

Annual Report for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

Name of Institution	Queen's University Belfast
Reporting period	2022-23 (Sep to Aug)
Date approved by governing body	28/09/2023
Date published online	06/10/2023
Web address of annual report	PDC Researcher Development Concordat page
Web address of institutional Researcher Development Concordat webpage	PDC Researcher Development Concordat page
Contact for questions/concerns on researcher career development	pdc@qub.ac.uk
Date statement sent to Researcher Development Concordat secretariat via CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk	06/10/2023

Statement on how the organisation creates, maintains and embeds a research culture that upholds a positive and inclusive environment for researchers at all stages of their careers (*max 500 words*)

The Research & Innovation Strategic Priority of the University's Strategy 2030 places significant emphasis on nurturing a vibrant research culture, with an ambitious and empowered community of researchers at its heart.

As part of a drive to enhance researcher excellence across career stages, the University has invested in bespoke structures to support research staff (Postdoctoral Development Centre) and fellowship holders (Fellowship Academy), and promotes mentoring and networking between researchers at different levels (e.g. academics and fellows mentoring postdocs, postdocs mentoring PhDs). A considerate effort is being made to enhance the support available to researchers and academics, building on the existing development programme introduced in 2006, including through innovation programmes or Impact Acceleration Accounts, and simplify access to opportunities across the research lifecycle (e.g. via a new intranet site).

As part of its Research Culture Action Plan, the University is delivering initiatives to recognise a wider range of contributions from more staff categories, notably using concepts from the Narrative CV and CREDIT taxonomy. It also widened the eligibility criteria for internal research funding, enabling 51 research staff to receive central funding to attend conferences, training opportunities, develop bids or partnerships, carry out engagement activities etc. in 2022-23, and introduced bridge funding, allowing 6 research staff to remain employed between contracts this year. The Research Culture Seed Fund, which supported 12 projects last year (e.g. promoting opportunities for AHSS ECRs, facilitating collaboration among African researchers, advocating Open Science practices), is now embedded within the Agility Fund.

In addition to work aligned with the Technician Commitment, a strong focus was made of highlighting the important contributions of 'Research & Innovation Professionals', who enable and support research activity, notably by creating an internal network and co-founding an all-island network of research managers and administrators (AiREN), and developing a UK-wide toolkit to examine research culture issues for research professionals.

This work has been the basis for Queen's successful bid to the Wellcome Trust's Institutional Fund for Research Culture. It proposes to establish a pilot Northern

Ireland Research Culture Initiative to foster collaborations between Universities, private organisations and public bodies, and tackle main research culture issues using a collaborative regional approach. The proposal includes a piece of work addressing career support for researchers and engagement with employers in the region, to notably promote mobility across the sector and support the expected economic developments of Northern Ireland through the [Belfast Region City Deal](#).

In addition to activities driven through the Research & Innovation Strategic Priority and Research Culture Action Plan, other institutional initiatives play a critical role in enhancing research culture, including the establishment of a dedicated Open Research Team in the Library, the ongoing efforts of [Queen's Gender Initiative](#) to address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion, and the establishment of a [Race Equality Charter](#) project. In relation to this, a gap analysis and action plan have been completed within the Research & Enterprise Directorate to identify and address any ED&I issues with internal processes linked to research, such as the allocation of internal funding.

Provide a short summary of the institution's strategic objectives and implementation plans for delivering each of the three pillars of the Concordat (environment and culture, employment, and professional development of researchers) for your key stakeholder groups together with your measures for evaluating progress and success (max 600 words)

Environment and culture

The University's Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan for 2021-24 has at its core the establishment of a Postdoctoral Development Centre (PDC), to serve as a central hub and driver for information, initiatives, support and policy for research staff. This includes introducing a dedicated website and extensive programme of activities. The embedding of research staff's voice into the committee structure and throughout the institution is another main feature, with the establishment of the Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group feeding into the Research and Innovation Committee, as well as the PDC Representatives' Network, which includes representatives across the different Schools reporting centrally and locally. One of the additional priorities relevant to this pillar is the development of work-life balance guidance and related wellbeing, resilience and time management resources to promote healthy working practices amongst researchers.

Overall, success will be indicated by the actual introduction of the different structures, committees, resources and workshops, as well as through engagement

and feedback data (for specific initiatives and research staff surveys), and other relevant indicators (e.g. website accessibility score and engagement).

Employment

The 2021-24 Researcher Development Concordat action plan includes a review of induction mechanisms for research staff and the introduction of a bespoke central welcoming session for postdocs and other resources (welcome booklet), to complement institution-wide events and local schemes, in order to help staff settle into their role and environment.

In line with the institutional strategy and Research Culture action plan, a key piece of work aligned with the employment pillar is the development of a 'Research-only' career pathway, including well-defined profiles across a wider range of grades and a progression mechanism. This will inform the development of guidance for appropriate costing of research staff pre-award.

In addition to the promotion mechanism described above, the plan involves other ways of recognising diverse contributions to research, team support, supervision, public engagement and general citizenship, notably via the PDC Postdoc Awards and ensuring the systems we use capture and value researcher contributions.

The action plan also involved reviewing the resources and support available to the line managers of researchers, to raise awareness about good line manager practice, institutional expectations in that space and incentivise positive behaviours (e.g. via leadership training, guidance for career conversations and appropriate promotion criteria).

Success will be demonstrated by actual delivery (e.g. awards, new resources), approval of processes and plans before implementation (e.g. career pathway and promotion mechanism), result of review and recommendations for further actions (e.g. processes for recognition).

Professional Development of Researchers

One of the first priorities for the concordat period is to review the workshop provision for researchers across the university, list them all in the same place (PDC website) and fill any gaps, notably in the areas of leadership, supervision and proposal development. Aligned to this is the introduction of more personalised support via 1:1 meetings by the PDC and the continuation of the postdoctoral group mentoring scheme. From a career's perspective, the concordat action plan includes organising career exploration events and engaging with potential local

employers to promote a range of career options. Putting in place a structure and funding to support postdoc-led activities to promote the development of vibrant community and enable research staff to develop leadership as a result, is another important priority. Finally, another key aspect is to review the policies and practices enabling, supporting and recognising the contributions of postdoctoral researchers to the supervision of students at different levels, including by rolling out the Assistant Supervisor role (for PhD supervision; piloted in one Faculty) across the institution.

Engagement and satisfaction with the overall provision and individual initiatives are the principal indicators of success for these priorities, as well as the approval of policy and guidance by relevant committees for the supervision priority.

Summary of actions taken, and evaluation of progress made, in the current reporting period to implement your plan to support the three pillars in respect of each of your key stakeholder groups [Institution; Academic Managers of Researchers (Deans, Heads of Schools/Departments/Pis); Researchers]

Environment and Culture (*max 600 words*)

Institution

The institutional bullying & harassment policy was reviewed this year, and is due to be approved by relevant committees at the start of 2023-24.

The information on the maternity leave policy and processes on the staff intranet was adapted to provide clearer information to research staff, notably by adding FAQs and fictional case studies covering different situations for people employed on externally-funded fixed-term contracts.

Following from last year, we further improved the accessibility of the PDC website online resources, with captions now added to all training videos (9), PDC recordings (5) and PDC podcasts (31). Approximately 60% of captions have also been manually reviewed for accuracy and the rest will be done progressively. The PDC website itself has reached an accessibility score of 94.6% (more than 10% higher than the industry benchmark), and been visited by more than 8600 users (with close to 18000 page views) this academic year.

A series of information sessions ('Postdoc life') tailored to research staff was provided on topics relevant to culture and to highlight opportunities available to them, including internal funding (conference, training fund...), open research,

teaching certification programme, narrative CV. The 4 sessions attracted 122 people and were rated between 4.5/5 and 5/5, as well as recommended (including the recordings) by 100% respondents.

Academic Managers of Researchers

The role of the PROG (Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group) academic representative was redefined to include more formal engagement with their Faculty senior management starting next year. A workload allocation was also added as demonstration of the importance of leadership in that space. We expect it will enable better flow of information, consultation and embedding of practice relevant to postdocs in Schools. Postdoc representation is now more flexible, with postdocs invited to contribute to a specific topic or initiative based on what they are involved with, enabling more postdocs to contribute and discuss with senior colleagues.

Researchers

The content developed in the past year on work-life balance guidance for researchers and their managers was finalised and made available on the PDC website. It was also completed by a new workshop, 'Time management for productive work and a happy life', which included elements of appropriate work behaviours to adopt for one's and others' work-life balance and promote a healthy culture. It was attended by 8 people, who all recommend it, and rated 5/5. One feedback respondent said "I really appreciated the emphasis on healthy work routines and the impact they have not only on yourself but also on your colleagues. You don't often hear these messages at work! But I think it's hugely important and beneficial to be reminded of this".

Local initiatives in individual Schools, led by postdoc and academic representatives, were organised to promote the development of local research staff communities and a supportive environment. These included welcoming schemes, coffee mornings, research symposia or seminars, game or movie nights, career development events and away days, townhall sessions etc.

Employment (*max 600 words*)

Institution

The PDC postdoc inductions have continued for a second year, with 5 sessions provided for 56 attendees, receiving 100% recommendation and 5/5 rating.

Recruitment for the Illuminate Vice-Chancellor's fellowships resumed in 2023 for the MHLS and EPS Faculties, with two fellows appointed and starting in 2023-24. These fellows will benefit from the support provided by the Fellowship Academy, receive a PhD studentship and a generous starting package, as well as a career track to a permanent senior lecturer or reader position by the end of their fellowship.

Significant work was undertaken during the past year to develop a 'Research-only' career pathway, intended to define a clear academic pathway for those on research contracts, aligned with existing frameworks for those on Teaching & Research and Teaching-only contracts. This is intended to include a promotion process and new roles up to the professorial level. Scoping and proposal development took place, with the work being now carried out by a working group reviewing overall academic progression across pathways (to be completed next academic year).

As mentioned previously, a new central bridging fund has enabled 6 researchers to remain employed between contracts this year.

Academic Managers of Researchers

Academics and researchers have taken part in consultation to identify ways to improve the annual Personal Development Review. A more tailored form and specific guidance for researchers and for managers have been developed to promote useful career discussions and planning for the use of the 10 career development days allocation. The 2021-22 research staff survey showed that 45% of research staff were not aware of the 10 days policy and 79% used less than 6 days per year, mainly due to lack of planning. We hope formal inclusion within the PDR process will improve this. The PDR pilot resources are being trialled with 40 researcher/manager pairs in summer 2023; they will be adapted based on feedback and rolled out for all next academic year.

The profiles, promotion criteria and processes are being reviewed for all academic pathways (Teaching only and Teaching & Research, in addition to the creation of the new Research-only pathway). Details are not yet finalised, but they should reward a broader range of contributions and emphasise the importance of nurturing and supporting research staff and students, as well as being less focused on metrics but also include narratives.

Researchers

In September 2022, 10 PDC Postdoc Awards and 8 commendations were awarded in 'Research', 'Support' and 'Citizenship and outreach' categories (88 nominations received, mainly from academics but also from research staff and students). For the 2023 iteration, the categories and nomination form were slightly adapted to align with the sections and principles of the Narrative CV, banning narrow metrics and requiring a description of the individual's contribution to the achievements listed, as well as the impact it had on their field, society, colleagues, institution etc.

Professional development (*max 600 words*)

Institution

In addition to the wider professional development offering for all staff, which includes a comprehensive suite of workshops and online learning packages (LinkedIn Learning, Nature Masterclasses...), the institution provided 20 workshops designed for research staff in 2022-23 (270 attendees total, consistent recommendation by 100% respondents and average rating of 4.8/5). This included the new workshops 'Time management for productive work and a happy life', 'Engaged research & Impact – Why are they important?', 'Defining your Research Career: Exploring alternative pathways', as well as the second iteration of the successful Postdoctoral Leadership Programme.

The University also supported the certification of research staff (14 Associate Fellows, 6 Fellows and 1 Senior Fellow of the HEA) via its free institutional merit award.

Additional provision was available to a wider range of staff, including innovation and entrepreneurship programmes, workshops from the Impact Academy and sessions on specific funding schemes.

The PDC provided personal support (application feedback, interview preparation and 1:1) in 40 instances, which received an overall 5/5 rating. 100% of respondents having received interview preparation feel more prepared to attend their real interview, and 100% of respondents having received support with their CV or application feel it was improved. This was complemented by 25 1:1 with an external consultant, ~90 fellowship 1:1 and 12 fellowship mock interviews.

Recommendations were approved by relevant committees to enable and recognise the contributions of postdocs to the supervision of undergraduate and

postgraduate taught students more consistently. Schools will begin implementing in the next year. This adds to the appointment of 26 postdocs as Assistant Supervisors for PhDs this year, and the Assistant Supervisor role attracting interest from an independent writer (article in Chemistry World coming soon).

As mentioned earlier, central funding supported 51 research staff with conferences, training, bids and partnerships development, and engagement.

Academic Managers of Researchers

The Postdoc group mentoring programme was organised again this year, with 8 academic mentors and 27 research staff. All respondents stated that the programme encouraged them to engage in personal development, with 83% taking the time to review their career development plan as part of the process. As mentioned in previous sections, resources to help managers carry out career conversations as part of the PDR process have also been developed, with input from academic representatives.

Researchers

Postdoc representatives contributed to a review of the 'core workshops' provided to research staff, showing strong satisfaction with the existing provision and identifying a few gaps (mentoring skills, having difficult conversations, proposal development and working with partners), which will be addressed next year.

An institutional 'Postdoc Society' was created, with a group of ~20 research staff volunteers from across the institution organising events for their peers and building their own leadership. They were provided with funding, advice and administrative support from the PDC, and organised several successful networking and social events, a wellbeing event and a writing retreat (146 attendees total, average rating 4.6/5).

'Career exploration month', comprising of 5 online events showcasing a range of former postdocs working beyond academia was organised with the support of postdoc representatives. These were open to all and overall attended by 343 people, including 180 internal to the university (average rating 4.5/5). This was complemented by two in-person speed-networking events focusing on careers, including one with university research and innovation professionals and another with fellowship holders (53 attendees and 4.6/5 overall rating).

Emphasis was placed on providing more structure for postdocs to engage with and mentor PhD students with navigating their PhD and early career steps, by

collaborating with the Graduate School. Postdocs (including from the Postdoc Society) took part in speed-mentoring group meetings within workshops, provided talks on their experience and joined panel discussions. An expression of interest process was designed to streamline such engagements, with already 47 responses.

Comment on any lessons learned from the activities undertaken over this period and any modifications you propose to make to your action plan and measures of success as a result. (*max 500 words*)

It was initially intended that Queen's would manage annual research staff surveys, but decided to hold off for 2022-23 and wait for the next academic year to avoid survey fatigue and enable more time for some of the recently introduced initiatives to have an impact. Feedback on specific events and pilot initiatives was collected from those directly involved as usual.

We had planned to engage more with employers this year, to raise awareness of the talent pool research staff constitute, and enable research staff to become more aware of career options and requirements outside academia. This had to be deprioritised to enable focus on the research career pathway work due to a lack of human resources and time, and because some of the relevant stakeholders (e.g. Belfast Region City Deal team) were on a different timeline. This action is being rescheduled for the next year, with new resources secured to deliver it via Wellcome Research Culture funding (including a new member of staff). Several career exploration events were provided instead, as highlighted in the previous section.

A significant amount of work this year was allocated to long tasks such as the development of the research career pathway and PDR resources pilot, which will only be effectively introduced in the next academic year and start having an impact beyond that. This is to be expected but worth mentioning considering any potential impact won't be possible to detect and measure right away.

**Outline your key objectives in delivering your plan in the coming reporting period
(max 500 words)**

The University was recently awarded Research Culture funding from Wellcome. This includes funding for a position within the PDC and in collaboration with the University of Ulster, focusing on engaging with local employers to raise awareness of the talent pool of PhDs and postdocs, and to promote career opportunities and options to research staff (via events etc.), leading to movement of talent in the local research and innovation sector. In the next period, the position will be filled and the postholder will develop a plan for engagement with employers and career resources, as well as start delivering activities.

The work on the new 'Research-only' career pathway is scheduled to be finalised, with role descriptions and criteria up to the professorial grade made available and a clear promotion mechanism ready to launch. This should also include clearer guidance on costing research staff positions in grants to account for expertise.

The new resources developed for this year's PDR pilot will be adapted based on feedback and rolled out across the institution. In addition to the relevant guidance for managers to have a career conversation with their researcher, an effort will be made to raise awareness of policies, practices and good practices in managing research staff with line managers. Resources for managers will be reviewed and completed as needed.

New workshops will be introduced based on the gaps identified by the PDC Representatives' Network (see above), and feedback will be collected. This will include a new proposal development workshop.

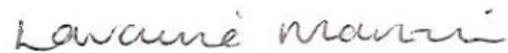
As 2023-24 will be the last year of the current action plan, new objectives and actions will also be identified to create another action plan.

Please provide a brief statement describing your institution's approval process of this report prior to sign off by the governing body (max 200 words)

This statement was shared with the PDC (postdoctoral Development Centre) Representatives' Network (includes postdoc and academic representatives from across the various University Schools), for feedback and support, before being reviewed and approved by the Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group (PROG), which includes postdoctoral representatives, Faculty academic

representatives, and members of relevant professional directorates (e.g. People and Culture and Research Services).

Signature on behalf of governing body:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lorraine Martin". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Prof Lorraine Martin, PROG Chair

Contact for queries: Dr Alice Dubois, Postdoctoral Development Centre Manager
(a.dubois@qub.ac.uk)

This annual report will be analysed by Universities UK, secretariat for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, to identify good practices, themes for development and information to improve national research culture policy and practice.

If you have any questions, or suggestions on how the reporting process could be improved, please contact the secretariat at CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk

www.researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk