

University of Hertfordshire 3-Year HR Excellence in Research Award Report

Institutional Context: The University of Hertfordshire (UH) is a modern and enterprising institution with a clear commitment to research excellence, societal impact and researcher development. Under its Strategy 2025-2030, the University aims to enhance its regional, national and global reputation through excellent research, innovation, and enterprise with the ambition of being recognised among the top 50 universities for research excellence in Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029. Research activity is delivered by a diverse community that includes 50 research-only staff, 1,523 academic staff of whom 22.3% are significantly responsible for research (SRR), and technical and professional colleagues contributing alongside other responsibilities. In total, 341 staff identify as SRR, alongside >900 postgraduate research students.

UH is committed to ensuring that research-only staff experience a clearly defined and supportive environment. This includes protected research time, structured career development discussions through the Performance and Development Review (PDR) process, access to mentoring and grant development support, and preparation for REF2029 through training and School level mock exercises. The relationship between research-only staff and those with SRR is deliberately integrated yet differentiated: while institutional frameworks such as workload and promotion policies apply across groups, additional actions, such as targeted mentoring, are directed specifically at research-only colleagues to ensure parity of opportunity and visibility within broader academic structures.

The University has held the HR Excellence in Research Award since 2010 and remains committed to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. Researcher support is coordinated through University's staff intranet and overseen by the Researcher Development Group (RDG), which ensures alignment with institutional strategy and representation of researcher perspectives in planning and implementation.

Governance Structure: Commitment to the Concordat is embedded within the University's research governance framework. At the core of this is the RDG that is chaired by a research active academic and supported by an HREiR Project Coordinator. Membership includes representatives from all five Schools, including Early Career Researchers (ECR) representatives and Research Culture and Integrity Champions (RCICs), together with colleagues from the Research Office, Human Resources, Learning and Organisational Development, Careers and Employment, the Doctoral College, the Equality Office, Health and Safety, the Head of REF, and the Black Women Research Collective.

The RDG provides a structured forum for dialogue between researchers and senior leadership. Implementation responsibilities are assigned to designated leads who report progress on a termly basis. Researcher feedback has directly informed institutional initiatives, including the establishment of a University-wide ECR Group and an ECR mentoring scheme in 2025, as well as refinements to the Academic Workload Allocation Framework informed by CEDARS findings. RDG, Research Culture team, and ECRG work closely with Schools to identify SRR staff with lower satisfaction than research-only colleagues, informing targeted support.

The Pro Vice Chancellor for Research and Enterprise oversees research strategy and chairs the Research Committee, ensuring alignment with Academic Board priorities. The group's work is supported by senior leadership and aligns with institutional priorities for research quality, impact and researcher experience. In recent years, the University has undergone significant senior leadership change, with the appointment a new Vice-Chancellor in 2025, the integration of research and enterprise services under a single PVC Research and Enterprise, and the establishment of the role of Director of Research Culture and Environment, all reflecting a renewed strategic focus on research excellence, institutional growth and the development of its research community.

Internal Evaluation: The HREiR Action Plan is aligned with the University's wider institutional priorities and frameworks, including the [Research Culture](#) action plan and strategy, [Athena SWAN](#), the [Race Equality Charter Mark](#), [DORA](#) and [COARA](#) principles, the [Technician commitment](#), and its commitment to the [Researcher Development Concordat](#), alongside relevant legal and regulatory obligations. The HREiR Action Plan is maintained as a live strategic document, reviewed regularly at termly RDG meetings and reported to the University Research Committee. School representatives communicate actions through researcher networks, ECR fora and School mailing lists, ensuring academics, SRR staff and research-only staff can contribute their views on researcher development.

Backward-Looking Plan

Environment and Culture: *Wellbeing and Mental Health:* UH has established a Wellbeing Champion Network, with volunteers from each academic School acting as informal ambassadors for wellbeing. Champions promoted positive practices within their Schools, shared information, signposted resources, supported events, and served as local points of contact for wellbeing matters, ensuring that support was embedded across all academic areas and accessible to all staff. All staff had access to free, confidential support through the University's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), which provided counselling services and expert advice on wellbeing matters. From April 2025, the EAP was delivered by the independent provider [MCL Medics](#), offering 24/7 support for a wide range of personal and work-related issues. In addition, innovative wellbeing initiatives were introduced to further support staff mental health, including extended campaigns during Stress Awareness Month in April and Mental Health Awareness Week in May to highlight resources and stress management strategies, a year-long pilot of the Leafyard platform and Forest Bathing sessions at Bayfordbury Campus, giving staff the opportunity to reconnect with nature and explore alternative approaches to mental health support. The CEDARS 2025 results demonstrate the University's positive impact on researcher wellbeing. Over half of respondents (53%) feel their environment supports mental health, and 71% say their manager promotes good work-life balance. Confidence among managers in addressing wellbeing has risen to 92% (up 14%). Research-only staff report the highest job satisfaction (92% vs. 77% nationally). While national job satisfaction dips mid-career (65%), at UH it rises steadily, early-career 60%, mid-career 69%, senior 76%, reflecting effective management support and a strong wellbeing-focused culture.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: UH has taken a coordinated approach to advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) across all levels of the institution. In September 2024, UH achieved the Athena Swan Institutional Silver Charter Mark and was recognised as one of the top 100 employers in the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index, reflecting its commitment to LGBTQ+ equality, and it prepared for a Race Equality Charter renewal submission in 2026. Staff development was supported through women's leadership programmes and initiatives such as the Race and Ethnicity Equity Staff Success Group's contribution to the national '100 Black Women Professors Now' programme, promoting diversity and representation in academic leadership. Understanding and awareness were strengthened through targeted training and educational initiatives, including LGBTQ+ Awareness Training for the Office of the Vice-Chancellor, EDI in Research Training for PGR supervisors, unconscious bias training for healthcare students and professionals, and the ongoing Black Lives Matter: Activism and Race Equity short course, which encouraged meaningful dialogue and action. The LGBTQ+ Staff Network and the Network of Women+ Professors (NW+P) Mentoring Programmes provided supportive spaces and career development opportunities for underrepresented groups, helping to build confidence, leadership skills, and research potential. The University exceeded its target to increase senior academic women (grade AM1 and above), achieving 51% representation in 2024, demonstrating the impact of deliberate strategies to promote equity in leadership. These efforts were complemented by a UH-wide calendar of diversity events, coordinated by the EDI Office in collaboration with Marketing and Communications and approved through the EDI Committee, ensuring EDI remained visible and embedded

throughout the University community. CEDARS 2025 results show that 75% of respondents (73% nationally) believe UH is committed to EDI, consistent with RDG feedback that researchers feel supported and fairly treated.

Employment: Recruitment, Induction, Recognition and Promotion: CEDARS 2025 confirms strong engagement with UH's employment processes. Managers show 96% confidence in inclusive recruitment, while 76% of researchers rate institutional induction useful and 71% value departmental induction. Although 91% of managers feel equipped to support career aspirations, only 58% of researchers find promotion pathways clear and 50% perceive fair advancement opportunities. Equity commitment is demonstrated through 2025 promotions achieving gender parity with three female and three male Professorships among six awarded, alongside 19 Associate Professorships, six Readerships, and Vice Chancellor Awards. Inclusive recruitment met its 95% manager confidence target (Outcome: Achieved); promotions delivered 50% female representation (Outcome: Achieved).

People Management: The online PDR now integrates wellbeing questions achieving 86% amongst research staff. Qualitative feedback confirms improved work-life balance conversations. The Academic Workload Allocation Framework supports collaborative planning, while the new iTrent HR system streamlines routine tasks and aligns people management with UH's researcher development strategy.

Professional and Career Development: A UH-wide ECR Group established in January 2025 now coordinates support across Schools, addressing previously variable ECR provision through professional development, mentoring, peer support, and interdisciplinary collaboration. This initiative delivered measurable career outcomes: the ECR evening event achieved >40 participants exceeding the 35-person target, with >70% reporting improved interdisciplinary collaboration confidence (Outcome: Emerging). UH's Genomics England membership enabled 15 researchers to participate and present at the 2025 Genomics England Summit, establishing new collaborations and networks (Outcome: Emerging). The November 2025 Human Tissue Authority licence has driven increased ethical approval applications for human participant translational projects incorporating HTA-compliant tissue analysis (Outcome: Emerging). Impact extends beyond participation: research-only staff reached 22% completing >10 development days (vs 13% national average, Outcome: Achieved vs target). ECR Group coordination shows sustained School engagement with qualitative feedback confirming career confidence gains (Outcome: Emerging). Researchers and technicians collaborate to integrate technical expertise into research building teams with diverse skills (Outcome: Emerging). This combination of quantitative benchmarking and qualitative outcomes evidences genuine career advancement aligned with Concordat principles.

Mentoring

A new ECR mentoring scheme was launched in October 2025 to support researchers at the initial stages of their careers. A distinctive feature of the scheme is the involvement of mentors from other UK universities and international institutions, which broadens participants' perspectives, expands professional networks, and exposes ECRs to diverse research cultures and career pathways. Through the scheme, participants benefit from being mentees while also having the opportunity to act as mentors for ECRs at earlier stages. This dual role promotes peer learning, strengthens leadership and mentoring skills, and encourages a collaborative and supportive research environment that extends beyond UH.

Stakeholder Engagement and Co-creation: Stakeholder feedback has directly shaped key initiatives across contract types and career stages. RDG focus groups with research-only staff directly shaped University-wide ECR Group and ECR Mentoring Scheme. Academic SRR staff CEDARS comments on workload transparency drove enhanced communication strategies for the Academic Workload Allocation Framework, while technical staff input through the Technician Commitment Network shaped targeted improvements to research-only staff induction processes. Engagement systematically captures perspectives across all researcher groups: two ECR representatives per School and mid/senior career researchers via RCICs; women researchers through the NW+P; LGBTQ+ staff via the Staff Network; ethnically diverse researchers through the Race Equity Success Group; and international staff through dedicated

forums. These mechanisms ensure comprehensive researcher voice in HREiR planning, evidenced by 75% of CEDARS respondents agreeing UH demonstrates EDI commitment.

Forward-Looking Plan

Gaps Analysis & Strategic Prioritisation: In preparing this report, we consulted School representatives and integrated researcher feedback from CEDARS (199 responses including 37 research-only staff, 47% of REF 2021 submitted staff), bi-monthly PVC Q&A sessions (>150 attendees), staff surveys, and researcher events. Analysis identified three principal institutional gaps guiding our 2026–2029 priorities:

1- *Bullying and harassment:* 25% of CEDARS 2025 respondents reported having witnessed or experienced incidents of bullying or harassment, and in the Staff Survey 2025 results only 64% of researchers agreed they would feel able to report such behaviour. This highlights the need to strengthen preventative measures and confidence in response mechanisms going forward; targeted School-level bystander training, clearer reporting pathways, and visible follow-up on reported cases will improve the safety and inclusivity of our research environments.

2- *Implementation of EDI principles:* While institutional frameworks are strong (Athena SWAN Silver, HR Excellence in Research status, and 75% of CEDARS respondents agreeing UH is committed to EDI), implementation remains uneven at School level. Strengthening School-level EDI leadership, embedding inclusive research culture practices, and aligning workload allocation, development opportunities and local decision-making with DORA and COARA commitments will enhance consistency and fairness across disciplines.

3- *Research integrity and responsible practice:* Although 81% of CEDARS respondents agreed they understand institutional expectations around responsible conduct, qualitative feedback highlighted limited awareness of how integrity principles translate into daily research practice and supervision. Strengthening integrity leadership through dedicated training for PIs and mentors, case-based seminars, and integration of UKRIO-informed content within doctoral and postdoctoral programmes, alongside clearer signposting to advice and reporting routes, will support a proactive culture of integrity, trust and openness in all research activity.

4- *Recognition, reward and promotion of research excellence:* Researchers expressed the need for broader recognition of contributions beyond outputs, including mentoring, collaboration, open research practices, research citizenship and community engagement. These views echo DORA and COARA principles and inform our Promotions Framework review, which will feature revised recognition criteria, transparent exemplars for promotion at each level, and School-level pilots (e.g. annual Research Recognition Awards and structured use of internal communications platforms) to spotlight diverse research achievements.

5- *Research identity and leadership development:* CEDARS free-text responses and Research Culture Forum discussions reveal a widespread aspiration among postdoctoral and mid-career researchers to strengthen their sense of research identity and leadership confidence, particularly in relation to leading teams, projects and collaborations. The planned Research Leadership and Identity Programme (2026–2028) will build on the University's ECR Mentoring Scheme and existing leadership offers, enabling researchers to develop independent research trajectories, collaborative networks, and effective, values-led leadership behaviours aligned with institutional strategic priorities.

6- *Wellbeing and Mental Health:* CEDARS 2025 indicates that 53% of respondents feel their environment supports their mental health and 71% report that their manager promotes good work–life balance, alongside very high job satisfaction among research-only staff and an absence of the national mid-career “dip”. Nevertheless, open comments highlight workload management, work–life balance and role security as ongoing stressors; strengthening supervisor training on workload equity, embedding wellbeing considerations into grant design and PDR processes, and expanding access to research-specific mental health support and peer wellbeing champions will consolidate current strengths and protect researcher wellbeing in a high-performing environment.

Environment and Culture: By 2029, Environment and Culture success will represent significant improvement in researcher experience despite inherent profession-specific stressors such as fixed-term contracts, grant deadlines, rejection rates, solo working, and perceived failure: from current 53% agreeing their environment supports mental health to 75%; from 71% manager work–life balance promotion to 80%; and bullying/harassment witness rates from 25% to below 15%. These defined improvements evidence a cultural shift where wellbeing and inclusivity become default researcher experiences rather than targeted interventions. Academic Workload Allocation Framework implementation across all Schools will achieve this through equitable distribution of responsibilities, enabling researchers to maintain focus on high-impact work while sustaining healthy work-life balance (tracked via CEDARS trajectory and workload satisfaction surveys). Each School's ECR representatives and RCICs will ensure career stage and integrity perspectives inform RDG priorities, targeting 100% School representation by end-2026 with documented policy influence (e.g. >5 actions per School annually). Wellbeing Champions and Dignity and Respect Advisors, supported by Schwartz Rounds, will deliver local, proactive support, aiming for 90% researcher awareness of wellbeing resources. This ambitious scale prioritises measurable behavioural change over activity continuation, with success requiring sustained upward CEDARS trajectories, reduced incident reporting, and qualitative evidence of cultural embedding by 2029.

Employment: Success will be measured through clear improvements in researcher experience by 2029, not only through implementation milestones. Career progression clarity will increase to 75%, up from 58% in CEDARS 2025. Perceptions of employment security will also improve, with 65% of researchers reporting a secure future, compared with 49% now. The usefulness of the research-only staff induction will reach 90%, up from 76%. Participation in the WHEN programme will also increase. Over three years, this will support more promotions of Black women to Reader, Associate Professor, and Professor. This will help build a stronger pipeline of Black female Professors. Success will also include a strong outcome in REF2029, with a high number of researchers entered at the highest levels. The 70% staff survey target for "treats people fairly and equally" (currently 59%) will be tracked alongside iTrent retention data showing >15% research-only stability and sustained promotion equity. Targeted actions including mandatory manager training on wellbeing, bullying/harassment prevention and EDI; School Wellbeing Champions; researcher Dignity Advisors; and Schwartz Rounds, will deliver these survey-verified shifts, evidencing tangible transformation in progression clarity, workload balance, and employment security by cycle end.

Professional and Career Development: The University is adopting a coordinated approach to researcher career development, reinforcing its commitment to professional and personal growth with ambitions of 100% PDR completion and 70% satisfaction by 2030. The Academic Workload Allocation Framework ensures transparency and equity in teaching, research, and leadership responsibilities, while the 2025–2026 academic promotions review and four-week transition period for all researchers returning from extended leave enable fair project engagement and equitable advancement. Complementing these, the University Leadership Forum (ULF), comprising senior leaders (including Associate Deans of Research and Enterprise (ADREs)) and staff at professorial level, equips research leaders with the skills to deliver the 2025–2030 strategic plan, and the "Let's Talk Research" week offers ECRs one-to-one mentoring with international leaders for grant guidance and interdisciplinary collaboration skills.

2026–2029 success targets career outcomes beyond participation: 70% ECRs reporting improved career clarity/confidence (from current 57% via biennial CEDARS); research-only staff maintaining >22% structured development completion (above 13% national benchmark); and measurable progression tracked through iTrent. Evidence combines CEDARS perception data with iTrent retention/progression records, Academic Promotions outcomes, PDR themes, ULF leadership impact evaluation, and ECR evening event collaboration confidence (>70%). This year-on-year measurement confirms genuine professional advancement by 2029 rather than activity delivery alone.