

HR Excellence in Research Award – 2022 Review

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# An overview of current challenges and solutions through the HREiR Action Plan

## Background

## HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiR)

HR Excellence in Research Award was developed based on the European Commission’s European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. A UK-specific award process is managed and assessed by Vitae. UCL received HR Excellence in Research Award in 2013.

### Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (Concordat)

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers defines key principles to improve environment and culture, employment, and professional and career development, with obligations for four stakeholder groups: funders, institutions, researchers, and managers (of researchers). Guided by the Concordat principles, the refreshed 2021 HREiR sets 49 clear obligations for institutions, researchers, and managers of researchers.

### UCL commitment

UCL is proudly embracing inclusiveness, fairness, collegiality, and community building as its core values. This dedication is highlighted in our key strategies and frameworks, including the UCL Research Strategy, which defines as its first objective an obligation to “nurture, develop and celebrate those engaged in research” (p.6). Hence, HREiR Action Plan intentionally focuses on broadly defined researchers and research support communities, including academic and research staff on all levels, research students, technicians, teachers, research support staff and clinicians.

This paper provides an overview of the collaborative actions across HR, Research Support, and Faculty functions to fulfil institutional commitment to the HREiR and the Concordat obligations.

## Key achievements in 2019-2021

While undoubtfully the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to re-prioritise our activities, most of the commitments pledged in 2019-21 action plan were either fully or partially completed. Some goals were purposefully postponed, with the intention to pursue more ambitious long-term targets (e.g. increased focus on improving quality of reporting). Key achievements include:

* Principle 1: New online induction suite Belong at UCL launched. Academic Career Framework actively promoted through new induction and leadership resources.
* Principle 2 and 5: Increased engagement with Festival of Early Stage Researchers (230% increase in unique registrations with 10% increase in co-created events).
* Principle 3: New HoD and Senior Leader Inductions and pilot of New PI Development Programme launched.
* Principle 4: RSDP moved to online delivery, with 54 new blended and hybrid programmes added in September 2020, new skills pathways launched in 2021.
* Principle 6: All charter marks achieved. Conference on best practice prevention of sexual misconduct delivered virtually, attracting international audience of over 350 delegates.
* Principle 7: Prof. Bogle (PVP Doctoral School) led the independent review of the Concordat. Revised Concordat endorsed by UCL Provost and signed in December 2019.

## Current challenges

To reaffirm our commitment to both HREiR and the revised Concordat, we conducted a UCL-wide self-assessment and consultation process. 26 representatives across HR, Research Support, and Faculties participated an HREiR Action Plan workshop in December 2021. This workshop was joined by early career researchers and senior academic representatives, alongside professional service staff. Three key pieces of work informed the discussion at the workshop; they are: Doctoral School’s Early Career Researchers (postgraduate and postdoctoral) concerns paper, Understanding UCL’s Research Culture paper, and insights from the Career, Employment, Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS). Key challenges that have been brought to our attention through the workshop are as follow:

### Institution and Culture

* More clarity is needed on expectations, with emphasis on accountability and efforts to increase capacity, for researchers and managers of researchers
* Need to address perceptions and underlying scepticism that nothing will change
* Recognise that bullying and harassment happens at all careers stages, to both early career researchers and principal investigators at higher grades
* Difficult to deliver penetrative communication in a large and devolved organisation such as UCL

### Employment

* Need to improve data integrity to be able to clearly identify number of individuals on certain career tracks (research, teaching, technician)
* More clarity on researcher career tracks and recognition for alternative paths
* Need to address researchers’ perception of over-delivery (in research, teaching, impact) to get promoted
* Low implementation of appraisals and how it can be used to address known issues, such as pay gaps
* Recognise that managers of researchers may need guidance to apply standard employment policies on researchers

### Professional and career development

* Workload as a key barrier to professional and career development
* Need system solution to record and report time spent on training, to fulfil Concordat obligation of ’10 working days per annum’ training allowance
* Recognise that requirements of various concordats are not clear to researchers, need to improve understanding of institution and concordat asks through clear communication and training pathways
* Need to be able to track and report engagement with mandatory and non-mandatory training

## Recommendations

* Acknowledge that HREiR Action Plan is an opportunity for more joined up approach across central services, and between central services and Faculties and Departments to deliver the People and Culture Strategy. The HREiR Action Plan Workshop Group will form part of the Research Culture Operation Group (RCOG), chaired by the PVP Library, Culture and Open Science & Scholarship, and convened by the Head of Research Culture.
* Acknowledge that the Research Staff Consultative Group, chaired by PVP Doctoral School will oversee the delivery of HREiR Action Plan. RSCG membership consists of 11 Faculty Directors of Operations, 14 Chairs of Early Career Networks (ECNs), five academics with researcher development responsibilities, six researcher developers from central services, and four which are faculty-based.
* RSCG will refer to the People and Culture committee for:
  + general line of sight on activities
  + senior consultation where required
  + validation of decisions where required
* Improve communication and engagement is key to inform researchers and managers of researchers of Concordat and Action Plan obligations. This includes:
  + establish regularly updated mailing lists of those on research, teaching and academic tracks, disaggregated by faculties
  + establish regularly updated mailing lists of managers of researchers (e.g., all HoDs, all VD-Research)
  + develop a Researcher Hub to clearly communicate institutional expectations and obligations. Phase 1 of the Researcher Hub is funded via the UCL Enhancing Research Culture Programme.
  + empower voices from those who are marginalised and disadvantaged in the research community (e.g., early career researchers, BAME researchers, part-time researchers, those on precarious contracts)
* Capacity building and skills training is essential to changing perception and delivering the Action Plan at local level. This includes:
  + deliver blended induction training researcher (postgraduate and staff)
  + develop academic and researcher leadership pathways, which provides overview of the expectations, competencies, training, and resources at key career stages
  + develop asynchronous e-learning resource to improve access and flexibility
  + embed researcher training as part of research support function’s core mission
* Improve employment experience, ensure assessment and incentives to embed positive behaviour. This includes:
  + ensure appraisal is used for development conversation
  + develop clear and flexible career paths for researchers
  + implement UKRI narrative CV Resume for Researchers and Innovators (R4RI)

## Governance

HREiR action plan was collated through extensive consultative process led by the Researcher Experience team in Organisational Development. The Action Plan was then consulted with, and approved by the People and Culture Committee, Research Staff Consultative Group, the Research Degrees Committee, the Doctoral School and the UMC.

RSCG is tasked with overseeing the progress of its implementation, with regular reports presented to key stakeholders (see obligation under ECI1 in HREiR action plan 2022-2024).

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