

Appendix 3: HR Excellence Report 2020 – Case Study

This case study of good practice highlights two initiatives that have positively impacted on the researcher experience at the University of Liverpool.

1. The University of Liverpool Research Staff Association (UoL RSA)



Over the past two years the opportunities for support, development and consultation with the Early Career Researcher (ECR) community at UoL have increased remarkably. Whilst developing the [2017-2019 Concordat Action Plan](#), it was recognised that, while part of a wider academic and research community, there were a number of prevailing differences in the employee experience for this group of staff. This case study of the RSA highlights how this association has positively impacted on the development of research staff capability and an inclusive research culture for postdocs and ECRs at UoL.

The Initiative

Following consultation with postdoc networks and groups that were active at local levels across UoL, the Academy collaborated with Vitae and the UKRSA to support UoL research staff to establish their own Research Staff Association. The [University of Liverpool Research Staff Association \(UoL RSA\)](#) is a research community-owned and led initiative. In February 2018, an inaugural meeting of the RSA took place; the agenda for the meeting was for research staff to co-create and co-define the aims of the RSA and to set up a steering group of pan-institutional research staff to run the RSA. There were 80+ attendees at this meeting. The UoL RSA has been designed to be fully aligned with Researcher Development Concordat and the University's commitment to it, particularly Principles 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Upon commencement of their contracts, all research staff automatically become members of the UoL RSA.

Aims and Structure

The aims of the UoL RSA are to:

- Represent a collective voice for research staff from all Faculties, Schools and Institutes on matters affecting researchers.
- Provide a platform for communication and networking amongst research staff both within the schools, institutes and across Faculties and the wider University community.
- Coordinate central support for researcher development with that provided locally by Faculties, schools and institutes.
- Facilitate a borderless community for researchers to make the most of their time at the University of Liverpool.

The [RSA Steering Committee](#) is led by two co-Chairs and two deputy co-Chairs. It consists of liaison committee members that represent 100% of UoL's 16 research institutes and schools. Currently, there are 31 committee members who range from research assistants to research fellows, including two permanent research staff developers representing the Academy. Information about the meetings, including minutes and relevant presentations can be found on the [RSA intranet pages](#) [intranet link].

A Success Story: Building Research Staff Capability and an Inclusive Research Culture

The UoL RSA organises Lunch and Learn sessions every 6 weeks, which are followed by a half hour meeting of the Steering Committee. Diverse groups of individual members are actively involved in organising various events, supplementing the work by the co-chairs and deputy co-chairs. These sessions are also important networking events enabling research staff from different institutes across the University to come together regularly. Sessions organised by the UoL RSA promote continued professional development and have included training on public engagement, REF, the researcher development framework, intellectual property, infographics, and research ethics. The sessions have also promoted internal support structures and funding available within the University including public engagement, mentoring, ECR and returners' fund. Approximately 30 ECRs attend each session, and notable past invited speakers have included:

- The Lancaster University RSA co-chairs, Dr Nathan Case and Dr Lucy Thorne speaking about the benefits of engaging with an RSA and ensuring sustainability.
- Dr Katie Wheat, Head of Higher Education at Vitae discussing the recently-published 2019 Concordat – what it is, why it is important to researchers, and what commitments the University has made in relation to it.

- UoL alumna Nadia Soliman sharing her experiences and leadership development in the Army, from Sandhurst to operations in Afghanistan and the lessons that academia can learn to better prepare academics for the rigours and challenges of academic life.

The RSA's inaugural conference took place in December 2018 titled, "[Enhancing the Research Environment and Researcher Career Progression](#)" focusing on post-doctoral career paths and support networks that are available through the University. 70+ registrations for the event included mainly post-docs and ECRs, coming from across all Faculties. 16.7% of the participants were research-related professional staff, indicating the willingness of all groups across the University to engage with RSA activities, post-doc and ECR matters. Following on from the success of this conference and using the feedback obtained, the [RSA 2019 Conference](#) took place on 11th December 2019 and focused on supporting researchers to take control of their own careers. The day consisted of keynotes, rapid fire talks followed by panel discussions, lunchtime workshops and 1:1 surgeries, an exhibition of resources for research staff development and wellbeing, and a talk by HR on the Rights and Responsibilities of Postdocs. The Conference was also the official launch of the UKRSA guidelines for [researchers taking maternity, paternity, adoption or parental leave and advice for institutions and employers](#). There were 101 registrations for the Conference, from which 72 also registered for lunchtime workshops with the careers team and 25 registering for one-to-one CV clinics. Attendance on the day was approx. 85 people. Information collected from feedback showed that over 95.7% felt the conference was in some way relevant to the needs of an ECR with 60.9% feeling that the conference was directly relevant to the needs of those that attended. 91.3% also felt that the content of the conference was useful for their future needs/career plans.

Postdoc Engagement and Consultation: Listening, co-Creating and co-Designing

In July 2019, based on feedback in which research staff highlighted that they wanted an event focusing on wellbeing, the RSA organised the inaugural RSA Wellbeing Day and Summer BBQ. 35 research staff engaged in a resilience workshop learning ways to adapt to difficult situations; healthy coping strategies for times of adversity; and how to foster perseverance and sustain motivation. 50 participants attended the BBQ and networking session. Planning is underway for the second annual Wellbeing event and BBQ in 2020. Using a non-directive coaching approach, the aim will be to provide a safe, non-judgemental space for postdocs and ECRs to reflect on their career paths while at the same time reflect on themselves and their skills abilities and behaviours.

"As a post-doc, engaging with the RSA has certainly improved the quality of my research experience at Liverpool. The RSA has provided me with a valuable support network for professional development, integration across the University and my everyday working life. Top-level research is just a part of what attracted me to Liverpool, but the positive work environment that has been galvanised by the RSA and the activities that result from consultations with research staff, have offered me important career-building experiences." (Research Staff member of the RSA)

Ahead of UoL's successful bid for the £4.4 million Research England-funded [Prosper Project](#) about 'Enhancing first-time postdoctoral career development and success,' the UoL RSA postdoc members provided critical touch points for focus groups. These consultations endorsed the importance of the time needed by postdocs for reflection, understanding and honing of transferrable skill sets and understanding what employers outside academia are looking for. Equality of opportunity was also explored in depth, given that postdocs are not a homogenous group. Prosper is currently conducting further focus groups with postdocs to help co-create materials, with a suite of resources launched and related activities happening from June 2020.

Celebrating and Recognising Researchers

The UoL RSA actively engages with local and sectoral activities to recognise and thank postdoctoral researchers for the significant contributions that they make to the research and teaching environment. Examples of such initiatives include a series of activities during the [2019 International Postdoc Appreciation Week](#), for which the UoL RSA collaborated with the University of Manchester in sharing all local activities available for postdocs and wider research staff during the week. The UoL RSA also regularly engages with all the [N8 Research Partnership](#) social media campaigns such as [#N8NewPioneers](#), [#N8PostDocs](#) and [#LovePostdocs](#). The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research intensive universities in the North of England, representing the geographical location of mobility for majority of UoL's post-docs and ECRs. The UoL RSA and N8 social media campaigns celebrate and recognise rising stars who have made unique or pioneering advances in their research field, or are creating real world impact through their work by partnering with industry and society.

Outputs, Outcomes and Career Development Benefits

2019 has been another productive year for the UoL RSA building on the success of its inaugural year in 2018. The UoL RSA's success in raising the profile of the needs of research staff across UoL are indicated in their [2018](#) and [2019](#) Annual Reports. Notable outputs and outcomes include:

- 300+ research assistants/associates/fellows engaging annually with the RSA across various events

- 100+ presentations across all the events, facilitated by invited speakers covering a diverse range of topics that are of interest to post docs and ECRs, including, mentoring, intellectual property, career impact, teaching recognition, responsible research and ethics, research policy, careers outside academia.

- Establishment of postdoc and ECR development award funding schemes at local levels, eg: [2019 Technology Directorate Career Development Award](#) (small, independent research project by awarding up to £10k in funding, to be offered again in 2020) and [the School of Physical Sciences Post-doctoral Development Award 2020](#) (a maximum of £2,500 per applicant)

- Building relationships with

"I'm extremely proud to be a graduate of the University of Liverpool and to now work here. As such I'm passionate about affecting a change in the research culture using our alumni to help us do this where possible. This began at a local level as co-lead of the IGH postdoctoral association, and has continued to the University level through my involvement with the RSA. Organising lunch and learn seminars to address training gaps has been a valuable experience giving me useful leadership, finance and networking skills. I was recently awarded a £10k Career Development Award from the Technology Directorate at the University; I feel the panel was impressed with the way I balance my research with the collegiate responsibilities that come with being co-chair of the RSA."
(co-Chair of the UoL RSA)

industrial partners through £600 worth of sponsorship for the 2019 Conference. Sponsors included IBM, Merck, Giftpay and Thermofisher.

- Representation of ECRs on internal panels within the University including the Concordat Steering Group, Research and Impact Committee, Athena Swan, Prosper planning Board, Tender Committee for the UoL Staff Survey

- Showcasing an effective operational structure of an RSA which has been mirrored by forums at departmental/school level across UoL, eg the [IIB Postdoc Society](#) [intranet link]

"Being co-chair of the IIB post-doc society and part of the RSA liaison committee has afforded me the opportunity to sit in a number of Institutional steering groups and management meetings. These opportunities have been invaluable to provide insights into management and overall working relationships and mechanisms in academia. I believe this experience has been key for my transition into a Facility Manager post from a post-doctoral equivalent." (RSA Liaison Committee Member)

- An invitation from Vitae and the UKRSA to present the UoL success as a case study of sectoral best practice at the [Vitae Researcher Development International Conference 2019](#)
- Evidence of additional transferable career development skills such as those depicted in the Vitae Researcher Development Framework from being involved with the RSA:
 - Leadership skills: managing a team of people
 - Finance skills: managing a budget and gaining sponsorship for conference
 - Management skills: organising talks and associated administrative tasks
 - Networking skills: meeting and collaborating with ECRs across the University and professional services staff

"I am in no doubt that being involved in establishing and developing the UoL RSA aided my recently successful fellowship application. The RSA enabled me to meet and network with many people from across the university including researchers, research staff developers and the professional services team as well as highlight numerous opportunities provided by UoL such as: teaching courses, research awards, leadership training and mentoring, all of which I enrolled onto. Not only has the RSA allowed me to develop various skills (leadership, management, conference organisation to name a few), it provides evidential scenarios which strengthen applications" ([Inaugural Chair of the UoL RSA](#))

2. Making an Impact Series



In its [2017-2019 Concordat Action Plan](#) (Sections 3.2.1 and 3.3.1), UoL committed to piloting and evaluating a 'Making an Impact' development week to inform the broader researcher development offer, and to effectively using a HEIF grant linked to Industrial Strategy in order to formulate a benchmark for funding development activity. Based on the achievements of the 2018 activity, further funding was made available for 2019 activity which was such a tremendous success, that the Making an Impact series is now one of UoL's flagship researcher development offerings. All sessions are mapped against the [Vitae Researcher Development Framework](#) to enable research staff, in particular, the talent pipeline of ECRs to explore all aspects of being a researcher; identify their strengths; prioritise areas for professional development; and have productive career development discussions with their managers and/or mentors.

The Initiative

In support of the University's Vision to be *"globally recognised in all our research and impact activities"*, and to help deliver the Research and Impact Strategy which *"is first and foremost about our people; creating the right environment and supporting our researchers at every career stage"* (Strategy 2026, p.6,p.10), The Academy partnered with colleagues from Research, Partnerships & Innovation Directorate to design and deliver [Making an Impact Week](#) in June 2018 and [Making an Impact 2019](#) between the 13th May – 28th June 2019.

Making an Impact was designed as a series of connected development activities focused around the Industrial Strategy priorities and supporting University of Liverpool staff, post docs and ECRs in particular, to develop their multi-disciplinary research-impact related knowledge, skills, attributes and competencies. Initiatives were designed to be offered locally, whilst harnessing external intellectual capital and facilities. The series focuses on four of the five foundations of the Industrial Strategy:

- Ideas: encouraging University of Liverpool staff to explore innovative ideas and solutions in relation to the impact of their research.
- Skills: ensuring participants develop and reflect on skills that will enable their greater contribution to the impact agenda.
- Business environment: supporting participants' ideas around IP and commercialising their research.
- Communities: enhancing the capabilities and impact of multi-disciplinary researchers who advance the communities within which they are based, and the wider UK populace.

The Kirkpatrick model of evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 2009) was applied to evaluate the development impact of both Making an Impact series and to evidence value for money. All participants were contacted 6 months after each Making an Impact series, with a follow-up about the longer term outcomes of the sessions and how they have applied the knowledge, skills and expertise gained in their respective work environments.

Making an Impact Week (MAIW) 2018: Design, Outcomes and Impact on Research Staff

The week-long [programme](#) (MAIW) took place from 11-15 June 2018. It was timed to augment the University's engagement with the [International Business Festival \(IBF\) 2018](#). A mix of external and internal speakers and facilitators engaged colleagues from the University in thinking about research impact – how it can be conceptualised, enriched, supported and sustained. Key numbers included:

- Over 800 registrations, comprising approximately 400 individual participants engaged with 5 days of intensive development activity.
- A total of 90 speakers and facilitators delivered across 28 sessions which included 1:1 surgeries, panel Q&As, facilities tours, keynotes, workshops, micro-seminars and showcases.
- The week was attended by staff from across the University with 42% coming from Health and Life Sciences, 26% from Science and Engineering, 14% from Humanities and social sciences and 17% from professional services.

- The week was evaluated by surveys administered during the activity and was completed by 240 attendees: 87% indicated that the sessions met their expectations. 82% said that the sessions were relevant to their current needs, and 90% affirmed that the sessions were useful to their future needs/career plans.

Feedback from post docs and ECRs of sessions across MAIW were themed:

- The **productive value of their time spent on the development activity**: *“Can apply this information to my whole life and not just work. Stress-free environment, feel good and worthwhile use of my time. Great info, well explained and presented.”* (Session on ‘Developing your resilience’ - postdoc)
- In relation to **knowledge about available resources at the University**: *“Best session all week! I have an impact case but haven’t been updating it. I now know what I need to do and can update more info and link to publications. I had no idea we were expected to be doing this!”* (Session on ‘Recording with Elements’ – academic staff)
- The **valuable first-hand insights from academic colleagues**: *“I really enjoyed the honesty of the presenters who have a large amount of experience in this area. I think it’s important that they talked about the pro’s and con’s of consultancy.”* (Consultancy workshop – research fellow)
- On **raising the profile of research impact-based activities**: *“Definitely encouraged me to think seriously about whether I am doing enough to have impact, giving creative ideas about how I can engage with both experts and non-experts.”* (Session on What impact will your research have? – postdoc)
- The **opportunities to network with colleagues from across the University**: *“This was a lot of fun, really enjoyed meeting people who I never otherwise would have met professionally.”* (Session on Building career impact and networking - postdoc)
- On the **useful application of skills during and post sessions**: *“Very clear presenter, to the point and engaging, great to have time to apply skills in session and get feedback from peers, would recommend”* (Session on Getting attention: Elevator pitching - ECR)

Additionally, a post-6 month survey of MAIW 2018 contributed to informing the design of Making an Impact 2019. Responses highlighted the following post-six month outcomes of MAIW:

- The relevance and importance of knowledge transfer to participants’ research projects
- Increased understanding between researchers and the professional services staff with whom they engage
- Participants more confidently able to explain research-related impact

“The Making an Impact Week 2018 was useful in providing opportunities to see the diverse range of activities undertaken in the University. This contributed in a way towards engagement in enterprising activities... It was also great to see industry partnerships integrated into the space.”
(Post-doctoral researcher)

MAIW met its key objectives and deliverables in relation to the development of staff engagement with research impact. The involvement of diverse stakeholders – ranging from an external Vice Chancellor, leading industry professionals, internal impact-related champions, external development experts, facilities and technicians, academic, research and research-related professional staff – is evident in the [Making an Impact Week 2018 evaluation report](#).

Making an Impact 2019: Design, Outcomes and Impact on Research Staff

Taking place over 7 weeks (between 13th May-28th June 2019), Making an Impact 2019 was even more ambitious, designed to respond to Liverpool’s research staff diversity and their ability to engage with development. It focused on four pillars of the Industrial Strategy:

- Ideas: encouraging University of Liverpool staff to explore innovative ideas and solutions in relation to the impact of their research
- Skills: ensuring participants develop and reflect on skills that will enable their greater contribution to the impact agenda
- Business environment: supporting participants’ ideas around IP and commercialising their research
- Communities: enhancing the capabilities and impact of multi-disciplinary researchers who advance the communities within which they are based, and the wider UK population.

The series continued its aim of supporting, in particular, the talent pipeline of ECRs, to develop their multi-disciplinary research-impact related knowledge, skills, attributes and competencies. The [Making an Impact 2019 Framework](#) was specifically created, consisting of impact clusters and a knowledge and skill axis. Postdocs and ECRs were able to build a tailored training and development experience of the [programme](#) based on their respective research impact needs, ambitions and interests. The keynote was livestreamed, and accessed from 13 remote locations internationally. Communications for the Series included two Twitter competitions that sought to further participants engagement with research-impact related activities: [Impact of Development Weekly Twitter Competition](#) and the [Stories of Impact Twitter Competition](#). The winning entry for the Stories of Impact showcase competition was [Dr Frances Sherratt](#) who developed a video titled ‘Qualitative research in clinical trials’. Fran’s video was selected as the front-runner based on its original approach to showcase research impact across disciplinary, technical and/or other boundaries. It can be viewed [here](#).

Key numbers from the Making an Impact 2019 activity included:

- 150 external and internal speakers provided 58 development sessions consisting of a mixture of workshops, seminars, facilities tours, an informal café, masterclasses, bootcamps, a keynote address, panel discussions, 1:1 surgeries and showcases.
- There were over 1300 registrations from 600 individuals. The activity was attended by staff from across the University with 32% coming from Health and Life Sciences, 27% from Science and Engineering, 18% from Humanities and social sciences and 10% from central services and 13% from other.

Feedback from post docs and ECRs of sessions across Making an Impact 2019 were themed:

- **Establishing networks with other participants from different backgrounds and research areas:** *“I really enjoyed the opportunity to listen and engage with a session outside of my own area and think sessions like this are vital for opening up inter-disciplinary interactions and not just expanding knowledge for the sake of knowledge. More like this please.”* (The Fall and Rise of the Country House - postdoc)
- **Acknowledgement of the expertise and active roles played by research users in making an impact and the usefulness of sessions in terms of information to take back to their teams and delivery partners:** *“I attended to understand how the money is spent on student projects, and this event gave me a valuable insight into the decisions behind these grants and the items being costed. Thus my understanding and connection with the School was clarified and I understood the real world application of the money.”* (Tour of the UoL Formula Motorsport Facilities – research fellow)
- **Working with user stakeholder and participatory groups, and the key research messages that resonate with the diverse groups:** *“Excellent info, very well presented great to hear a real-life case study and so key to be able to meet the contacts at UoL that have they knowledge.”* (Making an impact by engaging with policy makers – ECR)
- **The significance of developing flexible knowledge exchange strategies:** *“I have been thinking about creating a research blog for a few years, but have been stuck at where to begin. Now I have lots of ideas and many tools to help me form those ideas into blog posts. I’ve also received useful feedback on my first draft. Overall, I think this has been very helpful and I am sure to use these tips for my future work.”* (Blogging for Research - postdoc)
- **Developing good understanding of policy/practice contexts:** *“As a research fellow, I wish I had this program during my PhD to give insight into other career paths. I think this offers valuable training in how to convert an idea into a business and would highly recommend to PhD”* (Science Entrepreneur Experience – research fellow)
- **The importance of being visible:** *“I feel I have got a better understanding of how to maximise and demonstrate my research impact, how to write a good proposal for a postdoctoral position for on-going funding.”* (Maximizing and Demonstrating the Impact of Your Research - postdoc)
- **Augmenting a commitment to portfolios of research activity that build up reputations with research users:** *“Excellent session which transformed my understanding of the process for bringing scientific discoveries to market.”* (Science Entrepreneur Experience - ECR)
- **Collaborative reflection on research design and process:** *“I managed to solve a particular problem I had with my own pathway to impact proposal during the session and now feel armed for future bids.”* (Walking down the pathway to impact with everything in hand: developing your communications strategy – research fellow)
- **Immediate impacts on practice:** *“I believe that this will help my future plans and it has already had a positive influence on my current working practices.”* (Creating Stories of Impact – postdoc)

Making an Impact 2019 fostered the conditions where successful businesses could emerge and grow from postdoctoral and ECRs’ ideas, and enable them to explore innovative activities that would contribute to the future of the institution and the wider community. The programme was specifically designed to identify development sessions that would support researchers; [encourage interdisciplinary collaboration](#) and engagement with industries that are of strategic value to the UK economy. Key sessions were successful in their objectives to inspire, nurture and augment the formation of partnerships between researchers, industries and government, and is evident in the [Making an Impact Week 2019 evaluation report](#).

The Making an Impact series has provided a step-change in development practice at Liverpool, in seeking to provide innovative research-impact development opportunities for the pipeline of ECR talent. Reflecting the changing needs of research staff, and the importance of an organic event that is constantly evolving, including consideration of diversity and equality of opportunities for researchers to access development sessions, Making an Impact 2020 will run from 1st – 19th June 2020 and will involve a blended approach to include digital media, including face to face sessions.