

UWS HR Excellence in Research: Nine-year Report

Institutional context: University of the West of Scotland (UWS) has proudly held the HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award since 2016, reflecting our ongoing commitment to supporting researchers and embedding the Concordat principles.

UWS is a modern, multi-campus university focused on applied research with real-world impact, with campuses in Paisley, Lanarkshire, Dumfries and Ayr, and an international-focused campus in London. Our research culture is driven by curiosity and collaboration, uniting students, staff, and global partners to generate knowledge that delivers meaningful social and economic transformation. Our research approach is inherently collaborative and transformative. We believe our greatest impact comes from working in partnership—across disciplines, sectors, and borders to address complex real-world challenges. This approach is reflected in the HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award identified through internal evaluation and the additional insights gathered from the ongoing development of a researcher-informed living research culture action plan.

In 2024, we appointed a new Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, and in Spring 2025, launched Strategy 2030 which sets our direction for the next five years. The strategy aligns our efforts to create impact where it matters most and is grounded in our community-defined values: Integrity, Respect, Inclusivity, and Accountability. These values guide how we work together to achieve our goals, with a strong emphasis on colleague engagement, well-being, and inclusive practice. Aligned with our strategic goal of “creating and applying new knowledge” the forward action plan 2025-2028 supports impactful research, interdisciplinary collaboration, innovation, community engagement, and drives a culture of curiosity. Over 800 colleagues hold teaching and research roles and a small subset (less than 40) hold research-only contracts. Our development programme is therefore inclusive, welcoming research and academic staff as well as postgraduate researchers. Approximately 290 participants have engaged in regular Researcher Development staff programming since 2024, with 47% informing future programming through evaluation. Over the reporting period, 60 ECRs have engaged in the UWS Crucible (inc.4 Research Staff), 73% of whom evaluated the programme. 315 people engaged across the 2024 and 2025 UWS Research Festivals with an average of 31% feedback driving the direction of the festival. Further, our enabling plan for creating and applying new knowledge, as set out in Strategy 2030, foregrounds an inclusive approach which seeks to actively engage the whole UWS staff community of academic, technical and professional service colleagues.

Since the University’s first HREiR application, our approach has evolved in response to institutional strategy, external change, and researcher needs. We have focused on inclusivity, developing researcher development beyond initiatives aimed solely at research staff. From concept through to delivery, our research and innovation-related policy, codes and procedures, training and development, and initiatives are designed to ensure a broad choice of support, open to staff across the University with the ambition to be research active. A primary focus remains on those who self-define themselves as early career researchers (ECR), their Managers and the Leaders of the University’s research groups. Our definition of an ECR has always gone beyond traditional parameters imposed by funders, welcoming those entering academia from practice or returning to research after a break. The HREiR Award continues to be a vital enabler, ensuring researchers are supported to contribute, develop, and thrive within a vibrant and inclusive research culture.

All previous actions plans and summary reports are available on our [Researcher Development Concordat webpage](#).

Governance Structure and Internal Review Process: The Researcher Development Concordat Steering Group¹, chaired by Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), is tasked with ensuring progress against the HREiR action plan, developed in line with the Concordat. The action plan complements the UWS Athena Swan action plan, with responsibilities and themes around equality and inclusion. The group meets at least twice a year to oversee the development and delivery of the HREiR award. The steering group includes academic representatives of the Research and Innovation Committee; research staff; staff forum for research; and research-enabling staff from Careers Services, Research Services and People and Wellbeing. A member of research staff also represents the perspective of those on research-only contracts within the Research and Innovation Committee ensuring that issues can be raised independently and that all voices are heard.

The Concordat Steering Group and the Staff Forum for Research both report to the Research & Innovation Committee, a sub-committee of the University Senate. The Staff Forum for Research has grown to over 800 members and serves as a University-wide communication and engagement platform via Microsoft Teams. While supported by Research Services, the Forum is independently run by a committee of early career researchers. Strengthening Research Staff engagement in the Forum remains a priority, acknowledging that research-only staff have historically lacked consistent opportunities for institutional engagement. Members of the Concordat Steering Group also contribute to broader institutional initiatives, including annual reporting for the Research Integrity Concordat, equality, diversity and inclusion planning, Athena Swan accreditation, and the University's Research and Innovation Enabling Plan. In 2024, the University signed the Technician Commitment, and a dedicated Technician Commitment Group has since been established. This group also reports to the Research & Innovation Committee, further embedding inclusive governance across the research community.

The internal self-audit evaluation was led by the Researcher Development Concordat Steering Group and delivered by a small team from Research Services and People and Wellbeing. The need to treat the HREiR action plan as a living document - responsive to organisational change and external shocks - was first highlighted during the COVID19 pandemic and reaffirmed following a major cyber incident at the University in July 2023. After the initial recovery, and with the appointments of a new Lecturer in Researcher Development and a new People Experience Manager, a significant interim review was conducted. This led to a refreshed evaluation focus and a partnership approach to engaging our people on development, analysing our data on what is working and where further action is needed. The primary quantitative instrument for evaluation was the 2024 Colleague Survey, which has resulted in the creation of our people priorities, Academic Career Development Framework and Academic Promotions and the establishment of an Employee Forum. We also run a PGR survey annually and the results inform researcher development activity. This reinforces our intention to address our Concordat-related activity to our broad research and academic community. Our people told us what was important to them - Fairness & Equity, Enablement and Employee Voice - and we listened.

In 2024, we facilitated 18 research culture conversations with groups across all career stages, including Research Staff and their Managers, Professors, and directors of research groups. Conversations were designed to gather insights and used to identify key aspects of an effective research culture, shape the written action plan and guide future developments.

¹ Concordat Steering group membership: Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research & Innovation); Associate Deans Research and Enterprise; Research Staff representative(s); Staff forum for Research representative; People Experience Manager; Director, People & Wellbeing; Lecturer Researcher Development; Head of Research; Research Development Coordinator.

The emerging themes (guidelines and communication; resource management; researcher support; career development and collaboration; and, infrastructure and processes) were presented at the UWS Research Festival 2024. Progress towards 'building a positive research culture' and key achievements under the HREiR award to date were also shared widely. In the Spring of 2025, we added to the significant qualitative evaluation by conducting gap analysis sessions with our steering group, Research Staff and Managers and seeking feedback on draft actions for the forward plan. From the Research Festival 2025 ideas were captured about how we will build our culture of curiosity in 2025/2026 and as they develop, they will contribute to the delivery of both the HREiR action plan and Strategy 2030 enabling plan for creating and applying new knowledge. Research mingles organised by the Staff Forum for Research also provided an opportunity for this group to consult with researchers on the delivery of the 2022-2025 action plan and input into the development of the new forward action plan.

Progress and achievements since June 2022: Progress is reported annually on the University's [Researcher Development Concordat webpage](#). During 2022 to 2025, the Concordat to support the career development of researchers has been more widely communicated across UWS than before, with the HREiR logo added to UWS People and Wellbeing recruitment templates, referenced at onboarding events, at the annual research festival, and via the staff forum for research. Following a cyber incident impacting the communications plan for raising awareness of the HREiR action plan, the web pages were rebuilt and the UWS Research Festival 2024 was leveraged to raise awareness of the Researcher Development Concordat.

Developing the research environment and culture of inclusion: An annual review process consolidates the UWS research groupings into Institutes, Centres and Groups and has provided focal points for existing areas of research excellence and opportunities for new areas to develop, supporting our research community and staff who either already have, or are working towards having, significant responsibility for research. During the 2024 UWS Research Festival each research group demonstrated their contribution to building an inclusive and positive research culture. Groups chose a range of Directors, Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs), post-doctoral Research Staff and other ECRs to share their experiences of being integrated and active in a research group, with the wider research community. Together with the establishment of the annual research grouping Share Fair, participants reported positively to these new initiatives. Across the 2024 and 2025 festivals, 79% people reported the opportunity to engage with someone they didn't routinely interact with and 61% intended on following up with someone they engaged with at the festival. This, alongside an 11% increase year-on-year of attendees aligned to a UWS research group, indicates that the festival is both an important annual milestone and a key enabler of our research culture journey. The investment and ongoing development of both staff and PGR training portals aims to provide a single source of information on training and development opportunities, which are shaped by our research community, to support their professional and career development.

Developing good employment conditions for researchers: Clear pathways for career advancement are built into the new Academic Career Development Framework. The UWS recognition and reward procedure aims to recognise exceptional contribution/performance, capability and competence that is consistent with the annual "My Contribution" process. The procedure allows for self-application by individuals or management recommendation and our recently established UWS Employee Forum is gathering employee feedback to shape this. Through the Academic Career Development Framework, new academic promotions criteria and pathways were launched in 2023 to recognise the full range of academic and Research Staff contributions and the diversity of personal circumstances. Recruitment Chair's training is mandatory for staff who chair recruitment and selection panels. The training aims to

ensure capabilities and knowledge of diversity and inclusion and reduce risks of unintended bias to create a better candidate experience. Since 2023, 214 individuals have completed the training. To complement this, a range of training sessions are available to support researchers and their Managers in their wider equity, diversity and inclusion practices (EDI).

Supporting Professional and Career Development: Underpinning the My Contribution process is the need to create a culture where career development is a core activity. We are developing further guidance and support for researchers and their Managers to understand what development provision is on offer. The success criteria include increased awareness of resources and increases in attendance in training, supported by the development of the UWS training portal and the recently developed UWS Learning Opportunities brochure. Following a cyber incident in 2023, the base lines for all measures of professional development need to be re-established. In academic year 2025/26, our postgraduate progression and supervision system will include additional functionality to support PGR students throughout their entire journey. It became apparent in the research culture conversation with Managers of Research Staff that work was required to build awareness, and clarify this group's responsibility, to support the Concordat's 10 days commitment to professional development for Research Staff. 80% of Managers participated in an online interactive session in November 2024 to explore what this might look like across different disciplines, sharing experiences and ideas on how to meet the requirement and make sure the development is appropriately meaningful for their Research Staff's careers beyond the current post-doctorate.

Peer support: Research Staff, ECRs and PGRs have been encouraged to join and engage with one of two University networks: the Staff Forum for Research and PGR Connections. Both are established as peer-to-peer community-led networks for learning and development, helping to build cohorts of researchers to foster creativity and collaboration alongside a new 'Supervisor Meet Up' (an online community of practice for supervisors) to engage staff at the intersection of these two research communities. UWS Crucible is the flagship future leader programme designed to foster creativity, innovation, and leadership among early career researchers including Research Staff. Past participants inspired the 2023 and 2025 cohorts with their research and career trajectories post-Crucible, accrediting the programme as a contributory factor in their success. The Staff Forum for Research has been sustained by a rotation of Crucible participants taking on leadership roles in this peer network, with 6 appointed to the committee from the UWS Crucible 2025 cohort.

Challenges and Lessons Learnt

- **Governance Clarity:** Roles and responsibilities for delivering the action plan need clearer definition, along with consistent reporting on progress and success metrics.
- **Operational Disruptions:** A major cyber incident, plus staffing gaps—including a 5-month vacancy in the UWS Researcher Developer post and a prolonged vacancy in the People Experience Manager role, delayed key initiatives.
- **Engagement Gaps:** Some well-intentioned initiatives, such as career development support from the Careers Service, saw low or no uptake, highlighting the need for more targeted engagement strategies.
- **Unmet Actions:** Several planned activities were delayed or unachieved due to system access issues and the cyber incident, affecting engagement tracking and programme delivery.
- **10-Day Development Entitlement:** Promoting and embedding the 10-day (pro-rata) professional development entitlement remains challenging. It requires clearer communication, better awareness of what counts as meaningful development, and stronger support for both staff and Managers.

Next steps and Strategic Objectives: The UWS Strategy 2030 vision for research aims to advance knowledge, foster innovation and create stronger more inclusive communities within supportive environments. A central aspiration is to enrich a culture of curiosity and support Research Staff, their Managers and the wider researcher community to be a powerhouse of innovation in and for our communities. To support this, the strategic objectives and implementation plan for the Researcher Development Concordat are fully aligned with our institutional goal to create and apply new knowledge, and are grounded in our core values of integrity, respect, inclusivity, and accountability.

1. **Fostering a Supportive Research Culture:** We are deepening researcher belonging through inclusive, collaborative environments—supported by initiatives like Research Staff Gatherings, reading groups and structured mentorship schemes.
2. **Enhancing Impact and Engagement:** We are strengthening local and global partnerships to create and apply new knowledge that delivers meaningful measurable impact.
3. **Promoting an Open and Inclusive Research Culture:** We uphold ethical standards and embed openness and inclusivity across all research stages.
4. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Using data-driven tools like the Colleague Survey and Training Portal, we continuously refine our strategies to meet evolving needs.

Our 2024–25 Researcher Development Programme feedback has demonstrated that participants now have a clearer understanding of the support available to them and are actively contributing ideas for future programming. Building on this, our forward action plan is designed to address the key gaps identified through our Concordat gap analysis, with a particular focus on Research Staff and their Managers. To strengthen our research environment and culture, we will continue to foster a sense of belonging and support through initiatives like the new Research Staff Gatherings (exclusively for Research Staff). These are designed to promote mentorship and peer connection, responding directly to feedback from Research Staff seeking more structured mentoring opportunities.

We identified a need for more tailored support for Managers of Researchers. In response, we will co-develop a dedicated pathway within the UWS Managers' Toolkit through a Task & Finish group. This will ensure the toolkit reflects the real needs of those managing Research Staff. We will also continue to refine our onboarding processes to better support both research-enabling and academic staff. For professional and career development, we are enhancing our communications and engagement strategy using a 70:20:10 model and our Learning Opportunities Brochure to raise awareness of development opportunities and ensure they are accessible and relevant. We are improving our data systems, including the Training Portal and Colleague Survey, to better understand the needs of our research community and tailor our programming accordingly. Opportunities such as the UWS Women in Leadership Programme and UKCGE Supervisor Awards will be extended to Research Staff, particularly those beginning their supervisory journey.

Throughout this plan, we are committed to strengthening the feedback loop between Research Staff, their Managers, and institutional services. This includes continued support for peer-led initiatives like the Staff Forum for Research and the Employee Forum, which provide platforms for shaping University policy and practice. Our overarching aim is to better connect Research Staff and their Managers with the resources, development opportunities, and institutional structures that support their success, while ensuring their voices are central to shaping our research culture.