Developing Excellent Researchers: two year self-assessment report summary for the HR Excellence in Research Award 2014-16.

1. Background

In 2014, following a successful external evaluation, Newcastle University was amongst the first 10 universities to retain the HR Excellence in Research Award for a further 4 years. This award is in recognition of our on-going commitment to promoting the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. In addition to maintaining the good work already taking place, our new plan embraced the challenge of embedding the good practice at a faculty level. This report outlines the challenges, approaches and significant progress we have made towards achieving our objectives and also outlines some new initiatives we will be working towards for the next two years.

2. How the review was conducted

The 2014-16 action plan was agreed by Staff Committee and University Research Committee (URC) and progress monitored by quarterly meetings of the steering group (comprising of representatives from Human Resources (HR), Faculty Deans of Research, Faculty Research Support and Research Enterprise Service). In order to embed and ensure actions and activities were owned and aligned to the Faculty strategies, this monitoring was devolved to Faculty based groups (comprising of research staff, Research Staff Support, Faculty Deans of Research and Faculty Research Support). The actions and feedback from these groups was then collated and reported into Staff Committee and URC. Research staff were consulted and invited to input their ideas through Employee Opinion Survey (EOS) and Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS), research staff networks and the mail base.

3. Key achievements

We have progressed or completed the vast majority of the actions from our 2014-16 implementation plan (Progress against implementation plan 2014-16). For example:

3.1 Embedding HR Excellence in the Faculties

We have taken on board the comments from our external assessors’ report in 2014:

“It was noted that the 2/3 institutional representatives who joined the conference call were based in Human Resources which implies the process is being driven through HR. The review panel noted that there may be a risk that the action plan is not currently embedded in the academic community more broadly.”

This highlighted the problems of the “HR Excellence in Research Award” appearing to have been driven by HR. Under the umbrella “Developing Excellent Researchers” the Faculties are taking ownership of this agenda. The Institutional lead for this initiative is Professor Daniel Zizzo, Dean of Research and Innovation in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS). This allows the HR Excellence in Research initiative to share visibility with other strategic institutional projects. We looked at how the agenda was driven and concluded that working groups within each Faculty (including early career research staff (ECRS)) would be more effective in developing and moving forward new projects and actions.

3.2 Internal Fellowship schemes

The University is committed to recruiting, developing and retaining researchers of the highest calibre. The University has created the Research Excellence Academy to create fellowship and PhD opportunities to support a number of the best ECRS from their Post-Doctoral position to gaining independent funding. For example in the Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMS) ECRS can apply for Faculty Fellowships and Newcastle University Faculty Fellowships Newcastle University Research Fellowship Scheme - Faculty of Medical Sciences - Newcastle University. This provides a pipeline from PhD to independent researcher status. Faculty fellowships are also available in the Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering (SAgE).
3.3 ECRS networks
In addition to researcher networks at school and institute level, we have been working to encourage networks across the faculties. Launched in 2015, SAgE have hosted two ECRS lunches – an introductory network meeting and a “development lunch” where Post-Doctoral researchers and other research staff early on in their careers had the opportunity to meet their Faculty Research Funding Team and a Staff Development Unit (SDU) representative to discuss development and funding opportunities. SAgE ECRS have a mailing list and also hold regular sub-committee meetings with a representative from each school. HaSS have instigated a Researcher Forum, hosted by the Faculty Research Dean, which holds three meetings a year for staff to raise concerns and discuss ideas. In FMS the ECRS working group meets regularly to discuss concerns and input into agendas concerning early career researchers.

3.4 ECRS Representation on committees
ECRS are eligible to stand for nomination to Senate and sub-committees of Senate. As part of our action plan faculties have audited representation of ECR on committees and recommendations have been made to include representatives where appropriate. For example in SAgE there is now an ECRS representative on Faculty Research and Innovation Committee (FRIC) – SAgE appointed an ECRS representative to the FRIC in 2015 and the representative raises issues from ECRs and also reports back to the ECRS network on items of relevance.

4. Key challenges
The period following the award renewal has seen significant changes in senior staff at the University with responsibility for research excellence. Two of the three faculties have had both new Pro-Vice-Chancellors (PVCs) and new Deans of Research, who were also new to the University. The third faculty is currently undergoing changes in research dean. There have also been changes within our HR teams including a new interim Executive HR Director. These changes have given us a fresh perspective and, along with strategic projects launched following Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 results, have led to a shift in priorities and as a result some of the actions in the 2014-2016 plan have been revised.

5. Evaluation and monitoring
We collect and encourage feedback from our research staff following events and also take part in institutional employee opinion surveys and external surveys (CROS/Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS)). In order to embed and make this agenda part of core activity we have used regular quarterly meetings with research deans to monitor progress against actions and revise if necessary. At an institutional level, Staff Committee and URC have an overview and we are currently developing more formal reporting status by proposing a new sub-group of URC. As well as providing a direct route for ECRs to feed ideas into Faculty based working groups and the URC sub-committee, this approach will help mitigate the impact of future changes in key stakeholders. We have also included feedback and ideas from researcher networks and mail base to inform our ongoing plan (Developing Excellent Researchers: 2016-18 Concordat implementation plan).

6. Next steps
Further changes are underway with the Staff Development function taking an organisational development approach moving forward. This approach will lend itself well to the “Developing Excellent Researchers” agenda by enabling the policy, staff development and processes to align to support the strategic aims of the University and the career development of research staff. Priority areas for 2016-18 are to:

- Review and develop mentoring provision to enable ECRs to benefit from support from an appropriately skilled mentor.
• Develop a reporting structure which facilitates the embedding of the HR Excellence in Research Award actions within the Faculties.
• Review and develop how we communicate with research staff to better enable them to navigate development provision and support and also to improve two way dialogue to ensure appropriate feedback and input.
• Develop opportunities to maximise our ability to attract top talent through Research Excellence Academy and Research Investment Fund investment in post-docs and fellowships.