

HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH AWARD EIGHT YEAR REVIEW: NOV 2021

Introduction

The University of Kent is pleased to submit its HR Excellence in Research (HRER) Award Eight Year Review summarising progress since our [Six Year Review](#) (SYR) in the context of our [Concordat Action Plan \(July 2021-June 2022\)](#) (CAP) and [Concordat Annual Report 2021](#) (CAR). Key messages are in bold. **This document should be read with the HRER Backwards Action Plan (2019-2021) (BAP) and Forwards Action Plan (2021-2023) (FAP). The FAP highlights critical actions, i.e. those most beneficial to researchers in the next two years, including those carried forward from the BAP.**

Institutional context

Kent's constituency of academic researchers includes 690 'education and research' (E&R), formerly 'teaching and research' (T&R), and 237 'research only' colleagues. We also have a vibrant postgraduate research community including 1208 doctoral students, although they are not regarded as the primary audience for the [Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers \(2019\)](#), which is academic staff who research. HRER governance principles are similar to those outlined in [2017](#). The Researcher Development Working Group (RDWG) has been reconstituted as the [Researcher Development Advisory Group \(RDAG\)](#) to reflect a new institutional structure (see 'Support for and organisation of RD'). It meets termly and reports to Research & Innovation Board (RIB), which reports to [Senate](#). Its revised [membership](#) represents academic and research staff at all career stages from all Divisions, and five key Professional Services (PS) teams which support them: the Graduate and Researcher College (GRC), Research and Innovation Services (RIS), Talent and Organisational Development (T&OD), Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) and Information Services Research and Scholarly Communication Support. **RDAG aligns researcher support activities with institutional policy, strategy and other initiatives. It is the University's key consultation and decision-making mechanism overseeing the implementation of HRER/Concordat actions and processes across the University, with oversight of researcher-specific information. Divisional and central reporting to RDAG on a range of relevant variables is enshrined in multiple references in the FAP and now in progress.**

Other key stakeholders involved in HRER/Concordat processes include the: Deputy Vice Chancellor - Research and Innovation, Council, Dean of the GRC and its Researcher Developers, Head of Research & Innovation Support and Governance, T&OD Consultants, Head of the Careers and Employability Service, Director of Knowledge Exchange and Innovation, Research and Scholarly Communication Support Manager and the following Divisional staff: Directors of Research and Innovation, Research and Innovation Managers, and Deputy Directors. Their collaboration supports the implementation of and **Kent's commitment to an ambitious, people-focused agenda which embeds EDI across the institution, evidenced by our recent [Silver Athena SWAN Award](#). Our vision, values and ambitions are outlined in the [Kent 2025 strategy](#), into which the GRC's new 2022-25 strategy will feed, with progress to date summarised in a [Mid-Term Review](#). Kent 2025 is the key internal driver for embedding the Concordat Principles and Researcher Development (RD) in all strategic activities.**

Internal evaluation

The [Action Plan for Researcher Development 2017-2021](#) (AP 2017-2021) has been reviewed since publication of the [SYR](#). Detailed assessments took place when the Researcher Developer (Academic) was appointed and when the Concordat Action Plan and Annual Report were developed. These reviews built on discussions undertaken as part of the University's reorganisation of its Research and Innovation Directorate (2019-2020). New communication mechanisms, established in Spring 2021 between both Divisional and central colleagues responsible for supporting researchers, and with researchers themselves (especially postdocs), were utilised to encourage feedback. Ongoing consultation made clear that ideas expressed in [Concordat focus groups and via an anonymous feedback form](#) would feed into the HRER review process, Concordat gap analysis, CAP and CAR. Researcher input via the [Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey \(CEDARS\)](#) (see 'Researcher voice including CEDARS 2021'), and [Careers in Research Online Survey \(CROS\)](#), [run in 2019](#), demonstrated the impact of activities undertaken to support researchers and was used to establish success measures for future actions.

HRER-specific consultation commenced in Aug 2021 with Teams messages to key stakeholders (see 'Institutional context'). Consultation with academic and research staff was launched via an email in Sep 2021 linking to a [blogpost](#)

and anonymous feedback form. The consultation was highlighted at RD events in Sep-Nov 2021, including a ['Valuing, supporting and developing our postdocs' session](#), to maximise input into the review from researchers at all career stages. Strategic direction was provided by RDAG and the GRC. Documentation was reviewed by an HRER Working Group and at the Autumn 2021 RDAG meeting, and updated following Vitae feedback. (Input obtained at a GRC/RIS meeting in Sep 2021 clarified revised roles and responsibilities relating to researcher support. HRER action points were discussed at biannual meetings of the Grants Factory Working Group, constituted in Dec 2020 to oversee event-related operations.) Achievements and progress were evaluated in the context of:

- our most recent HRER submission, especially the [AP 2017-2021](#) and the [SYR](#)
- the three Principles of the new Concordat, with particular reference to Kent's [CAP](#) and [CAR](#)
- the challenges identified and recommendations made in the 'Review of Research Staff Support' (RoRSS) undertaken by Dr Natalie James, Professional Development Consultant, Research Coach in 2018
- key priorities highlighted in CROS (2019)
- [R&I](#) and other actions outlined in the Kent 2025 strategy.

Key achievements and progress

Significant advances have been made in implementing our [AP 2017-2021](#) and in bringing together our support for researchers into a more coherent structure. Two of the three challenges identified in RoRSS have been resolved ('lack of operational and budgetary support for research staff development' and 'lack of reliable reporting systems to establish who Kent's research staff are'), resulting in targeted, supported engagement with relevant staff. Good progress is being made with the third ('lack of information to support research managers' (RM)). Steps have been taken towards enhancing the professional and career development of our researchers, especially postdocs, as documented in Kent's REF2021 submission. Progress is highlighted below with impact demonstrated wherever possible.

Support for and organisation of RD has been refreshed through the [Organising for Success \(O4S\) project](#), which brings together various activity strands to deliver the Kent 2025 strategy. **The emergent six [Divisions](#) and restructured PS operations, many now devolved within Divisions, are supported by the new GRC, with an expanded remit to support all staff who research, doctoral researchers and other postgraduates.** The anticipated benefits of fundamental structural reorganisation, including Divisional autonomy in multiple operational areas (e.g. people and R&I training, development and support) and consequent benefits for researchers, are now being realised as new structures embed and productive working relationships develop. Five highlights are noteworthy:

- **the appointment of the Researcher Developer (Academic)** in Nov 2020 as a 0.6 position, made full-time in Sep 2021 with part-time administrative support (fixed-term) from Nov 2021
- **the appointment of Divisional Deputy Directors with responsibility for people development**
- the shift to blended training and support (including a greater emphasis on flexible delivery methods) has resulted in **an expansion of e-learning modules, e.g. on Induction, Mentoring and Project and People Management, some bespoke for researchers e.g. the upcoming 'Central Researcher Induction' Moodle Module (CRI) and relaunched Horizons Programme with a Spring 2022 cohort for staff who research**
- **customised Divisional provision led by newly appointed R&I teams means that training, development and support is now more targeted at the specific needs of researchers working in particular disciplines**
- **additional funds to develop digital content and/or external training for researchers in 2021-22 (£10,000).**

Signposting guidance for researchers: Significant progress has been made in terms of how information is shared with researchers. Dissemination strategies were reviewed and stakeholders mapped. The primary focus post-O4S was to expand online information and resources for staff who research via a one-stop shop. **This was achieved in Mar 2021 via new 'Academic and Research Staff' sections of the interlinked GRC [web](#) and [SharePoint \(SP\)](#) sites.** These incorporate a growing digital repository with content relating to **Professional and Career Development and other Concordat Principles planned.** Google Analytics data have been analysed, which is shaping GRC development of the new staff intranet ([KentNet](#)). **GRC online provision is supplemented by web and SP sites managed by other PS departments, which have been refreshed post-O4S, and by new central and Divisional sites being developed on KentNet/SP.** These resources provide a wealth of information which is now quicker to find and helps researchers take greater advantage of RD activities and support.

Concordat commitment and progress: Our commitment to supporting and empowering our researchers was demonstrated by signing up to the new Concordat in June 2020 with subsequent steps taken towards embedding the Concordat Principles across the University. The gap analysis incorporating input from Divisional and central academic and PS teams involved in RD was followed by consultation with academic and research staff, including via CEDARS and focus groups. **Resulting conclusions fed into a detailed [CAR](#), analysing progress in**

the first year of participation in this Concordat, and an ambitious [CAP](#). This is being implemented, with critical CAP actions incorporated into the FAP and highlighted below in the 'Strategy for 2021-2023'.

REF2021 reflection of the Kent RD culture: 100% of REF2021 eligible researchers were submitted including 727 T&R and 33 'research only' staff who met the criteria for [research independence](#). This reflects the University's inclusive RD culture, which is an important component of our efforts to build an institution that encourages and inspires all research staff, including the next generation of researchers. Inclusion in the next REF is now possible for all Kent staff who undertake self-directed research.

Researcher voice including CEDARS 2021: A major achievement in our communications was the creation of dynamic mailing lists for a) all academic and research staff, b) all research only staff and c) Postdoctoral Research Associates (PDRAs), Research Assistants (RAs) and Research Associates. This addressed the reporting systems challenge identified by RoRSS and responded to the need for bespoke communications (for ECRs and their managers) highlighted as a key priority in CROS. It has enabled the GRC to mail all academic and research staff from Apr 2021 and automated the process of postdoc mailings, undertaken since Dec 2020. **Survey use is also key to Kent's continued efforts to ensure that our researcher voice is heard and acted on when practicable.** CEDARS was undertaken for the first time in Apr-May 2021 and promoted widely via multiple channels including emails, [blogposts](#), Teams and individual interactions. Response rates were lower than hoped (12.4% of all academic and research staff, 10.8% for postdocs), which may reflect both O4S developments and the requisite remote nature of communications during the pandemic - many ECRs completing CROS in 2019 (54% return) did so after face-to-face engagement. As elsewhere, the researcher voice at Kent has been harder to hear during the pandemic with initiatives such as virtual postdoc lunches, CEDARS, Concordat focus groups, and a [PDRA/RA communications survey](#) generating lower than anticipated engagement levels. However, **this increased and more diverse communication with all staff who research, especially postdocs, should be seen in the context of our continued progress to expand awareness of the wide-ranging work taking place to support them.** It is hoped that the impact of this activity will be recorded in CEDARS 2023.

Appraisal and training take-up: Researcher engagement with training and appraisals has increased since 2019, although further work is required, especially in relation to impact. 74% of Kent's CEDARS respondents had had an appraisal in the last two years ((including 75% for postdocs and RAs, 52% in CROS) and it is hoped that current work to revise the 'Reflect, Plan Develop' (RPD) process, which was suspended in 2020-21 because of the pandemic, will raise future participation levels. Increased training take-up was demonstrated by CEDARS results in the following areas (CROS figures in brackets): teaching and lecturing 65% (31%), EDI 58% (47%), communication and dissemination 38% (27%), collaboration and team working 25% (20%), leadership 24% (16%) and personal effectiveness 19% (15%). **This improvement reflects continued efforts to develop opportunities which meet the diverse needs of our researchers at all career stages.** Recent GRC access to new training and line management reports will enable more targeted communication of relevant opportunities, including mandatory and optional training, thus increasing take-up by researchers and their managers.

Strategy for 2021-2023

Our HRER strategy for the next two years is outlined below. It reflects our Kent 2025 ambition to build a robust and supportive research culture and responds to the government's [R&D People and Culture Strategy](#). With actions mapping to all Concordat Principles, the strategy is divided into two phases, although timings and content may be subject to change. **Outcomes are identified that will benefit researcher experience** with success measures listed in the FAP including evidence of appropriate awareness and engagement levels.

Phase 1 (Nov 2021-Oct 2022): focus on delivery, implementation and evaluation, i.e. producing critical CAP deliverables, implementing other CAP and HRER actions, and evaluating their impact. Desired outcomes include:

- **improved experience of HR and local inductions** through new central and Divisional induction processes tailored to academic and research staff (including the CRI)
- **increased take-up and effectiveness of induction, RPD, training and other support by researchers and their managers**, through expanded promotional and monitoring activities by GRC and Divisional R&I teams
- **expanded provision of bespoke and more collaborative training, development and support activities for researchers** (see 'Support for and organisation of RD'). (This will form part of continued development of our programme of demand-led training, including [Grants Factory](#) and informal sessions such as postdoc lunches and forums on relevant topics. Content will reflect conclusions from completed benchmarking work on approaches to postdoctoral training.)

- **greater engagement with current and additional resources** (such as customised handbooks for researchers and RMs, Divisional training resources, e.g. R&I handbooks, and updated and expanded central and Divisional web and KentNet/SP sites) **through clearer and more comprehensive signposting**
- **improved awareness of and engagement with the Researcher Development Framework (RDF)**, to be achieved via the incorporation of links to it and other Vitae resources in the CRI, handbooks, web and KentNet/SP pages, and revised RPD guidance
- **increased researcher investment in career management**, e.g. engagement with new resources related to career progression and mobility, changing sector and/or discipline, including case studies/career stories
- **expanded provision and take-up of Divisional ECR mentoring**, including use of a digital mentoring platform, (with progress reported to RDAG via Divisional and central reporting to further embed its strategic RD role)
- **increased awareness of and institutional discussion about how to make the Concordat Principles, especially the 10-day expectation, a reality across Kent**, to be generated by a coordinated campaign to promote new digital Concordat content (including in the CRI, handbooks, web and KentNet/SP pages)
- **decision reached by the University's Executive Group (EG) on incorporating the 10-day minimum requirement for professional development into new E&R and research-only contracts, and issuing contract variations for existing staff**, in response to a GRC paper
- **greater use of open-ended contracts and redeployments considered by RDAG** via input from HR.

Phase 2 (Nov 2022-Oct 2023): focus on wider engagement and relationship building, especially closer interaction with staff who research (including networks and/or groups). Desired outcomes include:

- **greater awareness of available resources, opportunities and support for researchers**, to be achieved via increased social media communications and tailored emails to academic and research staff, including postdocs
- **greater researcher engagement with RD communications** including implementation of new promotional methods (to be agreed after a review. This may include modifying tools and channels for researchers and colleagues who support them as part of ongoing work to develop and optimise new central and Divisional processes and ways of working to support academic and research staff post-O4S.)
- **increased interaction with the GRC by researchers** including through attendance by GRC staff at Divisional and/or School meetings of staff who research
- **greater engagement with requests for feedback by researchers** including higher response rates for focus groups, shorter surveys and CEDARS
- **expansion and promotion of Divisional researcher networks**, where appropriate, including the appointment of Divisional ECR Co-ordinators and provision of termly researcher events in all Divisions
- **expanded provision of digital resources to meet identified gaps in provision**, where resources permit, e.g. additional training for RMs to respond to identified needs
- **active researcher participation in a consultation on establishing a Code of Practice (CoP) for the management and career development of all staff who research**
- **identification of measures which could be introduced to realise the 10-day requirement for professional development**, following endorsement by EG. (This may include changes to working practices and additional deliverables, and would involve consulting researchers and Divisional and central teams supporting them, and subsequent implementation of agreed actions.)

Conclusion

Progress made in 2019-21 has been reviewed and our strategy for 2021-23 summarised. Highlights include the expanded GRC remit for staff development for all academics who research, and the creation of and communication between new Divisional and central teams supporting this group post-O4S. Operational improvements include increased digital guidance for researchers and expanded efforts to hear their collective voice, including via CEDARS. The strength of Kent's RD culture is evidenced by our inclusive REF2021 submission and commitment to the new Concordat. **The CAR emphasized the need for focused and coordinated action, dedicated support and resources, to ensure successful implementation of Concordat Principles. The last two years have shown how much can be achieved, despite serious internal and external challenges, as central and Divisional colleagues coordinated efforts and worked together with and for researchers. It is hoped this momentum continues, and that recent additional staff and budgetary resources, and a new GRC strategy, will further catalyse our comprehensive efforts to put RD and support even more firmly at the centre of our Kent 2025 ambitions.**