

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

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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

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.

The establishment and continued resourcing of bespoke structures to support research staff (Postdoctoral Development Centre introduced in 2021) and fellowship holders (Fellowship Academy introduced in 2019) demonstrate the institution's commitment to supporting researcher development, and is complemented by additional initiatives for researchers and academics at all levels, such as innovation programmes and Impact Acceleration Accounts activities, as well as broader learning and development offering for all staff.

As part of its Research Culture Action Plan (2021-24), the University delivered initiatives recognising a wider range of contributions from more staff categories, such as: introducing support for Narrative CVs, widening access to internal research funding to research staff, technicians and research professionals, supporting pilot research culture initiatives driven by the research community, and establishing a network for research and innovation professionals. A new Research Culture Action Plan is being developed in 2024-25, to bring together initiatives like the Researcher Development Concordat, Research Integrity Concordat, Technician Commitment, EDI in research action plan, open research initiatives (and others) under the same umbrella. It will provide visibility to key actions from such initiatives, promote engagement between staff involved in diverse aspects of research culture, and introduce new actions aligned with institutional priorities. Some actions, such as the piloting of 'group handbooks', are expected to particularly benefit local research culture and as such the day-to-day experience of research staff.

The development of a new Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan for 2024-27 was a key priority for 2023-24 and will be publicly available in Autumn 2024. Similarly, a new action plan has been agreed for the Fellowship Academy. This will focus on providing fellowship holders with resources to support their engagement in Impact and Innovation activities and encourage the development of interdisciplinary collaborations.

This academic year, Queen's became the first university on the island of Ireland and second in the UK to receive an institutional Gold Athena Swan Award. This

significant achievement recognises years of work and progress towards gender equality, an ambitious plan for the years ahead, and efforts to share good practice with the sector. The new Athena Swan Action Plan includes actions that will especially benefit international research staff, and will feed into the 2024-27 Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan.

In 2023, Queen's was awarded a grant as part of Wellcome's Institutional Funding for Research Culture, to foster collaborations between Universities, private organisations and public bodies in Northern Ireland, and tackle main research culture issues using a collaborative regional approach via the Research Culture NI project. In addition to this role driving good practice at regional level, Queen's is a key partner and co-founder of the All-Island Research Culture network with University College Dublin, and contributed to the organisation of the inaugural All-Island Research Culture Conference in May 2024. The Wellcome funding has enabled a restructure of the PDC team (previously 2 FTE) into a Research Culture team (5 FTE). The former PDC Manager became Research Culture Manager in April 2024 and will keep leading on the concordat implementation and policies for postdocs, alongside broader research culture activities. A PDC Officer was recruited (August 2024) to oversee and broaden the programme of initiatives for postdocs, as well as a Research Careers and Employability Officer (June 2024), who will develop and expand career development support for postdocs at Queen's and Ulster University. A Research Culture Assistant was also hired (June 2024) to support broad research culture activities, alongside the existing PDC Project Assistant, who supports the PDC more specifically.

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

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

Institution

Following last year's success, further 'Postdoc Life' information sessions aimed at helping research staff understand their environment were organised. They included a session showcasing the recently adapted information on maternity leave for research staff, and others on pensions, teaching certifications and career development tools like the Personal Development Review and Prosper. These were well-received, with 105 overall attendees, as well as 100% recommendation and overall 5/5 rating.

The 'Time management for productive work and a happy life' workshop, introduced the previous year, again received positive feedback (rating 5/5 and recommended by 100%), and will remain part of the core PDC offering in the future.

Significant amounts of time and effort were dedicated to the development of a new 2024-27 Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan. This included engagement with postdoc and academics from the PDC Representatives' Network, the Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group (PROG) and key departments responsible for related initiatives to ensure alignment (e.g. Athena Swan action plan).

Academic Managers of Researchers

In 2024, the university initiated a review of the academic profiles used for promotion, and a review of the process itself. A working group with academic colleagues was created, with additional sub-groups investigating specific related strands of work (such as the introduction of a Research pathway; see Employment section). While the work isn't finalised at the time of writing, criteria within profiles should recognise a wider breadth of activities, including line management and mentoring of research staff, as well as aligning part of the format of the process to a narrative CV.

Researchers

In 2023-24, the Postdoc Society celebrated 1 year of existence and was nominated for a team Staff Excellence Award for their achievements in organising events for their peers the previous year. This year, they again delivered a successful programme of wellbeing, networking and social activities for research staff of all disciplines. This included a Postdoc Showcase as part of National Postdoc Appreciation Week, three wellbeing events, a pizza networking lunch, two writing retreats, a pub quiz outing and a family summer social. Overall, these activities attracted ~250 attendees and received average feedback of 4.5/5 and 100% recommendation.

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, as well as to integrate research staff within their Schools. These included welcoming schemes, coffee mornings, research symposia or seminars, game or movie nights, career development events and away days, townhall sessions, mentoring programmes for PhDs by postdocs, family days etc.

The Fellowship Academy organised a Leadership Retreat, in partnership with the UKRI FLF Development Network, with Queen's fellowship holders spending time with FLF from across the UK discussing and planning their leadership development.

Employment

Institution

Following the introduction of the Assistant Supervisor role to recognise contributions of postdocs to the supervision of PhD students and its capture on the student system in the previous year, modifications were made to the PURE research system so that research staff supervision appears on their profiles in the same way as academic staff.

After a break due to a change in leadership, a new working group was established to resume work developing a 'Research-only' career pathway, as part of the broader review of academic profiles and progression mentioned previously, and in close consultation with relevant postdoctoral committees. The group has developed recommendations relevant to the roles, grades and job titles for the new pathway, and the eligibility and process to allow research staff to apply for promotion. Criteria and profiles will be designed early 2024-25, with the expectation that refinement, sign-off and implementation will take place between 2024 and 2026.

A working group was also established to review the use of Fixed-Term contracts and propose initiatives to mitigate precarity for researchers. Engagement with research staff committees, unions and staff in relevant directorates and faculties led to a series of recommendations being submitted to the University Management Board, including i) not moving staff to open-ended contracts based on length of service, if the contract would be terminated once the grant supporting the member of staff would end, ii) enhancing career development support, iii) introducing a transparent process to research staff contract extension when further funding has been applied for, and iv) investigating restructuring research teams to enable the creation of permanent research positions across research groups. Further refinement of these plans is ongoing.

The Fellowship Academy Operations Group was established to assist in HR- and Finance-related process relevant to fellowship holders. This included monitoring the career progression of fellowship holders with pathways to permanent roles.

Academic Managers of Researchers

The important projects mentioned above strongly benefited from the input of multiple academics with line management responsibilities for researchers, either as direct working group members or leads, or via consultation with relevant committees such as the PDC Representatives' Network and Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group.

Researchers

In September 2023, 8 PDC Postdoc Awards and 3 commendations were awarded in 'Research', 'Support' and 'Citizenship and outreach' categories (59 nominations received, mainly from academics but also from research staff and students). For the 2024 iteration, the judging process was reviewed and improved to increase bias mitigation, notably by refining scoring criteria and scale, as well as providing more detailed guidance to judges.

Professional development

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 28 workshops or programmes designed for research staff in 2023-24 (rating is available for 23 of

the courses, reaching an average of 4.8/5). This included the new workshops 'Storytelling for researchers', 'Managing challenging conversations', 'Introduction to external research funding', and 'Coaching and mentoring for researchers'.

The University also supported the certification of research staff for their teaching practice (23 Associate Fellows, 8 Fellows and 1 Senior Fellow of the HEA) via its free institutional merit award. This process is being re-accredited in the up-coming year, and the PDC has been represented at relevant meetings shaping the application to ensure benefits for research staff aren't overlooked.

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

The PDC provided personal support (application feedback, interview preparation and 1:1) in 13 instances, which received an overall 4.7/5 rating. 100% of respondents either felt more prepared to attend their real interview, or that their CV or application was improved, depending on the support their received. This was complemented by 23 1:1 with an external consultant.

As mentioned earlier, central funding supported 32 research staff with conferences, training, bids and partnerships development, and engagement.

Thanks to the Research Culture funding provided by Wellcome (see introduction), a 'Research Careers and Employability Manager' was recruited in June 2024 and will provide enhanced career programmes for research staff at Queen's and our partner Ulster University in the next two academic years, including career skills workshops, career exploration events and individual support.

The Fellowship Academy provided a range of networking opportunities to encourage and support the growth of the community of Fellows at Queen's. This included peer-coaching meetings and Funding Circle groups to support research funding applications.

A new series of Insight sessions were held for Fellows, focused on topics such as Creating Interdisciplinary Collaborations and Global Engagement.

Academic Managers of Researchers

A group of 32 line manager volunteers participated with the researchers they manage in a pilot of new Personal Development Review (PDR) materials designed in 2022-23. They provided feedback on the new form and guidance for line

managers via surveys and focused groups. Thanks to the input of pilot participants, the resources were refined and launched for use by all research staff and their managers for the PDR exercise of Summer 2024. Pilot feedback highlighted that managers and researchers found the conversation triggered by the form more useful to their career development, and found the additional guidance provided useful. For managers, this especially related to the clarification of their role as reviewer, reassuring them about supporting individuals with career plans they are not familiar with (e.g. outside academia), and providing advice and prompts to lead the discussion.

In addition, 15 academic staff participated as mentors in the Postdoc Group Mentoring Scheme, providing development support to small groups of research staff.

Researchers

A total of 37 postdoctoral researchers, along with their line managers, participated in a pilot scheme for an updated PDR process. Subsequently, these participants, along with postdoc representatives in the PDC Reps' Network played a crucial role in disseminating and promoting the official rollout of the new PDR form and associated guidance within their schools and networks.

Research staff from across faculties engaged in institutionally-provided professional development workshops, with 498 research staff attending sessions specifically designed for postdocs. Additionally, a Networking Event with Fellowship holders from within the University saw 37 attendees and received a 4.9/5 rating.

The Postdoc Group Mentoring scheme had 32 postdocs participating as mentees. Participants reported significant benefits, including career exploration, career plan support, insights into funding and fellowship applications, and receiving impartial advice from mentors. Researchers also sought 1:1 support from the PDC for career progression. This included job application support, CV feedback, and mock interviews, benefiting 13 postdocs in total, in addition to 23 receiving 1:1 support as part of a cohort development programme.

Furthermore, research staff engaged with the institutional teaching and supervision certification scheme, the 'Queen's Merit Award', enabling them to apply for AdvanceHE Fellowships. A total of 32 research staff were successful, including 23 at Associate Fellowship level, 8 at Fellowship level, and 1 at Senior Fellowship level.

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.

The main delays and requirement to re-prioritise actions this year came from staffing challenges within the PDC team, including long-term leave, delays in obtaining the Wellcome research culture funding, and time required for recruitment of the new team members. The PDC Manager also had to deliver activities related to their new role as Research Culture Manager alongside PDC work until all new PDC staff were in post in the Summer. This notably required de-prioritising the development of a line manager hub, as well as career exploration events, since such events will be a focus for the next couple of years.

This was amplified by the unplanned addition of a significant piece of work to mitigate employment precarity in research, which was identified as more important and urgent than some other activities, and will continue to require resources in future years.

It is worth noting that the pressures mentioned above have now been resolved or included as part of up-coming work plans, and delays have enabled the recruitment of staff, which will enhance general provision and capacity in future years.

One of the most complex pieces of work planned this year, the creation of the 'Research' pathway, was not finalised during the course of the action plan, but has progressed significantly and will be delivered as part of the next action plan.

We again decided not to run a survey of research staff this year, but to focus on collating information from specific pieces of work and activities. Queen's indeed ran two lengthy all-staff surveys in 2023-24, and we expected running another survey would put too much pressure on staff and lead to low engagement due to survey fatigue.

Outline your key objectives in delivering your plan in the coming reporting period

The academic year 2024-25 will be the first of a new Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan, to be published in Autumn 2024. This action plan will include initiatives covering the line management of researchers, teaching opportunities and certification, support for international staff, reward and recognition, skill development, career development and community building.

In 2024-25, the Research Careers and Employability Manager will introduce a series of career workshops, individual support and career exploration events for research staff, significantly enhancing the current provision. They will also engage with local employers to promote the value of postdoctoral talent for their organisations.

The Research career pathway will be launched, including the process enabling research staff promotion. Refinement based on learnings is likely to take place in later years of the action plan. Similarly, we expect that a pilot process to manage research contract extensions will be introduced and that additional plans to mitigate employment precarity will be refined and initiated.

We'll also aim to showcase good line-management practices and develop a hub to sign-post to internal and external resources relevant to line-managing research staff. This will include the development of new resources, and clarifying expectations specific to research staff management, including around staff costing.

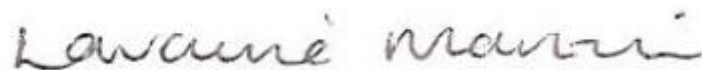
A Postdoc Parents' Network will be piloted, to enable research staff with children, expecting, thinking about parenthood or with other caring responsibilities to support each other. The Network will also aim to provide support and sign-posting relevant to issues around childcare and other pressures affecting parents working within research.

In addition to delivering usual inductions, workshops events and other regular initiatives, we will capture examples of ways researchers at Queen's use their 10 development days, notably to help research staff consider a broad range of development activities when planning their career and preparing for their Personal Development Review.

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

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:



Prof Lorraine Martin, PROG Co-Chair



Prof Denise Fitzgerald, PROG Co-Chair

Contact for queries: Dr Alice Dubois, Research Culture Manager
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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