HR Excellence in Research Award: 8 Year Review Report

1.   Introduction and background

Cranfield is a specialist postgraduate-only university with distinctive expertise in science, technology, engineering, and management. Our population comprises of 1780 staff including 126 technical staff, 277 researchers and 385 academic staff with teaching and research roles; and over 800 postgraduate research students. We consider researchers and academic staff with teaching and research roles to be the primary target audience for Researcher Development Concordat and the HREiR Action Plan, whilst ensuring mechanisms are in place to share good practice with our wider community of staff and students.

Launched in 2022, our Corporate Plan defines our ambitions as an institution for the next five years and is underpinned by core strategies to help us achieve our goals. Our People Strategy aspires to establish and promote a fully inclusive culture where colleagues feel part of a diverse, skilled, ambitious and motivated community. The five priority areas within this Strategy are well-aligned with the obligations of the Researcher Development Concordat and are closely mapped to our HREiR Action Plan:

- *Talented people:* engage and enhance high-performing, diverse talent.
- *Respectful culture:* embed equality, diversity and inclusion in all we do and build a fully inclusive, values-based culture where all our employees feel safe and respected.
- *Distinctive working environment:* Embed agile working practices and initiatives that promote and support employee wellbeing, provide flexibility and balance the needs of our employees, students, partners and wider Cranfield community.
- *Engaged employee community:* Deliver a distinct employee experience through regular engagement and communication with employees, recognised Trade Unions and our network groups to create a workplace employees value.
- *Meaningful reward:* develop a competitive and meaningful reward approach which aligns to our corporate objectives and values, and is respected by our employees.

Our Research and Innovation (R&I) Strategy is shaped with similar principles which include Diversity of People and Thought (setting aspirations to recognise and reward all those that contribute to research excellence, whilst challenging ourselves to become more inclusive) and Scholarship with Purpose (outlining our agenda to encourage a research culture whose central tenet promotes the articulation of intellectual contribution for useful application). Examples of R&I Strategy-led initiatives include our Excellence in Scholarship Programme, launched in 2022, which supports PDRA researchers, academic and technical staff through a programme of researcher development training and formative annual review with 1-2-1 feedback, to understand and enhance the novelty, contribution to knowledge and impact of their research, whilst ensuring compliance with University policies on integrity, ethics, data management and open access. The primary objective is to support research staff to produce the best research outputs and impacts they are capable of.

The University has seen a period of significant change over the last two years, with a new Vice-Chancellor, new Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, the launch of ambitious new institutional strategies and returning to a 'new normal' post-COVID. A wide range of initiatives, policies and actions have been introduced to support our overarching institutional aims, however feedback mechanisms and internal audits have highlight shortcomings in terms of how these are actually being implemented 'on the ground'. Thus, the primary challenge over the next three years is in ensuring effective implementation, particularly regarding awareness, accessibility, and engagement with the available support, so that we can embed positive cultural change throughout the entire organisation.

2.   Internal review process of evaluation and governance

The University's HR Excellence in Research Working Group (HREiR WG) is responsible for evaluation and monitoring of progress against the HREiR action plan. The Working Group is a formal sub-Committee of the University's Research Committee that is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Research and Innovation (PVCR&I) and has delegated responsibility, on behalf of the University Senate (in accordance with Ordinance 4.3.7), to oversee research strategy development, policy, governance and performance monitoring within the institution. This includes championing and promoting research excellence, integrity, and security in line with Concordat commitments, University policies and funder regulations. The HREiR WG reports to Research Committee as a standing agenda item, which includes a substantive annual review report. Research Committee formerly reports into Senate, but the PVC R&I will also raise matters directly with University Executive, as appropriate.

The HREiR WG is chaired by the Head of Research Excellence from the Research and Innovation Office, with the Head of People Business Partnering from the People and Culture team (formerly called HR) holding the role of Deputy Chair. The Working Group meets on a two monthly basis and consists of representatives from across the University including four researchers (three of these are on fixed-term contracts), and Deputy Directors of Research for each School (x4), as well as key members of the People and Culture and Research and Innovation teams that are responsible for development, oversight and delivery of our Action Plan. This composition ensures that the views of our research community are embedded throughout the planning, delivery and evaluation stages of our award submission.

In evaluating our progress over the previous reporting period and in setting future priorities, we have utilised a wide variety of approaches including: HREiR researcher representatives directly consulting with colleagues in their respective Schools, considering feedback from researchers via the Early Career Researcher Network (ECRn) and representation on Research Committee, and collating feedback from policy focus groups, for example those associated with the development of the Research and Innovation Strategy and research culture workshops. Our research community's views were also collected and considered using anonymised surveys, including participation in the CEDARS in 2021 and 2023, and University-wide pulse surveys. Pulse surveys are conducted at least twice a year, enabling ongoing review of progress and development as well as identification of any emerging issues.

One prevalent theme emerging from qualitative and quantitative feedback mechanisms was the variability in awareness of relevant support initiatives, policies and processes across the University, from both a researcher and manager perspective. Thus, our forwards-looking plan has a range of targeted actions that particularly seek to address this issue. We consulted the ECRn Organising Committee on the appropriateness of our future plans, including proposed mechanisms to improve communications with the researcher community. Directors of Research were also asked to comment on the draft action plan, to ensure credibility and buy-in from senior leadership within our academic Schools.

Wherever possible and relevant, we have ensured that the HREiR action plan is linked with existing quality assessment mechanisms and action planning such as those associated with relevant strategies (eg EDI Strategy), awards (eg Athena Swan), and Concordats (eg Research Integrity). This is achieved via cross-representation of key individuals on these groups to avoid duplication and to share best practice. For example, the Head of People Operations & Inclusion represents the EDI Strategy and associated action plans on the HREiR WG to ensure that we have a researcher-focused lens on EDI reporting.

3.   Key achievements and progress

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

The development and launch of a new corporate plan; Ambition 2027 and Research and Innovation Strategy provided an excellent opportunity to reflect on how we enable a supportive and inclusive research culture as an institution. Our strategies were developed following extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, with 14% of our researcher community participating in consultation workshops and focus groups (ECI6). Further notable achievements include:

- Significant work was undertaken to ensure that the researcher voice is embedded within our institutional policy making. This included establishment of the ECR Network (ECRn) as a collective voice for the community. The ECRn also aims to: build an inclusive and supportive platform for ECRs – including research students, PDRAs and early career lecturers; develop a stronger sense of community for ECRs across all four schools; provide opportunities for promotion, collaboration, and career development. The ECRn Chair (a contract researcher) now holds a formal role on the University Research Committee, and we ensure that researcher representatives are included in all discussions aimed at creating a positive research environment and culture within the institution (ECM5, ECR5).
- Cranfield University was named in the Top 30 Employers by Working Families charity, in recognition of our flexible and family-friendly policies and practices (ECI2).
- Our institutional Pulse surveys continue to have good engagement, with a 61% response rate in the most recent survey, and we have introduced a job family question to enable us to better understand the working experience of researchers specifically, as well as other groups (ER4).
- Participation in CEDARS increased, from 9% in 2021 to 16% in 2023 for researchers and 13% to 24% overall. We aspire to further increase survey response rates over the coming period to ensure that our survey results are as robust as possible and represent the views of the majority of our research community (ECI6).
- The launch of Report and Support, a new tool and mechanism to enable staff and students to report unacceptable behaviour, as well as access different channels and forms of support for mental health and dignity at work. This platform is explicit that we expect Cranfield to be a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for our community (ECR4)
- The re-launch of the HR Excellence in Research Working group, constituted with researchers from each of our four Schools (three of whom are contract researchers) to help shape, challenge and support implementation and awareness of our action plan (ECI6)
- We published Ethnicity Pay Gap information for the first time (ECI2)
- The launch of our new Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy and School EDI Committees, with researcher representation. (ECI2)

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

We are pleased to have made progress on a number of areas that demonstrate the value Cranfield places on its research staff. Examples include:

- Full introduction and establishment of hybrid working model, giving far more flexibility to staff in their working lives (ECM4)
- Relaunch of our Senior Academic Promotions Process with clearer criteria, transparency and consideration of personal circumstances, as well as specific sections where candidates must explain their achievements in terms of EDI, leadership and management, and citizenship to ensure that excellent people management is embedded in our reward processes (EI3, EI5)
- Benchmarking of our salary scales has commenced, to ensure our pay for researchers remains competitive (EI3)

- Introduction of recruitment dashboards to track diversity in our recruitment pipeline, through to shortlisting, through to offer stage, to assess the inclusivity of our policies and processes (EI1)
- Became signatories of DORA and realigned institutional research assessment processes (including promotions and contribution models) with a clear focus on quality over quantity and ensuring that the whole range of academic research activities is considered (EI3).
- Career development support – improved guidance on the promotion process and sessions held at career development events (EI3)
- Significant training programme to over 60 line managers of Researchers covering finance and people management, including career development and progression (EM1)
- Enhancements to some of our family friendly policies, including reducing the qualifying contract period for maternity entitlement, which applies to all staff contract types so is open to our contract researchers.

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 and an ongoing focus for Cranfield University. None-the-less, we are proud of the progress that has been made against our strategic targets in this area, for example:

- 92% of eligible researchers engaged in a Performance and Development review in 2023, a cornerstone of this process is reflecting on past learning and development, future needs and career aspirations. In one School, 100% of researchers completed the review. (PCDM1, PCDR4)
- Established a new cross-institutional ECR Network, led by contract researchers and bringing together research students, researchers and early-career lecturers to provide opportunities for leadership, collaboration, career development and as a powerful voice for the ECR community (PCDI1, PCDR5)
- Introduced ringfenced pot for ECRs in our Higher Education Innovation Fund allocations, supporting our researchers to collaborate with industry and non-academic partners. Applications led by researchers more than doubled as a result, providing greater opportunity to gain experience with different employment sectors (PCD15).
- An expansion of the provision of our Researcher Development Programme, resulting in a significant increase in researcher participation: from 83 attendances by 49 individuals in 2021, to to 148 attendances by 69 individuals in 2023, with positive feedback from participants (PCDR2).
- National Career week March 2022, we ran several events and working life hub sprints including apprenticeships, mentoring, internal interviewing skills, career wellbeing, career planning, exploring career options. (PCDI3)
- The launch of our Excellence in Scholarship Programme, supporting researchers, academic and technical staff to understand and enhance the quality of their research outputs and outcomes via a programme of training and formative annual review with 1-2-1 feedback - a key opportunity for researchers to develop their research identity and leadership skills (PCDR5).

4.   Future plans 2023-2026

The launch of the new Corporate Plan, Research and Innovation Strategy, and People Strategy in 2022 was accompanied by a wide range of supporting initiatives aimed at improving and enhancing the culture and working environment for our researchers. However, we recognise that success in delivering our new strategies is contingent on embedding cultural change at all levels across the institution. Therefore, our primary focus over the next three years will be ensuring effective communication and consistent implementation of our policies, practice and underpinning values, so that all our whole community will reap the benefits. We are particularly cognisant of the need to use

a variety of messaging approaches combined with more targeted communication channels to ensure this reaches researchers and managers in a more effective way, and to utilise summary engagement data to facilitate discussions with individual research centres where we identify patterns of low engagement.

We have taken a decision to focus on key areas of the Concordat for our forward-looking action plan and have noted (via the action plan comments section) areas where we feel the Concordat obligations are already fully embedded in existing practice, or not deemed a priority by our researcher community. This more focussed plan will help ensure that we are able to fully commit to and deliver against our priority areas, without overextending the available resources or reducing the effectiveness of our communication strategy.

4.1   Priority actions and areas

- **Building on the success of our newly established ECR Network** by increasing participation and engagement with the Network via a promotional campaign (including bitesized videos, meetings with Centre leads) and an enhanced researcher induction process, aiming for over 50% of the researcher population to be engaged by 2025-26 (ECR1).
- Creation of **a new researcher bulletin**, with 'spotlight' articles to highlight opportunities, policies and issues of particular relevance to the researcher community, to help provide a clear, reliable and targeted communication channel (ECR4, ECR5, PCDR5).
- A **proactive messaging campaign**, utilising a variety of approaches to **reach staff at different levels of the organisation**, including revised induction process, refreshed intranet, briefings at School meetings, bite-sized videos, infographics, researcher bulletin, regular meetings with Centre Heads (recognising that broader School and Thematic level communications are not reaching all staff) to:
    - Encourage greater participation in and engagement with the ECR Network (ECR1)
    - Improve awareness and understanding of research-related policies (ECI2)
    - Increase awareness of avenues for researchers and their managers to raise concerns, including the new report and support tool, EDI Groups, dignity at Cranfield policy (ECI3)
    - Promote the requirement for a minimum of 10 days professional development time, guidance on activities that count towards the 10 days and mechanisms to track this (PCDI1, PCDM3, PCDR3).
- Further **development of the promotion process** at the researcher to lecturer transition boundary to increase transparency and consistency of promotion decisions, accompanied by specific training to help researchers understand the process and how to progress their careers (EI3).
- Increased **focus on Research Integrity oversight and training**, with the development of a Research Integrity Action Plan and specific inclusion of integrity within the remit of our expanded ethics committee (ECI5, ECM2, ECR2)
- **Increasing oversight/monitoring of implementation of our policies**, practice and underpinning values (via annual Excellence in Scholarship Review, expanded ethics committee, engagement/compliance summaries discussed with Centre Heads) to ensure that:
    - All managers are acting in accordance with the Concordat, and we can identify and address any barriers to implementation of our action plan.
    - Our researchers are supported to engage in a minimum of 10 days professional development time (PCDM3, PCDR3).
    - We better understand engagement patterns with development activities by researchers and their managers, eg Researcher Development Program, ECR Network (PCDI1, ECR1, EI4, EM1, PCDR5).
- **Improved mechanisms to track the impact of our interventions**, including introduction of researcher focus groups, trialling the random selection of participants from the pool of researchers, to increase the representativeness of our feedback (ECI3, ECR2 ECR3).