

HR Excellence in Research Award: 6 Year Review Report

Introduction and background

As a specialist postgraduate university, Cranfield's world-class expertise, large-scale facilities and unrivalled industry partnerships are creating leaders in technology and management globally. We have over 20 international alumni communities across the world. In the UK higher education sector, Cranfield was second in terms of average contract research income with commercial businesses per full-time equivalent academic (2017-19). According to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014, 81% of our research is classed as world-leading or internationally excellent. Cranfield is also a six-time winner of the prestigious Queen's Anniversary Prize. It is therefore extremely important to us that we invest time and resources into the recruitment, retention and development of our researchers and that we demonstrate our commitment through promoting excellence in research and researcher development.

Cranfield was proud to have achieved the HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award in 2015 and to retain this prestigious award at the substantive 4-year review in 2019. Having become early signatories of the revised Researcher Development Concordat in February 2020, we conducted a mid-term review. This involved migration of the 2019 - 2021 HREiR action plan into a revised plan, which aligned with the standards and obligations of the new Researcher Development Concordat, a review of progress, gap analysis and the addition of new actions. This report is based on a review of the updated 2019 – 2021 action plan and summarises the University's ongoing activities and commitment to the HREiR Standard, the Researcher Development Concordat, and the support and development of research staff that it underpins.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both individual and University priorities and has inevitably delayed progress in some of the areas we planned to address. Examples include: inability to easily run awareness events and face-to-face development workshops for staff; additional time required to redesign events to be delivered virtually; the impact of furloughing around one third of staff, additional workload and the requirement to take a flexible approach to some of the aims and objectives already in place. Opportunities for researchers to undertake some kinds of development activity such as attending face-to-face international conferences also declined dramatically but this was countered by them being able to attend a wider variety of online workshops and conferences.

The pandemic created new opportunities to enhance the researcher experience, such as the opportunity for more flexible remote working arrangements and our decision to pilot hybrid working for the majority of roles in the University. Our wellbeing provision, particularly support for mental health has increased significantly over this period, and we have transitioned our development provision to be delivered virtually, increasing accessibility and inclusivity resulting in increased attendance. Part-time staff and students have benefitted from online provision and creation of permanent online content which can be reviewed at any time. The offer of online progress review meetings for research students, whilst not replacing valuable face-to-face interaction, has been well received. We will look to retain some of these positive aspects as we move into the post-Covid phase of working arrangements.

Internal review process of evaluation and governance

Evaluation and monitoring of the University's progress against the HREiR action plan involves the HREiR Working Group, which is now a formal sub-Committee of our Senate Research Committee, the University Executive and Council, our governing body. The HREiR Working Group consists of representatives from across the University including researchers, managers of researchers, Deputy Directors of Research for each School, members of the Research Innovation Team and Human Resources and Development Team. This composition ensures that the researchers' voice is heard as part of the planning, delivery and evaluation stages and is considered alongside feedback from researchers obtained through additional engagement activities such as those associated with the development of the research environment at Cranfield. Moving forwards, we acknowledge the need to ensure that the voice of fixed-term contract (FTC) researchers specifically is incorporated within our evaluation and governance structures and have committed to ensuring FTC representation in the HREiR Working Group, via our 2021 action plan.

Researchers' views are also taken into account through the use of surveys including participation in the CEDARS survey in 2020, and again in 2021, the results of which feed into the ongoing review of progress and development of meaningful actions to address emerging issues. We were pleased to see an increase in CEDARS participation in such a difficult year (88 to 110) but note that the response rate from researchers is low, at 9% in the 2021 survey, and seek to improve this going forward. University wide pulse surveys include a measure of how staff are feeling and are conducted several times a year. The results are used to identify priority areas for action to improve the staff experience. This year emphasis was placed on the impact of Covid-19 on staff, and we were pleased to see engagement levels equivalent to pre-Covid surveys. We survey research students at a number of points throughout their studies, including PRES, undertaken annually but with a break in 2020. The PRES action plan feeds into HREiR plans ensuring the student voice is heard. We are also signed up to the sector-wide Technician Commitment and are part of a major programme for talent development for technicians across the Midlands Innovation group of universities, TALENT. Technicians' voices are heard through their inclusion on key decision-making Committees. We also participated in the sector-wide National Survey of Technical Staff during February 2021.

The HREiR action plan review links with existing quality assessment mechanisms such as those associated with the wider HR and Development strategy, Equality Diversity & Inclusion strategy, Knowledge Exploitation Framework, REF and associated action plans e.g., Athena Swan, KE Concordat, Concordat for Public Engagement and Concordat for Research Integrity. There is some cross-representation on these groups to avoid duplication and to share best practice.

Key achievements and progress

Our actions have been re-grouped in order to address the principles of the new Researcher Development Concordat and in some cases, new ones added:

Principle 1: Environment and Culture – Excellent research requires a supportive and inclusive research culture

Recognising the sector-wide challenges of delivering a robust research culture and the further impact on this of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are pleased to have made significant progress against our targets under this principle. Examples include:

- Enhanced interventions to promote equitable treatment and fairness in the employee experience such as recruitment, promotion and reward including change to policy and practice. Examples include: a review of the Dignity at Work Policy, specific equality, diversity and inclusion training for staff involved in the management of REF and the review and challenge of pay award proposals to ensure equality (EC12).
- Athena Swan Bronze award re-accreditation achieved in October 2020 (EC12). Cranfield Sponsors International Women in Engineering day and was pleased that four of its female researchers were recognised in this year's awards: <https://www.cranfield.ac.uk/press/news-2021/cranfield-women-lead-the-way-as-national-engineering-heroes>.
- Development of a brand-new wellbeing strategy, enhanced wellbeing provision and greater promotion and awareness of the wellbeing support available, e.g., Mental Health First Aiders, wellbeing workshops, Time Out Thursday, bespoke wellbeing reviews and guidance for managers in supporting staff with their wellbeing, including the challenges associated with remote working. (EC13)
- Progress made towards embedding our University Values throughout the employee lifecycle, for example, all our recruitment documents now refer to our Values as does our annual performance and development review process, our discretionary reward process, and our general skills development programmes. The latest pulse survey revealed an upward trend in the extent to which our Values are being lived. (EC12)
- Improved feedback from researchers via a much more extensive and sector wide survey (CEDARS) following an awareness campaign involving presentations to all School Executives which saw a 25% increase in responses and frequent university-wide pulse surveys, enabling us to regularly review the quality of the research environment. (EC11)
- Improved training provision for research integrity to raise awareness levels (EC15). New research integrity e-learning module with an online assessment for academic and research staff and students launched June 2021. Proof of ethics approval now required for students to submit their thesis.
- Significantly improved attendance at unconscious bias training sessions (ECM1)
- Provided successful online networking opportunities supporting research culture (ECR1). The Cranfield Doctoral Network events for research students saw an increased level of staff engagement over previous years, with up to 45% staff attendance, compared to less than 20% previously.

Principle 2: Employment – Researchers are recruited, managed and employed under conditions that recognise and value their contributions

Against a challenging background where many of our researchers traditionally coming from Europe and thus impacted by Brexit, and the wider impacts of Covid leading to staff re-assessing their priorities, we are pleased to have made progress on a number of areas that demonstrate the value Cranfield places on its research staff. Examples include:

- Disability Confident level 2 achieved (EI1)
- Career development support – improved guidance on the promotion process and sessions held at career development events (EI1)
- More open/improved attitude towards flexible working. (EI1)
- Flexible working opportunities widely promoted and embedded in recruitment process. (EI1)
- First Line Manager training refreshed and rolled out with online delivery being well received. (EI4)
- Support for researcher job security consolidated through active support from line managers to seek new opportunities and providing funding to bridge contracts (EI6). Research associates are also encouraged and supported to seek fellowship and new lectureship opportunities.

Principle 3: Professional Career Development – Professional and career development are integral to enabling researchers to develop their full potential

Encouraging researchers to take time out of their focused research activities to undertake development is a sector-wide issue that must be tackled. For that reason, we have established a working group to look at the key barriers and to develop solutions to them. None-the-less, we are proud of the progress that has been made against our strategic targets in this area, for example:

- Progression of actions towards achievement of 10 days personal development including consultation with senior stakeholders to raise the profile of this initiative and begin to identify and address the challenges (PCDI1)
- Positive intervention to identify and support delivery of training needs highlighted in individuals' performance review meetings (PCDI1)
- Increase in the number of mentoring partnerships and positivity of feedback received (PCDI1)
- Introduction of the 75th Anniversary Fellowship scheme with associated new researcher development programme - <https://www.cranfield.ac.uk/research/engage-with-us/fellowships/75th-anniversary-fellowship-scheme/75th-anniversary-fellows> (PCDI4)

Future plans 2021-2023 (see action plan for further details and actions)

There are a number of significant staff changes currently taking place involving senior roles at Cranfield that will likely bring change and will have a direct impact on research strategy and culture. This has also meant that some of the plans we had in place to refresh key strategies have been delayed pending these appointments. In the interim, we have identified some of the key areas of focus we anticipate over the next 2 years:

- Raising awareness of the Concordat with researchers and their managers so that the ambitions become fully embedded within the culture and practice of the University, evidenced by increased engagement and positive outcomes from our next CEDARS survey in 2023. (ECI1)
- Increasing researcher engagement in the CEDARS survey via promoting through a newly established ECR Network and appointing CEDARS champions within the HREiR Working Group. (ECI6)
- Addressing the amount of time researchers allocate/are able to dedicate to personal development, and how best to monitor this in pursuit of 10 days development per annum. A key measure of success will be that the HREiR working group establish a set of recommendations and guidance on enabling researchers to achieve 10 days development. (PCDI1)
- Enable leadership and development opportunities by facilitating the establishment of a researcher-led post-doctoral (ECR) University network with a monthly seminar series. (PCDI1, PCDR5)
- Conduct school-based focus groups on research culture to further enhance our provision and areas to prioritise going forward. (ECI6)
- Continued improvement in the way we track and measure our progress against ambitions in the action plan, including how we develop and define actions by researcher stakeholder group. (Incorporated throughout the action plan)