

HR Excellence in Research 12-year Report 2023

Introduction and Background

Lancaster is a research-intensive institution. In REF2021, 91% of our research was independently rated as 'world leading' or 'internationally excellent', including 46% rated in the highest category of 4*. We take pride in our research environment, and 99% of Lancaster's overall research environment was rated world-leading or internationally excellent. This includes areas such as research support, training, and facilities. We are still growing in scale, with 50% more staff submitted in 2021 than in 2014. This increase in research activity has refocused attention and resource on the cultural elements of the research environment, with a Research Culture Manager being appointed in 2023 and the introduction of a new Research Culture Working Group focussing on specific areas for improvement.

Lancaster University first received the European HR Excellence in Research Award (HR EIR) in 2011. Since the 2021 year-10 submission and following the challenges of COVID-19 with the need to support all staff with remote working, there has been a period of continuous change. Lancaster was quick to respond, by switching to online delivery of all staff development activity and increasing its support programmes for all staff. This style of delivery particularly suited the researcher population and has left a legacy of blended delivery models. Now that flexible working is the established norm, Lancaster is looking at the impact all the changes have had on its research culture. In 2022 Lancaster launched a People Plan, for sustainable and transformative change – under the following three 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.

All ambitions under the people plan are equally important for all staff groups and have many synergies with the Concordat.

For context, Lancaster currently has 3,764 staff:

- 1,211 Academic staff
- 377 Research-only staff– 356 indefinite (with funding end date) and 21 fixed-term (*all these research staff are the focus of the Concordat Implementation Group (CIG) and HREiR action plan*)
- with the remaining staff in Professional services and other support roles.
- There are also 1,800 postgraduate research students (PGRs) supported by the Doctoral Academy and currently out of scope for the action plan.

Governance

All activity towards the HR EIR action plan and the Researcher Development Concordat is currently coordinated by the Concordat Implementation Group (CIG).

The CIG was previously chaired by the Director of People and Organisational Effectiveness, the chair has recently been replaced by the Cross-faculty Associate Dean for Research, with a view to bringing the focus closer to the research communities and culture. Other changes in membership include the addition of Assistant Deans for Research Enhancement and faculty managers; these join the existing membership, some of whom have been rotated to allow for fresh perspectives and input from a broader selection of researchers. Members include: four research-only staff, one from each faculty; staff from Organisational Development; Research Services Office; Library; Careers Service; Athena Swan; three Associate Deans for Research; and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) team (and other HR professionals as appropriate).

CIG is an action group, reporting directly to the Institutional Research Committee which, chaired by the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research and Enterprise), provides oversight and strategic input and is itself a subcommittee of Senate.

CIG works closely with the Athena Swan Implementation Group (ASIG) to ensure the two action plans have similar themes, this has now been expanded to also include the EDI institutional plans and once completed, the Race Equality Charter (REC) action plan.

The Research Culture Working Group, established in 2023, is looking to be formally accepted into university governance by becoming a subcommittee of Research Committee in 2023/24. This new Working Group will be chaired by the academic lead for research culture, with a representative membership, including research-only staff. It will oversee all elements of research culture, linking with other relevant committees such as EDI, Ethics and Integrity, Open Research and the CIG. It will instigate task and finish groups to undertake detailed analysis and design action plans to address areas of research culture that could be further developed in line with the institutional research culture statement and action plan which will be developed in 2024.

Researcher voice

As well as being active members of CIG, the Research Staff Association (RSA) hosts themed events once a term, allowing for direct in-person communication with the broader researcher community. There is also a researcher group in the faculty of health and medicine, with members sitting on several committees.

Regular newsletters are circulated directly to all research staff, keeping them up to date with development opportunities; these are in addition to local departmental and faculty communications. Researchers are reporting that communication within the departments, previously an area of concern, has improved in the last two years. Researchers new to the institution are invited to a bespoke researcher induction and Teams site and encouraged to join the RSA and/or the Faculty Researcher representative groups.

Lancaster undertakes CEDAR surveys annually to keep the flow of feedback current and relevant. This in turn directly informs the action plan and open discussions as part of the RSA events series.

Evaluation Process

To build on the data collected as part of the 2021 CEDAR Survey, Lancaster ran its own internal CEDAR survey in 2022 and followed this with several focus groups and one-to-one interviews. A researcher culture report was commissioned with QR funding, which highlighted some of the key issues researchers were experiencing, this was undertaken by a Lancaster researcher who ran focus groups with researchers and research managers and others in support roles. These issues were agreed with the RSA as being of importance to them and informed several new short-term priority actions, these included:

Equity – Consistency in application of policies around funding for conferences etc. There are clearer processes and Research staff have priority for development funding in Faculty of Health and Medicine (FHM), this is being held as good practice to be encouraged across the faculties.

Researcher Voice/inclusion – Inclusion of research staff in all communications etc. this is now reported by our researchers at our focus groups, as having improved across the institution.

Identity – Agreed nomenclature, use of the term research staff (instead of ECR, Post Doc etc), is now embedded in most areas. This makes it clearer that activities and policies are there for all researchers, and that when roles are advertised, they are open to those 'with experience' and not just Post Docs.

The library commissioned their own report by Great North Wood, focussing on open access research. The outcomes of both reports were not a surprise, with instability in employment and not being recognised in the same way as other staff, being two of the main themes. We are seeking to address issues within the new forward action plan, with a focus on an inclusive research culture and the creation of two new posts.

Environment and Culture

Lancaster has received £1.2M of Enhancing Research Culture QR (Quality Research funding) in 2023, which has supported the appointment of an institutional Research Culture Manager, who will create a University Culture action plan in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, such as researchers, research managers academics and those who support the research agenda. A new Open Monographs and Research Culture post in the library will also be appointed, as identified in the report by Great North Wood Consulting, to focus on how Lancaster's researchers may be impacted by trends in academic publishing.

New development modules and training post. We have procured digital training modules for research integrity, impact, safeguarding, trusted research and ethics these and other training and skills will be supported by a new Training and Skills development post currently under recruitment. This will help to fully embed our investment in researcher and research manager training.

Research Culture manager. To ensure that the development of our research culture is done with, not to, our researchers, we are investing in engagement pieces to gather opinion on the key areas for future focus and have designed ways in which to involve the full spectrum of research careers. In 2023, we will undertake workshops with researchers, research managers and those who support our research endeavours, whatever their role, and we plan to follow these up with focus groups and culture cafes, delving deeper into topics that results from these conversations. Feedback from these workshops, the two recently published report, the CEDAR survey alongside sectoral analysis will result in a Research Culture Institutional Statement and action plan. This will have synergies with existing plans such as the HR EiR, the AS action plan, the EDI action plan etc.

Lancaster was one of only 43 Higher Education Institutions to submit a £1M Wellcome Trust Research Culture proposal. Lancaster's submission focused on reimaging research practices to ensure a sustainable, digitally ethical, and inclusive future. The outcome of this submission will be announced in August 2023 and if successful will result in a suite of resources for researchers with associated training and a team of new researchers who will develop their skills whilst working with the whole research community.

Networks. The institution is proud of its broad range of staff networks (Parents and Carers, LGBTQ, Women's, Young Staff, Disabled Employee) these, along with the Research Staff Association (RSA), are consulted widely on the creation of the various action plans.

Open Research Group

In 2021, the university formed its Open Research Group, with a mandate to provide oversight of and support strategic decision-making on all key areas of open research.

The library plays a vital role in research culture through its ability to connect people. This role has developed further through investment in several areas. A commissioned report explored research culture at Lancaster and how it is affected by trends in academic publishing and open monographs and includes a series of recommendations particularly in terms of how we respond to the changing nature of the scholarly publishing ecosystem and seek to develop research culture to align with this direction of travel. A sector expert on research metrics provided a bespoke suite of training materials on responsible metrics. These will be used to deliver training sessions for researchers, exploring the tensions inherent in responsible metrics and research culture, and identifying appropriate ways to use metrics in accordance with responsible principles. The university signed the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) in 2019, and this investment will foster a culture where the spirit of DORA principles can be fully realised. New training and awareness raising of Trusted Research through open webinars, and the development of Moodle courses on research impact to support and accelerate understanding of research impact, and on safeguarding.

Rights retention policy. This policy aims to empower our researchers to keep the rights to their own works, rather than signing them all over to publishers, as well as enabling Lancaster to publish more of its research content Open Access. It was launched very successfully and in the 5 months it's been in operation so far, has meant that we've been able to publish over 100 articles open access.

Open access fund. The idea is to address the current inequality whereby funded researchers have more publishing options than non-funded, as they can afford to pay for article processing charges for open access journals. This new fund aims to give similar opportunities to non-funded researchers.

Open Research Spaces. An £11M extension to the library was opened in 2021, including collaborative research spaces for the library to partner with researchers and for researchers to expand their networks. Existing technology in the spaces needed to be enhanced to capitalise on its potential, particularly to

support hybrid events and exhibitions using visual and multimedia research outputs. This investment has allowed us to grow our existing collaborative events such as Data Conversations and Open Research Cafés, which allow researchers to explore numerous aspects of research culture. It will help us to realise our vision of an interdisciplinary incubator where researchers from different disciplines can connect, embedding collaboration and collegiality into the research culture. These spaces have also hosted events with Lancaster’s partner institutions and other external HE, again developing networks for the researcher population. Still in the early stages, numbers attending events and using the space has increase, but more importantly the new space has a distinct identity, and it provides researchers with their own space, that is welcoming and inspiring, and prompts them to collaborate and think differently about their research and has become the ‘unofficial home of cross disciplinary research and open research’.

Employment

All research-only staff have been moved to “indefinite with an end date” contracts – giving full employment rights and access to enhanced redeployment opportunities. This has been a bittersweet action, as it does mean that some researchers are now not eligible to apply for some ‘contract researcher’ grants, and it has not been welcomed by all research staff. Contracts are still time limited, resulting in job insecurity and so cause concern for staff. On a positive note, all new grants (where applicable) should have promotional costs built in, allowing researchers opportunities to apply for promotion.

Professional and Career development

Lancaster continues to run a full range of support programmes for research staff at all career stages. These include: a bespoke Introduction to Research at Lancaster for all new researchers; a cross institution mid-career researcher mentoring scheme, launched following a pilot last year (and featured at the Vitae conference); and a range of research leadership and management workshops. In direct response to feedback from the RSA our week-long event ‘Preparing for Promotion’ features research-only pathway case studies and processes, and balances the Prosper project, which looks at careers beyond academia (Lancaster partnered with Liverpool and Manchester in producing this portal and support programme, which is now widely available to all institutions).

These programmes are in addition to research skills training, developed by the Library and the Research Services Office, media and engagement support, and teaching support options. We now have a broad range of online tools available for research managers including a change and uncertainty toolkit.

This year Lancaster has introduced a new tracking system, allowing researchers to request to use some of their 10-day development allocation, linked to their professional career conversation as part of the Performance Development Review (PDR) process. The system will capture the number of days used and a breakdown of the type of development activity undertaken. A web page offers guidance to researchers and managers as to the types of development activity that is appropriate, making it clear that this is in addition to role-specific training.

3-year key objectives

Development of University Research Culture Action Plan and statement	With ambitious plans to grow our research, Lancaster is looking to provide clarity and focus with the development of a University Research Culture Action Plan and statement. This will look at all aspects of research culture, not just those covered by the Concordat. This will be developed with a range of stakeholders, including our researchers, research mangers and those who support research. To be launched Spring 2024.
Review of research support, committee structure and development of a structured response to the needs of the Research Culture Action Plan	Led by the Head of Research Quality and Policy with the Research Culture Manager, this review will raise the profile of research culture and consolidate actions across all areas. Ensuring that the committee structure and membership is fit for purpose and making recommendations to streamline

	process. With a remit to ensure that researcher voice is represented at the right levels to have significant impact. Direct impact on researcher representation as reported by RSA. (Long term impact goals across the three years of the action plan.)
Strengthen links across all action plans and look for combined objectives (EDI, REC, AS etc)	It is important that we do not duplicate effort. These groups have been included in production of the HR EIR action plan and as members of CIG made aware of synergies and complementary activities. The relevant teams will maintain this relationship by continuing to meet regularly to focus on any cross-cutting themes.
Recruitment and selection review – complete and review impact on research population	This is an ongoing central review of all recruitment and selection practices and processes, looking to improve the experience for potential recruits and hiring managers. As part of the evaluation process the impact on the researcher population will also be measured with specific focus groups, including researchers and research managers.
Review of redeployment process	This is due to start on completion of the recruitment and selection review. POED are aware that this process currently has a negative impact on the researcher community and as such members of the RSA and research managers will be involved from the start. (Summer 2024)
Bullying and Harassment – impact of new group	A new post has been created to support the new Bullying and Harassment policy and working/support group. Our CEDARS data showed a decline in instances of bullying over the last reporting period; however, this is still an area of concern and will now have a renewed focus.
Improve researcher voice and representation on a broader range of committees and decision-making opportunities	A set of guidelines to be drawn up to aid with recruitment and to add clarity to the role of researcher representative. Currently no formal feedback/feedforward reporting process is in place, and there are no role outlines or recruitment guidelines. Guidelines in place by end 2023.

Acronyms

AS – Athena Swan

CEDARS - Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey

CIG – Concordat Implementation Group

DORA - San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment

EDI – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

PDR – Professional Development Review

POED – People and Organisational Effectiveness Division

QR – Quality Research

RCWG – Research culture Working Group

REC – Race Equality Charter

REF – Research Excellence Framework

RSA – Research Staff Association