Appendix 3: HR Excellence in Research Award Report January 2024
Examples of Effective Practice

The two examples of effective practice outlined below highlight the initiatives that have positively impacted research culture and the researcher experience between January 2021 and January 2024.

1. The Prosper Principal Investigator (PI) Network

Overview

The Principal Investigator (PI) Network is a community of practice led by the Prosper team within the Academy, aimed at addressing the development needs of PIs and managers of researchers and, ultimately, the career development needs of research staff. The PI Network has run 4–6 online events a year since 2020 and is open to PIs and managers of researchers across the UK. Through expert speakers, PI guest speakers and peer-led discussions, PI Network events aim to positively influence the culture within research institutions, developing PI practice and creating an environment that supports and values research staff and the academics who manage them.

The PI Network, with which 120+ PIs are currently engaged, aimed to help managers of researchers and principal investigators to support the career development of their research staff, by sharing best practice and providing peer support and resources. The initiative addresses the career development needs of postdocs by helping their managers to better understand and recognise how to support them. Simultaneously, the initiative addresses the development needs of managers of researchers themselves, who may have had uneven support in their own management and leadership development. It also provides the opportunity for managers of researchers to share their management/leadership experiences (rather than their solely research focussed expertise) and learn from peer-to-peer best practice beyond their own discipline.

Peer-to-peer Learning for PIs and Managers of Researchers

Prosper created a series of events targeted specifically at the development needs of managers of researchers and PIs. The title of the group was chosen to be as appealing to the audience as possible, in the decision to call it a 'network' rather than a 'community of practice'. The PI Network was led by the University of Liverpool in partnership with the University of Manchester and Lancaster University, which enabled further networking across universities. A PI Steering Group consisting of managers of researchers and professional services staff from across the partner institutions informed the creation of the PI Network and provided the initial topics for PI Network sessions. The topics for subsequent sessions were also informed by feedback and suggestions from PI Network event participants. PI Network events were held every 2-3 months, with 4-6 events occurring annually from 2020 onwards. Since its launch PI Network events have been attended by 120 unique PIs from across the three partner institutions. The topics chosen aimed to support and develop the skills of both the participants and those they manage.

Topics have included:
- The mutual benefits to supporting research staff career development
- The PI-postdoc relationship
- Career conversations
- Supporting staff wellbeing
- Management and leadership practices
- Creating inclusive research communities.

Sessions are facilitated by professional services staff and consist of one or more expert speaker, with several opportunities for participants to share their own experiences and ask questions in group discussions. Many of the PI Network events also include guest PI speakers, who are

managers of researchers invited to speak about a particular issue or opportunity relevant to the theme of the session. Therefore, PI Network events aimed to be informative and provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.

Engaging, Inclusive and Accessible events
PI Network events were held online to allow managers of researchers based at the separate partner institutions to attend. Following each event, recordings, workbooks, briefings, shared learnings and other resources were created and made freely available on the Prosper portal for anyone (based at the partner institutions and since summer 2023 to the whole sector/publicly) to access and learn from. PIs and managers of researchers are busy, pulled in many directions whilst trying to maintain and progress their own research programmes. Postdoc career development may not always feel like an important priority to a manager with many other demands on their time, and engaging with an initiative aimed at helping PIs to better support postdoc career development may seem even less so.

The PI Network took a multi-pronged approach to addressing the challenge of PI engagement. Firstly, we took a proactive approach to dispelling myths around the issue, using research-based evidence to demonstrate the value of supporting postdoc career development to the postdocs, their research projects and the PIs themselves. Secondly, we worked with the willing. Whilst those who objected to the idea of supporting postdoc career development were vocal, the majority of PIs and managers of researchers we encountered were very positive and open about their own development needs. We focussed our limited resources on engaging with those who were already interested and aimed to change academic culture around the dissenting minority. Finally, we worked to include peer-learning in all PI Network events, including group discussions, PI case studies and guest PI speakers who shared their own experiences. With consent, we also included the shared learnings and quotes from managers of researchers in the asynchronous resources that resulted from each event and were made available on the PI Network area of the Prosper portal.

Aligning the PI Network with the Concordat Principles
Environment and Culture: The PI Network initiative aims to positively influence the culture within research institutions, by working with managers of researchers to develop their own management practice and create an environment that supports and values research staff and the academics who manage them. From 2023, the PI Network is open to PIs and managers of researchers across the UK.
Employment: The PI Network events included themes that supported managers of researchers in having regular constructive performance management with their researchers and other management practices.
Professional and Career Development: The PI Network events informed the creation of the Managers of Researchers area of the Prosper portal, an area that allows managers to support their postdoc's career development, develop their own leadership and management skills, foster a positive and inclusive working environment, stay up to date with trends and best practices in career development, and learn from other managers of researchers.

The Impact the PI Network – Advancing Relationships Between PIs and Research Staff
Three activities were performed to evaluate the impact of the PI Network. Following each PI Network event, short post-event online surveys were conducted aimed at understanding whether and how the participants found the event useful and what could have been done differently to make the session better for their needs.

After 14 PI Network events, a longer online survey was conducted to assess the overall impact of the PI Network on participants. Prosper also held online focus groups with PIs and managers of researchers to get more responsive feedback, to ask more probing questions and get further

information. Following each evaluation initiative, the findings were reflected upon and changes to procedure, format and content were initiated.

Over 60% of PIs reported that engaging with the network has helped them develop their own knowledge and practice regarding management and support of postdoc career development. Further, 60% PIs were supportive of research staff having more time for career development.

> *"It has provided a focus and prompt for our discussions about career progression."*
> *"Made me more reflexive and also opened up new discussions with postdocs to find out more about their needs and goals."*
> *"Hearing about how other fields approach managing PDRAs is the most useful along with discipline discussions."*

An Ongoing Focus on Empowering PIs
The PI Network supported the creation of a comprehensive set of resources for PIs that is open access: https://prosper.liverpool.ac.uk/managers-of-researchers/, including all previous event recordings from the network's activities: https://prosper.liverpool.ac.uk/manager-of-researchers-resources/the-pi-network/.

Creating a space for PIs in a programme designed to enhance postdoc career development has enhanced PIs' understanding of the value of professional and career development for postdocs and opportunities to consider careers beyond academia. PIs were also more confident in having these conversations with their postdocs. The network is now being expanded to be open to all PIs across the UK and will include more events and activities with a mix of expert speakers and opportunities for peer-led learning.

2. The UoL Research Staff Association Buddy Scheme
Overview
The University of Liverpool's Research Staff Association (RSA) Buddy Scheme is open to all research staff (those on research-only contracts) at University of Liverpool. It provides a structured space/activity for these staff to meet new colleagues, build their networks and share their experiences of working at the university. It was designed as a way for research staff to meet peers at similar career stages across different faculties and create informal support networks. The scheme is led by the University of Liverpool RSA with support from The Academy. Between March 2022 - January 2024, it has run thrice, with the fourth round scheduled for March 2024.

Research Staff-led and -owned Initiative
The Buddy Scheme is promoted as an opportunity for postdocs and early career researchers to enhance their professional, research and social frames of reference. The RSA Steering Committee organised the advertising of the buddy scheme through their weekly e-bulletin and in their local faculties and department networks. Research staff were invited to apply within a 3-week window and then grouped with three-to-four research staff and invited to meet within a 3-week window.

Since the first round of this scheme, based on feedback, it has expanded to be a key part of the induction experience for new researchers supported by the RSA. The RSA Steering Committee take the role of lead buddies for the groups. This enabled more experienced researchers to connect with new researchers, make them feel welcome, answer questions, and help them navigate the university's culture and ways of working. All groups have a mix of disciplinary areas, to support the formation of cross-institutional networks.

Over the 3 rounds of the Scheme between 2022-2023, 91 research staff participated, including:
- 44 from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences
- 18 from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
- 29 from the Faculty of Science and Engineering

Aligning the Buddy Scheme with the Concordat Principles
Environment and Culture: The Scheme enables research staff to actively contribute to the development and maintenance of an inclusive and enabling research culture and be a supportive colleague, particularly to newer researchers. It provides support for researchers in developing a healthy working environment, by encouraging them to take care of their own wellbeing.
Employment: The Buddy Scheme is part of an effective induction process at the university for research staff, by providing an informal way for new researchers to learn about the university processes and ask questions to peers in a safe environment.
Professional and Career Development: The Buddy Scheme helps research staff to build networks cross-institutionally and with individuals who have different development experiences and career aspirations. This enables researchers to recognise different opportunities for their own professional development or career pathway.

The Impact of the Buddy Scheme – Enabling Researchers to Feel More Integrated
Following each round of the Scheme, research staff were invited to complete an evaluation survey which informed the planning for further rounds of the scheme. On average, 80% of respondents reported a good or very good experience of meeting their group. Some of the common highlights of the scheme for the participants were meeting people from other parts of the University at similar career stages and exchanging views on life of as a researcher. They found learning that they have similar challenges/concerns reassuring. Other participants enjoyed taking time out of their day to have a chat with someone new.

> *"The highlight was to meet buddies who are at various stages in their academic career, share my experience of being an early career researcher and learn about their career paths."*
> *"It was amazing to connect with someone who could say, let me know if you need anything for your research from my end!"*

A Success Story: Fostering an Inclusive and Respectful Research Culture
In response to research staff expressing their keenness to contribute more actively to fostering a positive research environment at UoL, the RSA has recently initiated opportunities for research staff to be lead buddies for PGRs in a one-of-it's kind PGR-Postdoc buddy scheme, collaborating with the UoL Postgraduate Researcher Development Network.

The PGR-Postdoc Buddy Scheme has just completed its first round, with 15 research staff and 97 PGRs taking part. Feedback to date indicates that all research staff who took part felt that the buddy group meeting was a good or very good experience. In particular, the research staff enjoyed provided support on PGR-related topics and facilitating conversations between the PGRs. They also appreciated this scheme as a way to develop their own skills in leading group meetings.

> *"It was nice to hear that everyone feels the same on their first year and to provide insight/tips. I also enjoyed that I was able to facilitate a meeting without feeling anxious or nervous and was able to use it as a way to improve my own confidence and skills."*

In all, the RSA Buddy Scheme continues to be a valuable part of building an inclusive research culture and environment for our research staff, from their induction where they can hear from more experienced research staff to their own development, after which they have the opportunity to pass along their own insights to new and emerging research staff.