

HR Excellence in Research Award Summary Report
University of Manchester
September 2026

1. Institutional Research Context

The University of Manchester (UoM) employs more than 12,500 academic, research and professional services staff across three multidisciplinary Faculties: Biology, Medicine and Health (FBMH), Humanities (HUMS), and Science and Engineering (FSE). Since securing the HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiR) in 2011, successive action plans have focused on improving support and development for research staff: those whose primary responsibility is to conduct research and who are usually funded through external grants and contracts. This group includes research assistants, associates and fellows, and is a diverse, fluid cohort of c.1,800 staff. They are the principal audience for our Researcher Development Concordat, although actions increasingly involve academic managers and professional services colleagues who shape the research staff experience.

Research staff make a significant contribution to the University's research and teaching ambitions. In October 2025, the University launched its 10-year strategic plan, *From Manchester for the World*, committing to 'lead the UK in ambitious, inclusive research and careers' and to enable colleagues to thrive in a culture that values creativity, inclusion and collaboration.

The Concordat also supports UoM's research culture and EDI priorities. Since our last HREiR Award, we have launched the Research Culture and Environment Framework and [Hub](#). The Researcher Development team works with EDI Academic Leads and Professional Services Charter Mark leads to align HREiR activity with Athena Swan, the Race Equality Charter, Disability Confident activity and emerging disability charter mark work. Shared priorities include Prosper at Manchester, targeted development for underrepresented researchers, inclusive support for disabled researchers, and improved access to mentoring, sponsorship and development opportunities.

2. Governance and Decision-Making

Research staff development is championed at senior level, with the Vice-President for Research holding overall responsibility for HREiR action plans and the Research Staff Strategy Group (RSSG), chaired by the Associate Vice-President for Research, overseeing delivery. RSSG brings together faculty academic leads, research staff representatives and central Professional Services partners, including the People Directorate, the University Academic Lead for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, the Library and Researcher Development. It meets four times a year, reports to Research Committee and Research Operations Group, and supports annual Concordat updates. Research staff representation is embedded through RSSG and faculty and school research committees, ensuring priorities inform institutional, faculty and school decision-making.

3. Summary of Progress and Achievements Against 2023-26 Plan

Since the last award, the University has embedded Concordat activity more firmly into institutional practice, with progress reviewed through RSSG and informed by the University's 2025 and 2026 Your Voice Matters surveys. Supported by RSSG updates, newsletters, the Research Staff Handbook, the Researcher Development SharePoint hub and induction activity, Concordat awareness rose from 62% of research staff in 2023 to 76% in 2026, exceeding the 75% target. Research staff representation has also strengthened: all nine Schools now have research staff representatives on Research and Innovation Committees, and the research staff reps network covers all three Faculties. These changes have improved visibility and routes for research staff voice. Progress is also evident in confidence in research misconduct processes and mentoring engagement, while job security, recognition, development time, disability inclusion, and consistent PI and manager support remain priorities for 2026-29.

Researcher feedback directly shaped institutional practice during 2023–26, particularly in communication, development support and employment practice. Through open meetings, reps’ forums and RSSG, research staff asked for clearer, more accessible information about opportunities and support. An initial proposal for a Teams channel was tested with researchers, but feedback showed Teams was not widely used. We therefore developed the Researcher Development SharePoint hub as a more accessible central route to information, guidance and resources.

Feedback also informed institutional processes. During development of the new ‘Excelling at Manchester’ performance and development review process, materials were reviewed from a research staff perspective and reps were invited to comment. They highlighted that generic guidance did not fully reflect research roles. In response, a distinct review form and guidance were developed for researchers, making career and development conversations more relevant.

Researcher feedback also prompted changes to employment-related processes. Reps raised concerns that a lack of provision for salary progression within grant budgets could limit opportunities for promotion, despite promotion decisions being independent of grant funding. In response, guidance was added to the project costing tool, encouraging PIs to consider potential promotion costs when developing budgets, helping to address this perceived barrier. Consultation on the Talent Bench project showed that research staff were seeking practical ways to improve job stability within the constraints of externally funded research. This learning shaped the 2026–29 plan, broadening the focus to include alternative stable roles such as the Roving Researcher pilot and exploration of bridging funding.

3.1 Barriers and Challenges

Delivery of some 2023–26 actions was affected by changes in institutional context, capacity and ownership within key partner areas. Personnel changes in the People Directorate reduced sustained sponsorship and operational capacity, particularly for the proposed talent bench pilot, which progressed more slowly than planned. Changes to performance and development review processes also created uncertainty about the best route for embedding research staff career conversations. In addition, the move to an annual institutional colleague engagement survey (Your Voice Matters), with centrally defined questions, limited local survey activity and required us to adapt our evidence-gathering.

These challenges have directly informed the 2026–29 plan. Future actions have clearer ownership, stronger senior sponsorship and more realistic delivery dependencies. Where People Directorate input is needed, support from the Executive Director of People has been secured to help resolve dependencies and intervene earlier when risks or delays emerge. RSSG will continue to monitor delivery and escalate issues as required. Where actions depend on wider institutional change, such as performance review reform or systems transformation, we will align with existing programmes rather than duplicate effort. Evaluation will combine institutional survey data with targeted qualitative feedback from research staff, PIs and managers.

4. Internal Evaluation, Gap Analysis and Stakeholder Involvement

We used the following process to identify, prioritise and approve actions for the 2026-29 action plan. It was designed to ensure that the agreed actions can be traced directly to evidence gathered through evaluation and consultation.

- a. A researcher-specific question set was included in the 2026 Your Voice Matters staff survey to identify areas requiring further institutional attention and provide the initial evidence base for action planning.
- b. Survey results were shared and discussed with a specially convened meeting of RSSG.
- c. Survey results were shared with research staff via an open meeting and with PIs at a focus group. Participants were invited to discuss the findings, raise issues not captured by the survey, suggest potential actions, and provide feedback on proposed actions through facilitated small-group discussions. Online Padlets were used so that colleagues could contribute online.
- d. The Researcher Development Manager joined each Faculty research staff reps forum to share emergent consultation findings and gather further views on the issues and potential areas for action.

- e. Issues raised were developed into an action long-list, mapped against HR Excellence in Research Award obligations, and prioritised by RSSG based on evidence, institutional priorities, deliverability and potential to address the identified gaps.
- f. The prioritised actions were reviewed and approved by Research Committee before finalisation.

This process identified five priority areas for the 2026–29 plan:

- a. **Job security** – This continued to be the lowest rated measure in the survey, with just 24% of research staff agreeing that they have good job security and 82% identifying it as a top future priority for UoM. In all consultation meetings, research staff and PIs stressed the centrality of this issue. Given the strength and consistency of feedback across the engagement activities, RSSG agreed that job security must remain a priority for the 2026–29 plan, and so selected obligation 11.
- b. **Recognition** – In the staff survey, research staff reported low satisfaction with recognition (35% favourability). This theme was reinforced during the direct consultation, with staff highlighting specific areas where recognition is underdeveloped, including recognition of research contribution and appreciation from local leaders. The consistency of these findings led RSSG to select recognition as a priority area for action in the forward-looking plan and to choose obligation 8.
- c. **Enabling research staff to take up training and CPD** – During consultation, and in the survey, we identified that there are now myriad opportunities for research staff to engage in CPD and 73% reported satisfaction with CPD on offer. However, staff told us that there remain barriers to engagement including manager support and time (61%). To address this, we have proposed further guidance and training for managers of researchers on supporting research staff to engage in CPD and to raise further awareness of the Concordat. These findings indicated that the priority for the next plan should be enabling access to development opportunities, rather than increasing the volume of provision available, leading to the selections of obligations 12 and 16.
- d. **Strengthening management and leadership support for PIs and managers of researchers** – Relatedly, consultation with researchers and their managers indicated that there is limited and inconsistent development opportunities for managers of researchers and new PIs. In the PI focus group and research staff reps meetings, we heard how new PIs – or those returning to the role after some time – were not given adequate support to effectively lead or manage their teams. Onboarding and induction for research staff and managers were also repeatedly raised, alongside gaps in awareness of key policies and processes, e.g., finance. Taken together, RSSG noted that development, induction and onboarding for managers of researchers should be a priority area for the 2026–29 plan, leading to the selection of obligations 1, 7, 4, 13 and 10.
- e. **Supporting the career development of disabled researchers** – disabled researchers continue to report lower satisfaction rates, across the board, than their non-disabled counterparts in the staff survey. Engagement with the Realising Disability Inclusion project team, comprising disabled research staff and academics, told us that there was a strong desire for targeted leadership training for disabled researchers and that the pilot training they had run in 2025 was vastly over-subscribed and well evaluated. These findings led RSSG to prioritise this area by selecting obligation 4.

4.1 Selected Concordat Obligations

Obligation	Evidence from consultation	Gap addressed	Institutional link
1: Awareness and Engagement	Only 31% agreed that reasons for change are well communicated; consultation also showed	Improves access to information, visibility of change, and feedback loops showing how	Supports M2035 ambitions for inclusive research careers and a culture where

	low awareness of key policies and procedures.	research staff input is used.	colleagues have the information to work well.
4: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Survey and consultation evidence show persistent inequalities for disabled research staff, including lower favourability on belonging, culture and contribution.	Strengthens disabled researchers' career development and improves inclusive management for underrepresented research staff.	Aligns with Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter, Disability Confident and emerging disability charter mark work.
7: Recruitment and Induction	Consultation highlighted inconsistent onboarding and variable access to HR, finance, Pure and development information.	Provides earlier, clearer signposting to policies, support, promotions, Pure and the 10 days development commitment.	Builds stronger research teams by improving early belonging, clarity and confidence for new research staff and fellows.
8: Recognition, Reward and Promotion	Only 35% feel recognised; 43% selected recognition and reward as a priority. Consultation highlighted credit, authorship and local acknowledgement.	Improves recognition, promotion feedback, visibility of contributions and specialist career progression routes.	Supports fairer career pathways and recognition of the full range of contributions to research excellence.
10: People Management	Local management is a relative strength, but staff cited PI/manager support and lack of development guidance as CPD barriers.	Improves support for new and returning PIs and strengthens consistent line management for research staff.	Supports inclusive, well-managed and development-focused research teams.
11: Job Security	Job security was the lowest scoring area: 24% favourability, a 40-point gap with academic staff, and 82% selecting it as a priority.	Reduces fixed-term contract anxiety and improves support for transitions between roles.	Supports sustainable research careers and a more resilient research workforce.
12: Championing Professional Development	Although 73% report access to development, uptake is constrained by workload, unclear pathways and limited support for CPD time.	Improves use of training, visibility of the 10 days commitment and support for protected development time.	Enables staff to build skills, confidence, networks and future career options.
13: Career Development Reviews	Consultation showed only around half of research staff feel their career aspirations are being met; PDR reform offers a route to improve guidance.	Strengthens manager-led career conversations and meaningful development planning.	Embeds career development as a normal part of research roles.
16: Diverse Careers	Research staff want more career support: 37% selected career management, 35% leadership, and 33% diverse careers as priorities.	Improves access to diverse careers training and manager support for varied career pathways.	Supports inclusive research careers and recognises movement across sectors as valuable.

5. Alignment with Wider Institutional Frameworks and Monitoring

Concordat activity is integrated with the University's wider research, culture and EDI priorities. The 2026–29 action plan supports institutional aims to lead ambitious, inclusive research and careers, and to attract, retain and develop excellent research teams. Its priorities on research culture, employment conditions, recognition, career development, PI support and job stability align with Athena Swan, the Race Equality Charter, Disability Confident activity, emerging disability charter mark work and specialist and technical career pathways. Integration is supported through shared leadership and governance: the AVP portfolio links research culture and researcher development, while RSSG, Research Operations Group and Research Committee provide joined-up oversight of progress, risks and emerging needs.

6. Strategic Plan for the Next Three Years (2026–2029)

6.1 Vision and Intended Change

In environment and culture, our vision is that all research staff experience Manchester as an inclusive, supportive and rewarding place to build their careers, regardless of Faculty, discipline or personal circumstances. The intended change is to make support, opportunity and recognition more consistent across the institution. Building on the gap analysis, the University will strengthen recognition of research staff contributions, improve support for disabled researchers, build inclusive management practices, and help PIs and managers create inclusive environments in which research staff can thrive.

In employment practice, our vision is that research staff can navigate career transitions with confidence, supported by timely advice, development opportunities and approaches that maximise continuity of employment where practicable. Job stability remains the most persistent concern. The 2026–29 plan will therefore reduce avoidable uncertainty linked to fixed-term employment by strengthening end-of-contract support, providing targeted career development for staff in the final six months of contract, using protected development time within extended notice periods, exploring internal opportunity matching, and piloting a 'Roving Researcher' model.

In professional and career development, the intended change is to move from growing a strong development offer to ensuring research staff can realistically access and benefit from it. Although provision is available and valued, barriers to training and CPD remain. The plan will focus on embedding the 10 days development commitment, improving career conversations through Performing at Manchester guidance, manager training and the PI Toolkit, sustaining targeted support for Global Majority research staff, improving support for disabled researchers, and expanding access to Prosper and diverse careers support.

6.2 Priorities by Concordat Pillar

Environment and Culture: The forward plan will strengthen conditions for research staff to feel informed, included and recognised as part of the research community. Priorities include clearer communication, reliable engagement routes, better use of data to reach research staff and PIs, and more inclusive local practice, responding to gaps around recognition, disabled researchers' career development, and PI and manager support.

Employment: The employment pillar will improve consistency, transparency and fairness across induction, onboarding, recognition, progression and end-of-contract support. Priorities focus on job stability, recognition of research staff contributions, clearer promotion feedback, and stronger PI and manager support, reflecting the strongest evidence from the gap analysis around job security and recognition.

Professional and Career Development: This pillar will shift from availability of provision to equitable access and meaningful uptake. Priorities include making the 10 days development commitment more visible and usable, improving career conversations through Performing at Manchester guidance and PI Toolkit resources, sustaining targeted support for Global Majority researchers, improving support for disabled researchers, and strengthening access to mentoring, Prosper and diverse careers support.