcollege/) and [ECR hub](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/doctoralcollege/early-career-researchers/) websites. Additionally, since 2021 we have appointed a dedicated PGR education welfare advisor.

In 2022 the University launched a new Supporting the Mental Wellbeing of your Staff course for anyone with responsibility for others which includes PGR Supervisors as well as research team leaders, PIs and similar. Wellbeing is a standing item for the Concordat SG, which now includes the new PGR Education Welfare Advisor.

Since 2021 there has been an 11% increase (2021=78; 2022/3=85) in attendance at relevant mental health and wellbeing courses (17 courses in total, including five tailored to the specific needs of researchers). Levels of engagement with PGR welfare services increased in 2020/21 (from 2019/20) and remained at these increased numbers in the 2021/22 year (2022/23 data not available).

In 2023 our Wellbeing team launched their [Wellbeing Network](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/departments/inclusion/groups/networks/wellbeing/#a0) which is open to all colleagues in the university. This is aimed at creating a supportive community to help people with their wellbeing.

## 8 Improving contract precarity

Since 2021 there has been an increase in permanent contracts of 2% for female and 4% for male researchers; and a concurrent drop of -2% female and -7% male, in fixed term contracts respectively. We are now exploring bridging funding options to preserve continuity of employment in between research funding contracts and also matching researchers coming to the end of their contract with new opportunities arising from the award of new research grants. This would be over and above the current redeployment support, but we would also look to see how we could enhance that.

## 9 Mitigating the impact of the pandemic

Online training has been very successful with increases in participation, and we will be maintaining a mainly online mode of training delivery. However, we are complementing this with specific face to face interactions around team building, networking, and social space. The wider ongoing research community impacts (e.g., research paused, contracts and grant changes) are recognised at the most senior levels and mitigative support for those impacted continues via our research management committees (e.g., RIEC and Doctoral College Board).

## 10 Plans and priorities for 2023-2026

10.1 Focus on culture

Following the review of our Exeter Academic promotion and progression framework (implementation 2023/24), we are aiming to further embed [Responsible metrics](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/services/governance/metrics/) into best practice.

[Research Culture in grants toolkit](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/Researchcultureingrants) was launched June 2023. This toolkit has been co-developed with sector leading experts and helps integrate research culture into grant application from doctoral training grants or fellowship application to large-scale strategic grants.

We now have research culture action plans for each department which will be monitored as part of the Annual Research Monitoring mechanisms (reviewed by our DVC R&I).

We will continue with ECR & PGR inductions in person as well as online. Furthermore, as part of RC activities in 2023 we are applying to the Wellcome Trust for funding to greatly expand induction and initial support offerings across the University at a departmental level.

We have used Research England funding to support specific activities in departments around RC, [Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion and Equality (DICE) training](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/ResearchandEDI/SitePages/DICE.aspx?OR=Teams-HL&CT=1683878682265&clickparams=eyJBcHBOYW1lIjoiVGVhbXMtRGVza3RvcCIsIkFwcFZlcnNpb24iOiIyNy8yMzA0MDIwMjcwNSIsIkhhc0ZlZGVyYXRlZFVzZXIiOmZhbHNlfQ%3D%3D) (a one-off training program using funds from Research England's enhancing research culture fund, aimed at PGR supervisors, DPGRs, DoRIs and the Research and EDI working group) and ECR enhancement funding, with creation of bespoke ECRN awards and ExBiblio workshops that help with writing. We will fund further sessions in 2023/24 and 24/25.

[Research and EDI Deep Dives](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/ResearchandEDI/SitePages/Network-Deep-Dives.aspx) (2021/22): BME, Disability, LGBTQ+, International and Gender. The dives have resulted in an [action plan](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/ResearchandEDI/Lists/Deep%20Dives%20Actions/AllItems.aspx) that collates and reports progress against actions in each area.

We are continuing to support the team [tool](https://universityofexeteruk.sharepoint.com/sites/ResearchandEDI/SitePages/How-inclusive-is-your-research-environment-.aspx) to determine how inclusive a research environment is, at the team or department level.

2023/24 will see greater connection between departments investigating misconduct and bullying/ harassment cases to examine how this relates to research ethics issues and what can be done to help; plus new and enhanced training and a new misconduct policy to align with sector best practice.

10.2 Leadership

We will continue with our successful RLDP programme, working with People Development to ensure integration into the wider [Leadership Landscape](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/humanresources/learninganddevelopment/exeterleader/NEW_Leadership_Landscape_Sept_2023_%282%29.pdf) of development. We will explore a new “Induction for Research Managers Programme” covering key topics for managers of researchers.

Our aim is to ensure 90% of Researchers managing and leading others have attended leadership and management development by 2025.

10.3 Mentoring

In 2023/24 we are introducing a strategy for coaching and mentoring throughout the University that focuses on facilitating Faculty/Departmental based schemes of mentoring for researchers (and all other staff) that follow accepted guidelines and training provided centrally.

10.4 Workload and Wellbeing

We will support the adoption of recommendations from the 2022/23 Academic Workload Allocation Review for our E&R researchers and review these outcomes to explore the impact on R only researchers. We will work with the relevant teams to ensure that the wide range of tailored and generic wellbeing courses and services are consolidated for our researchers.

10.5 Developing and supporting our Early Career Researchers

In 2023/24 both ECR and PGR development programmes are being fully reviewed, evaluated, and reconstructed based on feedback and evaluation summaries. ECRNs continue to work well, and we are fostering further links with GW4 and British Academy. The latter of which we were instrumental in supporting development of our South-West ECR Hub.

10.6 Careers

Our target is to rationalise the role of consultant coach by aligning ECR and PGR careers delivery, ensuring synergy between the two, and expert advice on moving from one to the other. GW4 crucible specifically addresses aspects of moving from ECR to PI positions. In 2023 we are piloting an ‘Increasing your Career Confidence’ workshop for PGRs with the aim of wider rollout. In 2024 we will deliver the outcomes of the review of our Performance and Development Review (PDR) with the aim of dramatically improving engagement with reviews and a focus on career conversations.

10.7 Developing and supporting our Postgraduate Researchers

To help with the sometimes difficult student/staff position of PGRs we are enabling all our PGRs to get some staff privileges including access to iTrent and addressing EDI considerations. We are also building on our existing digital first approach, to improve access for researchers that are remote, part time, or have caring responsibilities. In 2023/4 we hope to launch a new platform for mandatory training that will provide PGRs access to all our staff mandatory training for the first time. Currently access is limited. A full-scale PGR Training Needs Analysis (TNA) is underway with results to be reported in late 2023 with actions implemented in the 2023/2024 academic year. There are new PGR RD managers in post and as part of GW4 collaboration there will be an examination of DC strategy. Institution visits to 8 competitors have allowed us to further evaluate Researcher Development activities.