

Appendix 3: HR Excellence in Research Report 2022

Effective Practice Examples

The three examples of effective practice highlight initiatives that have positively impacted on the researcher experience at the University of Liverpool between January 2020 and December 2021.

1. Research Staff-led Peer Consultation on Human Resources (HR) Policies and Induction Processes

The Initiative

In November 2020, the University of Liverpool Research Staff Association (UoL RSA) consulted with the postdoc and research staff community about general awareness and barriers to accessing Human Resources (HR) policies and induction processes.

A survey focusing on HR policy awareness was distributed to researchers via the UoL RSA mailing list. Feedback indicated that there was a lack of awareness on policies, particularly “dignity at work & study” (less than 26% aware) and “redundancy” (less than 50% aware). However, the research community were more aware of policies relating to “flexible working”, “bullying & harassment” and “diversity & equality of opportunity”, with over 80% of those responding to the survey saying that they were aware and / or had accessed the policy.

In addition, feedback highlighted the requirement for clearer induction processes that went beyond the existing safety or laboratory induction. Researchers emphasised the importance of supporting new starters at the beginning of their role.

Two focus groups were carried out to further unpick the results of the survey and consult on possible enhancements. The first focus group took place in late November 2020 on policies and the second in early May 2021 on the induction process. Comments and ideas were captured using [Mural](#) (an interactive white board). The consensus of the focus group was that the induction process needed to be more holistic and cover a wider range of pastoral, as well as institution-related, information.

Impact on Improvements to Central University Processes

The results of the survey and focus group were shared with HR, who in response created an online induction module delivered via the University’s VLE, Canvas, on [‘Introduction to Working Life at the University of Liverpool’](#) [staff login required]. Alongside this, the RSA informed the development of a ‘virtual marketplace’ highlighting the teams and services that help new staff settle into University life. The marketplace links to the [HR new starter page](#) [staff login required] for practical advice on navigating campus, obtaining equipment and understanding staff benefits.

Further building on RSA feedback, the University is currently establishing a ‘Social Onboarding’ platform that will sit within the University’s central CORE HR system. All research staff new starters will be directed to the platform in their offer letter. The Social Hub will have a variety of tasks that new starters must complete, including signing terms and conditions, obtaining a staff card, lab access, etc. ‘Tiles’ containing useful information on induction, about the city, research staff benefits, car parking and other key topics will be regularly updated, in direct response to RSA focus-group feedback.

Separately, the RSA have used the information from the survey and focus groups to introduce initiatives that augment central and local induction processes. These researcher-led actions are outlined below and have contributed to the overall enhancement of new researchers’ experiences at Liverpool. This has been particularly important for those who have started roles during the pandemic, who have had very little opportunity for face-to-face contact with their wider research groups.

Researcher-led outputs leading to increased awareness and connection with University networks and leadership

Since the focus groups took place, approximately **380** new starters have been invited to a ‘virtual coffee meeting’, hosted by the UoL RSA, via a welcome email that is sent out each month to all new starters on a research-only contract. This email also includes a link to [HR policies and procedures](#) (accessed via staff intranet).

The meeting, which is attended by 10-12 new research staff monthly, provides new starters with the opportunity to meet other researchers and be welcomed to the University by their peers. It creates space for the UoL RSA to informally signpost new starters to information that may be useful to them; to answer any questions they may have and creates an opportunity for RSA colleagues to operate as leaders within their community:

"As an ECR in a department with only a handful of post-doctoral researchers and early career researchers, I began attending RSA coffee events at the beginning of my three-year post in October 2019. I found these informal events beneficial as they made me feel part of the university as my research was mostly solitary and office-based. I then began attending the lunch and learns and became a liaison committee member representing my department. Following this initial role, I then became a co-chair of the RSA between May 2020 and September 2021. Working alongside my fellow co-chairs, deputy co-chairs and with The Academy was the first time I had taken on a formal organisational role at the University of Liverpool. I found this role both rewarding and challenging especially during Covid-19 where every meeting and event was online. It allowed my personal confidence to grow and my professional skill set to become more rounded. I believe I've become a better researcher as a result of the experience, and I'm now more confident about applying for roles and opportunities outside of my research specialism as a result."
(UoL Postdoctoral Researcher and subsequent co-chair of the UoL RSA, 2020-2021)

Additionally, the RSA regularly signpost the [Researcher Hub](#), including this [case study](#) on the working environment at the University of Liverpool. The case study outlines the policies, provision and support that are in place for staff for maternity, paternity, adoption or parental leave and how / where this information can be accessed.

The RSA helped to inform the redesign of the 'work and life balance' area on the Researcher Hub to provide a dedicated [family friendly section](#) that provides a direct link to the UKRSA family leave leaflet, the University's policies and case studies on return to work and parental rights. These resources are supplemented by the [ResDevInYourPJ Series](#) which the RSA co-produced with the Academy at the onset of the pandemic.

The RSA used information from the focus groups to inform the Annual [Research Staff Conference](#), which included a session on the rights and responsibilities of postdocs. The resource is a permanent addition to the Researcher Hub and as with all RSA resources, is frequently linked to via the weekly e-bulletin sent out to all staff on a research only contract as part of the "Did you know?" section. This information is therefore regularly signposted to the 1000+ subscribers of the RSA's mailing list for postdoctoral and early career research fellows.

2. Professional Development Review (PDR) and Career Conversations for Postdoctoral and Early Career Researchers

The Professional Development Review (PDR) at Liverpool is intended to provide an opportunity for a meaningful dialogue between an individual member of staff and their reviewer. Effective PDR conversations are essential for the on-going development of research staff. The focus groups referenced above (see Example 1 of effective practice above), highlighted that PDRs are also an opportunity for researchers to discuss development opportunities and University policies that may be relevant to them.

To help researchers feel well prepared in their PDR meeting and to provide very practical tips to ensure that the PDR conversation works for them, the UoL RSA facilitated a number of events and developed a range of resources with a specific focus on postdoctoral and early career researchers.

Empowering researchers to achieve their personal and professional goals

As part of National Postdoc Appreciation Week 2020, an external facilitator was commissioned to run a session on "Getting the most from your PDR/appraisal". The aim of this session was to help participants to be able to:

- Identify what they want from the PDR process
- Consider what it is probable that their reviewer wants from the process
- Negotiate an appropriate meeting to ensure both sides' requirements are effectively addressed
- Use effective influencing skills to be appropriately assertive and responsive during the PDR/appraisal meeting

There were 44 registrations for the session which was positively received and a [recording of the session](#) [staff login required] was made available on the Researcher Hub.

"Very useful content, presented well, good to have opportunity to interact with questions via the chat. The online format was fine and made it more accessible. Overall great!"
(UoL Postdoctoral Researcher who attended the PDR session in 2020)

Following the focus group feedback, in July 2021 the Academy ran a RSA lunch and learn session [entitled "It's all about you: making your PDR fit with your personal and professional goals"](#). The session incorporated Liverpool case

studies of researchers' PDR situations to foster small group discussions. The aim of this session was to help postdoc and early career researchers be able to:

- Prepare for their PDR conversation
- Manage the power dynamics that might likely exist
- Incorporate both personal and professional goals
- Raise awareness of individual contribution via the PDR

There were 46 registrations for the session, a recording of which was made available on the Researcher Hub. Feedback was so positive that this session will now be repeated annually for postdoctoral and early career researchers before PDR season commences.

"I really enjoyed the practical techniques to deal with worry, and to think about physically crossing worries off. I look forward to trying this"
(Early Career Researcher after attending a researcher wellbeing week event)

"I learned a lot from this session. I thought the 1-hour slot was perfect. The small group discussions about peoples' experiences of the PDR was really useful"
(Postdoctoral Researcher who attended the PDR session in 2021)

Creation of PDR resources accessible throughout the year

Additionally, the University's Prosper Project portal contains content on 'How to hold successful career conversations', written from PI and postdoc perspectives: PI perspective <https://prosper.liverpool.ac.uk/principal-investigators/pi-career-conversations/> [staff login required] and postdoc perspective: <https://prosper.liverpool.ac.uk/postdocs/explore/postdoc-career-conversations/> [staff login required].

A Researcher Hub blog post on [Difficult Conversations – are you ready?](#), written for postdoctoral and early career researchers by a career development and leadership coach, provides advice on how to have a difficult conversation with a manager. A recording of a session on the same topic, facilitated during the National Postdoc Conference 2021, is also available <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/researcher/postdoc-appreciation-week/npdc/programme/c-parallel-sessions/psc4/>

Supplementing PDR conversations, the University's [Statement of Expectations for PIs and Research Staff](#) is signposted in the PDR form and is also disseminated at local levels via Faculty groups.

As a result of this focus on having positive PDR and career conversations, the weekly ebulletin emailed to all staff on a research only contract regularly links to the recorded PDR development sessions, especially in the months leading up to the time when most PDRs take place. Enabling researchers to utilise these resources at a time that suits them is critical to their effectiveness. To date, the online PDR resources have had 535+ hits.

3. Researcher-led Wellbeing Initiatives

The University recognises that work / life balance is not only beneficial to individuals and their families, but also to the University as a whole. The Academy, in conjunction with the RSA, produced a [Researcher Development Commitment and Inclusivity Statement](#), which highlights our institutional commitment to actively embedding equity, diversity, inclusion and wellbeing across all researcher development activities. To help fulfil this commitment, events and resources were developed to enable researchers to recharge and to support the creation of a positive research environment.

Prioritising Researcher Wellbeing

The pandemic made it impossible for staff to access face to face wellbeing opportunities and therefore refreshed, dedicated [wellbeing webpages](#) were redesigned in August 2021 within the Researcher Hub, linking to internal and external resources, including family friendly policies. The pages have received 400+ hits since relaunch.

Supplementing these pages, one of the four key areas of the newly-created [Researcher Development Roadmap](#) is 'Reflect – Personal Effectiveness', which has 3 sub-themes that include numerous resources in a variety of formats on: Contributions to Research Culture, Reflection on Practice and [Resilience and Wellbeing](#).

Additionally, the RSA led two Researcher Wellbeing Weeks across the University, in July 2020 and July 2021. RSA representation in Wellbeing activities continues and RSA reps have been invited to participate in the development of the University's Wellbeing Strategy / Action plan and in planning for University's Wellbeing activities in 2022. Various events were organised and recorded in 2020 and 2021, focusing on PDRA wellbeing in particular: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/researcher/work-life-balance/university-resources/wellbeing-week/>. Over **130** researchers engaged in activities throughout Researcher Wellbeing Week 2021. The rich bank of varied activities remain a permanent resource that researchers can access throughout the year.

Increasing accessibility and engagement with wellbeing activities

Effective support for staff wellbeing requires resources to be flexible and, where appropriate, self-led. To this end, a podcast on how coaching can support postdoctoral and early career research fellows to [maximise their potential and researcher wellbeing](#) has been provided.

Further augmenting this focus on postdoctoral and early career wellbeing, the University developed a dedicated, open-access '[Wellbeing Oasis](#)' for Postdocs, supplemented by facilitated wellbeing sessions for the Liverpool-hosted National Postdoc Conference 2021. The Wellbeing Oasis contains specially curated collections of activities and self-led resources for research staff. These pages and resources continue to be regularly signposted in the RSA weekly e-bulletin to support and prioritise researchers' wellbeing.

Commenting on accessibility of sessions:

"I would have felt reluctant to take a full day away from research, so having shorter sessions worked well for me. Being online also made it easier to be more open in the breakout discussions."
(Postdoc after attending a researcher wellbeing week event)

"All the information was there and it was easy to access. Via zoom meant it fits into my day better than spending time moving to a location on campus for in person event"
(Postdoc after attending a researcher wellbeing week event)

The shared experience of peers provides an authentic voice, particularly when discussing wellbeing. The second edition of [Pathfinder: Adventures in Researcher Land](#), published in November 2021, includes an article from a senior research fellow at the University on their thoughts on creating a positive work / life balance.

A number of [researcher blogs](#) written by postdoctoral researchers from the University of Liverpool and professional coaches, provide tips and advice regarding wellbeing. Titles include:

- [Why wellbeing can't wait](#)
- [The benefits of achieving a calmer life](#)
- [Top tips for Researchers to Energise, Reset and Restore](#)
- [Recognising thinking processes that affect our wellbeing](#)
- [How to be a resilient researcher](#)

The summer Researcher Wellbeing event is a reoccurring annual activity organised by the RSA. It provides an opportunity for research and research-related staff to focus on their wellbeing as well as connect and network with their peers. Plans are in place to recommence the RSA annual BBQ in July 2022, as part of researcher wellbeing activities at Liverpool.