

University of Reading HRER Submission 2020 – Review Report

Background and Context

The University of Reading was one of the first 10 institutions to receive the HRER award in 2010, and we have continued to hold it since then. The university is strongly committed to supporting the development of all our staff and, particularly, those in the earlier stages of their career. This commitment is reflected in our overarching research strategy, our governance, policies and procedures, and our day-to-day practice. Reading supports researcher development from undergraduate through to professorial level, through a range of funded schemes. Our Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme funds summer vacation bursaries so that our students can work alongside experienced researchers on real research projects. Our large and successful graduate school, with 26 staff in a dedicated central building, supports 1700 doctoral students. Our Research Endowment Trust Fund supports research initiatives that build research excellence, foster interdisciplinary working, and supports the development of funding bids. Its various schemes include funding research fellowships, open awards, and travel awards. Early career researchers and research staff are given highest priority when awarding travel funding. The university also recognises and celebrates developing excellence through our PhD Researcher of the Year award, as well as our Outputs and Impact Awards for research staff and early career researchers. More recently, the University continued to pay full salaries to research staff who were furloughed during the COVID-19 lockdown and university closure, and also provided co-funding for costed grant extensions, where full funding was not provided by funders.

The university believes that supporting and promoting equality and diversity is an essential aspect of fostering and supporting researcher development. Reading holds an Athena Swan silver award at university level, and four of our Schools / Departments hold silver awards, and three hold bronze awards. Supporting research staff, both directly and indirectly, features in a number of ways in the action plans of our various submissions. The university also holds the Race Equality Charter Award and is a Stonewall top 100 employer.

Professors Dominik Zaum and Parveen Yaqoob were appointed as Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research & Innovation in 2018, the first board level post to be held as a job share. Following their appointment, they led the development of a new research and innovation strategy, which was published the following year. Supporting researcher development, especially through the early career stages, is a key pillar of the strategy. Incorporated into the development of the new strategy, was a review of the University's five research themes; Environment, Food, Health, Heritage & Creativity, and Prosperity & Resilience. This resulted in the merger of two of the themes (Food & Health), in order to exploit key synergies and facilitate enhanced collaboration and knowledge exchange. It was also agreed that research staff would automatically become members of the research divisions that make up each theme, rather than having to opt-in, as was previously the case. This work is still in progress

but, once fully implemented, will enable research staff to be a more integral part of our research environment and our research planning moving forward.

Alongside development of the new strategy, the Professors Zaum and Yaqoob led a review of the University's research and innovation governance structure to ensure that it was aligned to the strategy. The revised structure allows for increased transparency and improved communication. A key element is that academic staff (including research staff) can apply for dedicated positions on all research-related committees and thereby contribute to decision making. In addition to this, the Chair of the university's Research Staff Committee is automatically a member of the University Board for Research & Innovation (the highest level committee in the structure), as is an early career lecturer. As part of these changes in governance structure, the University Postgraduate Research Studies Committee was replaced by a new Researcher Development and Postgraduate Research Studies Committee, with expanded terms of reference (see below).

Key achievements since 2018

- Significant progress in the support provided to all research staff coming to the end of their fixed term contract. Of particular note, the School that employs 36% of research staff has established a system whereby staff can formally request to be put onto an open-ended contract. There is a clear process by which these requests are considered, taking account of relevant employment legislation and also the long-term availability of research funding to support ongoing employment.
- Agreement in 2019 that research staff would automatically become a member of their research division, rather than them needing to opt in. This has resulted in a greater engagement from research staff within the research community, such as through participation in Research Division Communities of Practice, and working towards a personal research plan.
- Establishment of many local networks for research staff to come together to discuss development needs and to share best practice and experience, with evidence of the ways in which ECRs have benefitted.
- Successful Research Staff Conference held in February 2019, covering the topics of the world of media and career development.
- Increase in the number of grade 6 to 7 promotions.

Implementing the new Researcher Development Concordat

Reading was amongst the first group of signatories to adopt the new Researcher Development Concordat, agreeing to work towards meeting all of the institutional obligations, as well as to support research staff and their managers to achieve those relating to them.

Following this, the University appointed Professor Dianne Berry, Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies and former Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research, as senior lead for the Concordat. Professor Berry chaired the national writing group that worked with the Concordat Strategy Group to develop the Concordat throughout 2019. The new University

Committee on Researcher Development and Postgraduate Research Studies, which is chaired by Professor Berry, was designated as having responsibility for overseeing our progress in implementing the Concordat. Its terms of reference include supporting research staff and early career researchers, as well as ensuring the University meets its obligations in relation to the new Researcher Development Concordat. The committee reports termly to the University Board for Research and Innovation, and will be responsible for reporting annually to the University Council on its progress in implementing the Concordat.

During the latter half of autumn term and early spring term, considerable progress was made in terms of reviewing existing structures, processes, training, and documentation relating to research staff and their development. Various meetings were held with a number of research staff and research managers, as well as key staff in HR and other relevant services. This led to the development of a gap analysis which mapped out current provision against what would be needed to be compliant with the new Concordat. Work then started on developing an accompanying action plan. Unfortunately, this had to be put aside in March 2021, when Professor Berry's time was fully taken up with matters leading up to, and following, the COVID-19 lockdown. Some of our research staff were furloughed, and a number of research managers had to commit time to getting teaching materials online, rather than participating in Concordat-related workshops, etc. This has resulted in timescales in our draft action plan having to be revised to take account of the unexpected and unforeseen circumstances. However, progress is now starting to be made and we anticipate that this will accelerate once more staff return to working on campus from September 2020. We will be using the coming session to establish appropriate baseline measures so that we are in a better position to include informed numerical targets, where appropriate, in our updated action plan next year.

Finally, implementation of the new Concordat has resulted in some changes to the governance for HRER. Whilst our PVC (R&I) remains overall sponsor for HRER, Professor Berry is now working with the L&D officer to lead the ongoing work and oversee progress. Progress in relation to implementation of the Concordat is now a standing item on the agenda of both the Researcher Development and Postgraduate Research Studies Committee and the University Board for Research & Innovation.

Key priorities for 2020-2022

- Ensure that all research staff and managers of researchers are fully aware of what the Concordat means for them in practice – their rights and responsibilities, through:
 - Developing a new online training module for managers of researchers
 - Holding termly workshops for managers of researchers to discuss issues that arise in implementing the Concordat
 - Developing a new online induction module for research staff
 - Revising and developing new webpages for research staff and their managers.
- Do more to prepare research staff for a range of careers, through:

- Improving our current career planning tool
- Ensuring that research staff are encouraged to participate in annual career development reviews, and supporting their managers to enable them to engage in meaningful discussions
- Finding meaningful ways to help research staff to undertake professional development training as well as to develop their research identity.