

# Annual Report for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

Universities and Research Institutes

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**Statement on how the organisation creates, maintains and embeds a research culture that upholds a positive and inclusive environment for researchers at all stages of their careers (max 500 words)**

Over the past two years, USW has implemented a series of initiatives aimed at building and nurturing a vibrant research culture across our activities within the University. Our aims have been to embed research within all operations and to furnish a situation where teaching and research are considered together as part of any decision making. These have all been established with inclusivity at their core to ensure an optimum environment for researchers at all career stages to reach their potential. The structures and initiatives include the development of a new 2030 Research and Innovation (R&I) Strategy (published Dec 2023), and the establishment of 14 Research and Innovation Groups (RIGs).

With these now established, the 2023/2024 academic year has focused on the implementation of the following strategies and initiatives in addition to a consolidation of the RIG structures.

Originally aimed at our postgraduate researcher (PGR) and Early Career Researchers (ECR) community, our Researcher Coffee Mornings are open to all colleagues engaged, interested in, or supporting research. They are informal events, usually with a panel of USW researchers sharing their experiences, knowledge and expertise to support others who may at some point face similar challenges in their research journey. Topics covered in 2023/24 were *finding balance between teaching and research, making research more inclusive, avoiding rabbit holes in research, and dealing with rejection*.

In 2024, we brought together the RIG leads, other research leaders and professional service colleagues to form a '*Professoriate*'. The aim of this group is to provide solutions to the delivery of the Research and Innovation 2030 Strategy through our university structures. We created task and finish groups to focus on the obligations of this Concordat. Particularly:

- Creation of appraisal guidance for managers of research active staff, to be published September 2024.
- Developing proposals to support our Mid-Career Researcher (MCR) community.

Work undertaken during this time included support for researchers, their workloads and expectations of maintaining a good work/life balance. Through the '*Professoriate*', the RIG leads work with the Associate Deans for Research and Innovation (ADR&I) and managers of researchers to ensure advocacy for their members whilst contributing to develop plans

around training needs and objective setting. Additional support and input from relevant departments, the ECR Network and other strategic groups was sought as required.

The Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028 is built upon three pillars of impact and influence for which the University has a duty to work with and for: our students, colleagues, and communities, both internal and external. It sets out our pledge to tackle stigmas, remove barriers, and create equitable spaces for all. With the aim of ensuring a 'one university approach', the Plan was developed in alignment with USW 2030 and existing organisational strategies such as the R&I Strategy 2030, this Concordat and the HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiRA) to support planning processes, data captures and delivery of action plans.

**Provide a short summary of the institution's strategic objectives and implementation plans for delivering each of the three pillars of the Concordat (environment and culture, employment, and professional development of researchers) for your key stakeholder groups together with your measures for evaluating progress and success (*max 600 words*)**

### **Environment and culture**

The USW R&I Strategy 2030 aims to foster a robust research culture that produces world-leading research. We recognise and support positive behaviours and researcher well-being through various initiatives, such as R&I Bulletins, coffee mornings, and PGR well-being activities. These efforts align with the USW R&I Strategy, supported by the Wales Research Environment and Culture (WREC) fund, and informed by this Concordat, and HREiRA.

We've developed a PGR well-being plan and participated in the HEFCW Researcher Well-being Cymru project to ensure our PGRs receive appropriate support. We also support an ECR network and are developing proposals for a mid-career researcher network.

To achieve this, we will:

- Continue hosting researcher-focused events.
- Investigate barriers to career progression for mid-career researchers.
- Increase the percentage of academic staff with Level 8 qualifications by offering internally funded PhD opportunities and prioritising research in staff recruitment.
- Embed research-led teaching across our curricula to inspire future researchers and strengthen connections between teaching and research communities.
- Organise cross-University research showcases to highlight activities within Research and Innovation Groups (RIGs).

- Promote the Concordat at meetings and in the R&I bulletin.

We will measure our progress by:

- Gathering feedback from colleagues through surveys and informal discussions.
- Offering networking and collaboration opportunities and evaluating the response.
- Monitoring the number of staff with Level 8 qualifications and reporting to the R&I Committee.

## **Employment**

The University's People Strategy emphasises the importance of a supportive, inclusive culture that enables colleagues to realise their potential. Alongside other strategies, it supports the implementation of USW 2030 by addressing challenges and opportunities.

The strategy is crucial for harnessing USW's talent and fostering diversity to transform our work and achieve our vision of positively impacting lives and the world.

To support this, we will:

- Collaborate with the Ethnic Minority Advisory Group (EMRAG) to identify and eliminate barriers faced by ethnic minority applicants and colleagues.
- Ensure every new academic receives a welcome email from RISE, outlining available support, relevant RIGs, and key contacts.
- Continuously improve recruitment processes through the Vacancy Management Panel, ensuring research and innovation (R&I) are integrated into new academic roles.

## **Professional Development of Researchers**

We are dedicated to cultivating a thriving research culture where researchers can reach their full potential. Our Research and Innovation Development Programme (RIDP) provides a wide range of high-quality, needs-driven training courses to support career development and foster a vibrant research community. Training is free for all researchers and professional staff in research environments, with additional dedicated training for PGR students, their supervisors, chairs, and examiners.

Recent events include:

- The inaugural R&I Conference, which facilitated collaboration in areas like AI, inclusivity in research, and sustainability.
- The annual PGR showcase, attended by 55 delegates, where PGR students delivered oral presentations, showcased research images, and participated in the Three Minute Thesis (3MT) competition.

- A Horizon Europe Briefing by the UK Research Office in Brussels.

Feedback will guide future events for 2024/25, we will continue offering training, development, networking, and collaboration opportunities.

The People Development Group, an operational steering group, oversees workstreams and progress under the People Strategy. It's core themes include:

- Culture, values, and behaviours
- Talent attraction and management
- High performance
- Engagement and evidence
- Reward and recognition
- Well-being

Each theme is led by a senior business sponsor collaborating with HR and EDI to champion and embed the work. We will continue to monitor and improve our training and events based on feedback to better support our researchers.

### **Environment and Culture (*max 600 words*)**

HEFCW (now MEDR) introduced the first Wales Research Environment and Culture fund in 2023/24, which enabled USW to further develop a supportive and inclusive research environment. WREC funding procured a licence for DotMailer; software that helps to design, disseminate and measure engagement with our R&I bulletins.

### ***Institution***

#### **Actions taken**

- 'Professoriate' task and finish groups formed with work progressing well.
- Approved and launched the R&I Strategy 2030 December 2023.
- The PGR Wellbeing Strategy published October 2023.
- Published the 'Well-being Strategy: Making a positive impact for colleagues and students' December 2023.
- The Strategic Equality Plan published/launched March 2024.

#### **Progress made**

Response to CEDARS 2022/23 showed that we need to communicate more efficiently and effectively with our researchers. 2023/24 saw the launch of regular USW R&I Bulletins, a

bespoke online space for researchers to showcase their research, promote collaboration and celebrate success stories. (HREiRA Action: ECI6)

We are committed to the well-being of our PGRs and have published our PGR Wellbeing Plan 2023-25 and been involved in the HEFCW Researcher Well-being Cymru project. This plan will further enhance our inclusive and supportive community by positively promoting good wellbeing and health (social, physical and mental) as the foundation for academic success and a great student and colleague experience for the PGR community.

### ***Academic Managers of Researchers***

#### **Actions taken**

Developed 'Guidance for Appraisals', which includes a set of questions for line managers to encourage discussions around Significant Responsibility for Research (SRR) and Research and Scholarly Activity (RSA).

The Faculty of Business and Creative Industries Subject Heads received bespoke training and development focussed on nurturing research culture.

#### **Progress made 2023/24**

The 'Guidance for Appraisals' has been developed and published September 2024 in time for the mid-term reviews with full implementation for the DPR 2024/25 session in June to September 2025.

The R&I Conference was held in April 2024, this 2-day event brought together over 100 researchers from across USW to learn about the work of the RIGs and support ideas for collaboration.

### ***Researchers***

#### **Actions taken**

- To meet the targets set out in the R&I 2030 Strategy, each RIG has developed a strategic plan.
- Through 2023/2024 EMRAG, a diverse research community that actively supports and enhances inclusive research in Wales has continued to expand. Created by researchers who identified a need to improve the way the University works and engages with people from ethnic minority communities in its research. EMRAG brings together community representatives, researchers, academics, and professionals from across Wales to address priority research areas and collaborate to drive meaningful change.
- The first annual EMRAG Conference, "Trust Matters, No-one is Hard to Reach," took place in July 2024 and included representatives from across HE, the NHS, the third and

private sectors. This event focused on addressing the challenges of engaging diverse communities in research by building trust and fostering relationships.

### **Progress made**

The RIG Lead is responsible for nurturing research culture, support the development of researchers and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. To encourage this, they regularly meet with members, with occasional ad-hoc meetings with individuals as needed. This ensures that members are informed of and included in any decision-making processes. Members propose topics for discussion, incorporating:

- Ongoing activities, e.g., forthcoming publications and PhD matters.
- Research funding and identifying new research opportunities.
- Ensuring projects are on track for completion.
- Sharing ideas and opportunities for collaboration.
- Training opportunities e.g., funding applications, intellectual property, publishing, impact.
- Identifying issues and progress towards the RIG strategy.
- REF planning and preparation.

Through 204/2025 phase two of the website replacement project will undertake the development of new RIG websites, that will showcase the work of each RIG.

### **Employment (*max 600 words*)**

Attracting talented colleagues to USW and building opportunities for development and progression are important themes within our People Strategy. We recognise the opportunity of being a major employer in our area and the key role we have as part of our wider communities, and we aspire to be an employer of choice for colleagues from both academia and professional services disciplines.

One area of significant concern for the HE sector in Wales was the ending of EU structural funding. USW had a portfolio of circa £20M of projects coming to an end at various points in 2023, with contract staff being significantly impacted. Additional financial support was needed to sustain this activity, and a post EU funding support fund was established to support the transition of staff and projects to alternative funding streams.

### ***Institution***

#### **Actions taken**

- Produce and publish an action plan aimed at increasing attraction and development of colleagues from all under-represented groups across our region.

- Ensure that our talent attraction activates support and reflects our commitment to the Welsh language.
- Using an evidence-based approach, review our current selection and assessment approaches, ensuring these remove barriers to access and bias within our decision making, as well as helping us to identify and select the best candidates for roles here at USW.
- We have ambitious plans to grow the percentage of staff with a Level 8 qualification by 2030. All new academic posts are discussed and agreed by the ADR&I and corresponding RIG lead to encourage the inclusion of R&I components, and where possible inclusion of SRR within the role.

**Progress made**

- EMRAG is a sub-group of the R&I Committee, and its co-chairs regularly attend university meetings to share the work of the group and access expertise. EMRAG and the EDI team work to raise awareness of barriers across certain groups.
- The vacancy management panel meet regularly, their task includes reviewing the new role/job descriptions and ensuring their alignment with our accelerators and RIGs.
- Work is underway for USW to apply for and secure the Advance HE Race Equality Charter Mark in 2025.

***Academic Managers of Researchers***

**Actions taken**

We are committed to developing and implementing a leadership and management development framework, which sets out core competencies that align with Strategy 2030. To deliver this, the employment principle of the Concordat is underpinned by the USW People Strategy, where to date our work has focused on the ‘Talent Journey of a Researcher’.

**Progress made**

- The ‘Guidance for Appraisals’ is complete and will be published September 2024.
- The ADR&I regularly meet with their RIG leads where they engage in two-way briefings around research culture and environment, and to receive updates on personnel issues.

***Researchers***

**Actions taken**

- HR are working with all faculties, departments and RIG leads to develop ‘people plans’ for each area that will be aligned to the People Strategy.



**Progress made**

- To keep lines of communication open and ongoing, the Director of Human Resources regularly attends the 'Professoriate' meetings. This allows HR to hear the challenges faced by our researchers and provide feedback on the work of the People Development Group and accompanying action plans.
- The Vacancy Management Panel continue to review and improve recruitment processes and practices with ongoing engagement from the ADR&I and PVC&I to incorporate R&I into all new academic posts wherever possible.

**Professional development (*max 600 words*)**

We are committed to supporting and developing staff to enable the achievement of USW objectives and the realisation of the potential that exists in all colleagues throughout their employment.

***Institution*****Actions taken**

- Continued investment in on-line training; renewed subscription to the Epigeum research training software to May 2025.
- The Graduate School to offer a development pathway for supervisors leading to UKCGE accreditation for more experienced supervisors. Epigeum's Supervising Doctoral Studies (SDS) package which aligns to UKCGE's Good Practice Framework will be rolled out shortly.
- We have implemented a plan that will nurture and develop staff, with the expectation that it will lead to the growth in the percentage of staff who are at Professorial and Associate Professorial level by 2030.
- We continue to review, revise and promote the Research and Innovation Development Programme, and invest in the Welsh Crucible Programme and the Welsh Universities Research Leadership Programme.

**Progress made**

- RIG leads and ADR&IS are working together to create and maintain a high-performance R&I culture with people at its core.
- We are continuing to develop a rich research community by empowering staff and amplifying with strengthened links between teaching and research across USW.
- Annually we review and revise the RIDP to include sector initiatives.

***Academic Managers of Researchers***

**Actions taken**

We have provided training for Academic Managers of Researchers to be able to conduct DPR in a way that recognises the requirements for Significant Responsibility for Research (SRR) and Research and Scholarly Activity (RSA).

**Progress made**

The 'Guidance for Appraisals' was developed and published in time for the 2023/24 mid-term reviews with full implementation for the DPR 2024/25 session in June to September 2024.

**Researchers**

Regular RIG and theme level meetings allows members to create a supportive, innovative, and ethically sound research environment that promotes both individual and group success as well as:

- Share their research progress and challenges, fostering a multidisciplinary perspective.
- Develop skills by sharing information on new techniques, tools, software, equipment, or methodologies relevant to RIG's research.
- Engage in open discussions about research ethics and integrity to ensure responsible research practices.
- Provide or receive peer support, offering guidance on academic and professional development.
- Celebrate achievements such as publications, awards, and successful grant applications, boosting morale.

The RIG Lead meets individually with members once a year or upon request to discuss their research careers, aspirations, and areas for personal and professional development. Some also maintain a Teams group or newsletter where information and opportunities are shared more regularly than in formal meetings.

**Actions taken**

- To encourage applications to the Welsh Crucible Programme we held a Showcase in November 2023. This event provided an opportunity for early to mid-career researchers to get together as a community and learn about our research. It also provided an opportunity for attendees to seek advice on the application process, from current and former attendees, and RISE colleagues. Three USW Researchers secured a place on Welsh Crucible 2024, which is supported through the investment of QR funding. *'The labs boosted my career confidence. Opportunities often arise that I'm interested in but feel unqualified for; now, I feel confident to pursue them.'*

In 2023/2024 we participated in the Welsh Universities Research Leadership Programme. The programme supports researchers by enhancing their leadership capabilities, skills, abilities, and confidence to lead and manage effectively. This programme enables those with expertise in leadership from across Wales to build and foster cross-institutional engagement and networking. Seven researchers participated in the programme. *'I realised that my role as a RIG lead extends beyond immediate research outcomes to include nurturing the future research project leaders of (our) academic community'*.

**Comment on any lessons learned from the activities undertaken over this period and any modifications you propose to make to your action plan and measures of success as a result. (max 500 words)**

### **Researcher Mentoring Scheme**

In Autumn 2022 we purchased a participant lead mentoring matching software and following a period of extensive testing, the system was rolled out across the university in April 2023. By the 19th of May 2023, only a small number of people had registered. Furthermore, due to a lack of matches being made by participants it was necessary to undertake a manual matching process at the end of July 2023.

To help us understand the user experience of the scheme and the usability of the mentoring platform, participants were invited to complete a feedback survey in October 2023.

Results showed that 100% of those registered as mentors had engaged in a mentoring relationship with a mentee, despite this 60% of mentees had not been matched with a mentor. Feedback from mentees stated they were either not offered a mentor through the platform or the mentor that was suggested was not a good match.

Around half of users (57.1%) found the mentoring platform easy and intuitive to use. Despite this, 100% of users had held meetings outside the platform. This was mainly due to the ease and convenience of using familiar applications such as Teams and email.

General feedback from participants suggested that they would like their mentoring relationship to be more discipline specific, which was not obvious through the software. Participants also noted that emails from the platform were negatively adding to their email traffic. The aim of an online platform was to make the scheme self-sufficient and to allow researchers the flexibility to find their own mentors or mentees. Some users

however misinterpreted what the platform was trying to achieve and were expecting input from Professional Services staff to find them a mentor or mentee.

As a result of the low engagement and rising cost of the software, in Spring 2024 it was decided that whilst the Researcher Mentoring Scheme must continue, the use of the costly online platform was no longer feasible.

As we look to revise our Researcher Mentoring Scheme, we note that informal mentoring relationships have formed organically within the RIGs. Taking responsibility for nurturing research culture and supporting researcher development RIG Leads and senior RIG members offer support to less experienced members as and when required.

In 2024-25 we will review and revise the application process and workflow for the Researcher Mentoring Scheme, with an aim of relaunching the scheme in the latter part of the year. The action plan will be updated to reflect this change, and a task and finish group established to work through the logistics of the refreshed scheme.

**Outline your key objectives in delivering your plan in the coming reporting period (*max 500 words*)**

As stated above, our key objectives are to strengthen our research culture and environment so that we provide equal opportunities for all staff with fairness in career progression for all.

To achieve this, we will:

- Continue to look at initiatives that will be of most benefit to all our PGRs and researchers.
- We would like to direct some of our future WREC allocations to our RIGs and researchers at different career stages, via an open call for projects that will enhance our core purpose. Providing opportunities for future activities to take place that would otherwise not be possible.
- Further develop the research website. The overarching research website is now live, and through 2024/25 we intend to build the RIG web pages and migrate all other research sites (Graduate School and Research Groups and Centres) to the new website.
- Participate in the 2025 Culture, Employment and Development of Academic Researchers Survey, using the results of this survey to update our HR Excellence in Research Award action plan.
- Consider how to take the Researcher Mentoring Scheme forward following the unsuccessful pilot with the online mentoring tool.
- RIGs will continue to nurture our research culture, support the development of their researchers and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Participate in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey.

- Continue to run our mock REF exercises each year, reporting our progress to Academic Board, Executive and the R&I Committees.
- Utilise the experience of senior researchers such as our REF Unit of Assessment leads to support and encourage the personal development of early to mid-career researchers to expand our pool of REF reviewers.
- Encourage colleagues to share their knowledge and understanding of REF procedures along with the providing exposure to REF scoring and processes.
- Development of our REF Impact Case Studies, allocating time required to further develop the ones we intend to take forward.

**Please provide a brief statement describing your institution's approval process of this report prior to sign off by the governing body (*max 200 words*)**

The 'Professoriate' was established in 2024 to contribute solutions to the delivery of the Research and Innovation 2030 Strategy. Led by the PVC-R&I, several task and finish groups were developed to support our excellent staff through their continuous personal and professional development and to recognise them for their work in innovation and impactful research. The 'Professoriate' will be responsible for leading the relevant work packages required to meet our obligations to the Researcher Development Concordat and includes broad representation from across USW as required. The Professoriate reports progress to the Research and Innovation Committee; Academic Board; and the Culture, People and Values Committee. A 'Professoriate' sub-group is also responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the HREiRA.

Signature on behalf of governing body:

Contact for queries:

This annual report will be analysed by Universities UK, secretariat for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, to identify good practices, themes for development and information to improve national research culture policy and practice.

If you have any questions, or suggestions on how the reporting process could be improved, please contact the secretariat at [CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk)

[www.researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk](http://www.researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk)