HR Excellence in Research Award (HR EiR) 10-year review and report

Introduction and Background

Lancaster University first received the European HR Excellence in Research Award in 2011. Since the 2019 submission there have been, and continues to be, considerable changes to the senior leadership team within the Institution with the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellors. The past two years have been as impactful at Lancaster as elsewhere, but the institution has carried on teaching, research, and knowledge exchange activities throughout, including the launch of its new Institutional Strategic Plan for 2021-2026. With a primary goal ‘to consolidate Lancaster University’s status as a leading global research-intensive university.’ This new strategy maintains a significant focus on research and the researcher community and culture, underpinned by the new institutional values:

- We respect each other by being open and fair and promoting diversity
- We build strong communities by working effectively together in a supportive way
- We create positive change by being ambitious in our learning, expertise and action

For context, Lancaster currently has 3560 staff (1130 Academic and Research roles) (393 Research only roles – 372 indefinite and 21 fixed term). 1800 post-Doctoral students are supported by the Doctoral Academy and currently out of scope for the Action Plan. However, work is underway to draw the two work streams closer together and to share good practice. A similar partnership has evolved between HR EiR and Athena Swan, with a member of the A.S. team represented on the Concordat Implementation Group (CIG), this has a mutual beneficial impact with a broader reach and joint credibility. The institution has encouraged the setting up of a range of staff networks (Parents and Carers, LGBTQ, Womens,’ Race Equality, Young staff, Disabled Employee) these, along with the Research Staff Association (RSA), are being consulted widely on issues such as the new People plan, the Institutional Values and strategy for example and have played a part in supporting staff through the pandemic.

Further investment in the research environment has seen the completion of the Health Innovation Campus, which offers a unique opportunity for Lancaster’s researchers to work with other industry and private sector partners on important health challenges. This increased the multidisciplinary Research Institutes at Lancaster to six. The library has been extended offering a dedicated researcher space. Which will provide physical, digitally equipped spaces, for the library to co-deliver researcher development activity and to be a hub for researchers to meet and collaborate.

Concordat progress, evaluation, and governance

At Lancaster, progress against the action plan has continued throughout the two-year period. With regular reports and updates from the key stakeholders, through CIG. Chaired by the Director of People and Organisational Effectiveness, with four RSA Executive members, representing different facilities (other members include staff from OD; RSO; Library; Careers Service; AS; Associate Deans for Research and EDI and other HR professionals as appropriate). This group meets every other month to assess progress against the current Action Plan, receive updates from across the institution on activities to support researchers and to coordinate further initiatives, to support our researcher community. This plan followed a RAG rating scheme to enable the group to maintain momentum in all areas. CIG is an action group, reporting directly to the Institutional Research Committee, chaired by the Pro VC for Research, this committee provides oversight and strategic input and is a subcommittee of Senate.
Community engagement, research population and key stakeholders

Engaging directly with the research population is of paramount importance, so that researchers’ concerns can be raised within the Institution. Data gathering and information sharing has been undertaken throughout the two years, and increased during the Pandemic, using a range of sources, activities, and a variety of media:

- The RSA executive has regular contact with the broader research representative network (whose members sit on Departmental Research and other committees. Themes and concerns raised by the reps are communicated at CIG meetings
- RSA regular afternoon tea sessions (currently fortnightly, online)
- Broader feedback from Researcher workshops and development activities
- University Pulse Surveys
- CEDARS survey 2020 and 2021
- Focus groups (with researchers and research managers) – these specifically looked at the new concordat and how it could be embedded in culture. Researchers were asked what their main current concerns were, so that these themes could be included in the forward action plan
- Presentation and discussion at Faculty, Department and University level research committees
- Interactive session for the ULG (University Leadership Group)

Achievements and Review of progress since 2019 – summary

Key Priorities were:

Raise the EDI agenda

- By including AS colleague on the committee and drawing the two action plans into parallel this gives both agendas a new impetus and greater traction.
- New University Values (see above)

Reinforce Principal Investigator responsibilities as leaders and managers of research staff

- We focussed our development options on delivering PI/PGR supervision and managing your teams remotely. All were booked up.
- Satisfaction rates (measured through CEDARS) focusing on management and research leadership showed an upturn in positive responses.

Transparency of promotional routes and procedures, internal policies, and processes.

Due to the Pandemic this is one of the areas where progress has been slower than anticipated. The new policies are still working their way through University Governance structures and will be in place in the Michaelmas term. There has been considerable consultation throughout this process with researchers and research leaders. These will be shared at the ‘Making Professor: the whole Journey’ weeklong promotions event in September.

Foundation of good practice and development of alternative career pathways for researchers

The Prosper Project partnership with Liverpool and Manchester, (developing skills for alternative career destinations) is entering its final pilot phase; early responses have been overwhelmingly positive and will bring a wealth of opportunity to the research population.

Enhance Lancaster’s practices re. recruitment, retention & development of research staff
Most research staff were moved from fixed term to indefinite (subject to funding) contracts, which offers greater stability and equity with other staff. It is acknowledged that these are not permanent positions, as they are dependent on funding. The redeployment process has been improved, during the pandemic staff were placed on the redeployment register for up to 6 months, prior to their proposed funding end dates. This remains under review.

Lancaster continues to offer a broad range of researcher development activities, workshops, and programmes to support the research community at any stage of their careers and are piloting a new cross institutional mentoring scheme for Mid-career researchers, with MMU, Salford, Liverpool, and Huddersfield. If successful, we are looking to broaden the reach to include several other institutions.

COVID response

Lancaster moved most of its UG and PGT teaching online and followed this to include all its staff development provision. The increased pressure on the research environment led to an increase in demand for specific sessions, notably Principal Investigator (PI) and PGR supervision sessions, we doubled the capacity of each session and doubled the number of instances they ran. Lessons for OD; we were able to deliver all our programmes as scheduled, and increased capacity, with most sessions receiving excellent feedback. This does not mean we will continue to deliver all our programmes online, but are developing a hybrid model for the future, working with the feedback we have received from colleagues based both in the UK and overseas. This flexible approach to delivery has proved popular and family friendly. Allowing for a broader range of attendees.

Strategy for the next two years

As the University moves its focus from its response to COVID and teaching back to research, from firefighting and survival, back to forward looking and planning. There will be a lot of pressure on research teams to make up for any lost time. The leadership and management of these teams will be paramount, and the OD development programmes will reflect this. Initially there will be another period of change and adjustment and online materials have been prepared to support the researcher managers to manage the transition and re-establish connections.

Engagement and broadening reach and impact will come firmly into focus, ensuring ethical working practices and safe and welcoming working environments will be key. Embedding the new values and understanding and sharing the new university strategy and vision will be underpinned by a Research Culture review, helping to understand where further improvements need to be made, sharing good practice, and working across the institution to embed the new policies.

At a practical level, ensuring research staff get the 10 development days that they are entitled to, will need a mechanism to help track and monitor this activity. We need to ensure these are of real value to the individual researcher’s professional and career development and that a wide range of opportunities are available.

There was an increase in the number of Researchers responding to this year’s CEDARS survey, up from 70 to 125. Further consultation with researchers and their managers, in the form of focus groups, highlighted concerns on practical issues such as ‘managing their research projects;’ understanding policies and best practice for promotion and the quality of PDR discussions.

Lancaster has recently signed the Race Equality Charter and so new activities will be added to the forward action plan in response to this.
Glossary of Terms

AS (AP) – Athena Swan Action Plan
CEDARS – Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey
EDI – Equality Diversity and Inclusion
HoDs – Heads of Department
HRBP – Human Resources Business Partners
HR EiR – HR Excellence in Research
OD Organisational Development
PGR – Post Graduate Researcher
PGT – Post Graduate Taught
PI – Principal investigator
POED – People and Organisational Effectiveness Division
RAG – Red, Amber and Green, colour system to identify areas for concern.
RES – Research Enterprise Services
RSA – Research Staff association
RSO – Research Services Office
UG – Undergraduate
ULG – University Leadership Group