

HR Excellence in Research Award, Ten-Year Review (January 2022): Progress Report

1. Introduction and Background

Queen's University Belfast supports the principles outlined in the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. This is demonstrated through support for researchers from Faculties and Schools and a range of centrally co-ordinated initiatives offered to those employed to undertake research at all levels. Queen's first achieved the HR Excellence in Research recognition in 2012, the first University across Ireland to receive the Award. An action plan has been updated every two years. This report outlines the progress achieved, as well as challenges faced and emerging opportunities. The accompanying action plan provides more detail with success measures.

2. A Successful Research Environment

The landscape of researcher support at Queen's has evolved significantly in recent years, with the introduction of several new support structures, including:

- The Postdoctoral Development Centre ([PDC](#)) launched as an institutional wide initiative in October 2021. The PDC was piloted in the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Sciences (January 2018), as a 'one stop shop' providing relevant information, support and guidance for research staff.
- The [Postdoctoral and Researcher Oversight Group](#) (PROG; November 2020): New committee which combines two previous groups (Concordat Implementation Review Group and Postdoctoral Forum) to provide a single central representative body with responsibility for overseeing research staff support structures and policy and linked into institutional governance structures. This group reports to the Research and Innovation Committee (one of the University's [regular committees](#)) to ensure a clear line through to the core [governance structure](#) for strategic reporting and decision-making.
- The [Fellowship Academy](#), launched in January 2020, supports holders of internal and external fellowships.

Building upon these developments, a gap analysis was completed as part of the process for developing this Action Plan. With input from researcher and academic representatives, as well as professional support staff. The analysis identified several findings that would form the basis of priorities for the next period of Concordat implementation, including the need to:

- Introduce a clear, dedicated, central point of reference for research staff
- Increase awareness around policies and procedures (e.g. 10 development days)
- Improve coordination between various units that support researchers
- Harmonise institutional policies and procedures
- Enhance support for Faculty- and School-level researcher-led groups.

The University's new strategic vision – [Strategy 2030](#) – places significant emphasis on nurturing a vibrant research culture, with an ambitious and empowered community of researchers at the heart of this. It commits to enhancing researcher excellence across all career stages. The strategy commits to:

- Investing in developing our staff
- Creating a vibrant culture based on our core values
- A focus on staff wellbeing and staff engagement
- Greater opportunities for flexible working
- Improved processes and reduced bureaucracy
- Playing a sector-leading role in equality, diversity and inclusion.

Linked to this, the institutional [Research Culture Action Plan \(RCAP\)](#) identifies as one of its five strategic priorities the need to "respect and facilitate the diverse range of career pathways that exist within research, both in and out of academia, and provide tailored support to attract and retain talent across the research community".

3. How was the HR Excellence in Research review undertaken?

The current Action Plan, based on the updated Researcher Development Concordat (RDC), was developed during 2021 and agreed by PROG in September 2021. As noted above, during 2021, the governance arrangement for the consultation and implementation of the RDC was updated. The Postdoctoral Researcher Oversight Group (PROG) now coordinates RDC-related activity. Membership of PROG includes academic and research staff representatives from all Faculties, researchers representing Faculty-based research societies, and professional support staff with a remit for the support and development of research staff. The group aims to promote the Concordat action plan and act collectively to monitor, recommend, develop and implement initiatives to meet the objectives of the action plan. This includes reviewing data gathered through the staff survey and engagement in learning and career development activities.

Researchers were also consulted via the Researcher-led Faculty Societies. Other relevant staff provided suggestions and feedback on the action plan, e.g. People and Culture, Postdoc Development Centre, Business Alliance and Research Governance. To identify progress, potential challenges and future priorities, additional stakeholders were consulted, including: the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research & Enterprise), leaders from the People & Culture and Research & Enterprise Directorates, Deans of Research and those who manage researchers/other senior managers.

4. Key Achievements and Progress – From the HR Excellence Action Plan (January 2022 Update)

Detailed updates on the full range of actions and success measures are included in the [Updated Action Plan](#) and cross-referenced to the Concordat Principles. A number of these are highlighted for this summary as main areas of progress. Some challenges are also highlighted with mitigations:

Queen's University committed to researcher development in signing the refreshed Researcher Development Concordat in February 2020 (action: 1a). A gap analysis was completed and updated, and a new Queen's Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan was developed and agreed in September 2021 (actions 1b and 1c). This included a revision of governance arrangements (action 1d and 2g) for action plan implementation and monitoring. Significantly, the institution-wide Postdoctoral Development Centre was launched in October 2021 (action 1e), which includes a new [PDC website](#) to collate and share information with postdocs. Over the past two years postdoc/researcher societies have been established in all three Faculties and research staff-led initiatives will now be supported by the PDC (action 1f and 2f).

Action 2a – the overall investment to support our commitments to researcher development has expanded in terms of budget and resource with launch of PDC and Queen's Fellowship Academy, to approx. £230k (previously approx. £200k) to ensure the achievement of the action plan commitments.

Central to the career development support is the 'Developing Your Research Career' Programme, which continues to be delivered twice per year with up to 16 researchers attending each programme (action 2b). Overall participation by research staff in L&D activity increased year on year between 2019 and 2020 by 18% as a result of collaborative efforts to promote L&D offer to relevant staff, focus on Personal Development Review (PDR) and staff taking responsibility for their own learning and career development.

The Postdoc Group Mentoring Programme was delivered in 2020, with 33 participants. However, due to impact of the pandemic, this initiative and the Postdoctoral Showcase (2e) were not delivered in 2021. This was due to the restrictions and work pressures on potential academic mentors (action 2d). Priority was given to moving researcher development support online from March 2020. Since then, engagement in the workshops has increased and additional online learning has been made available to research staff, e.g. expanded Nature Masterclass Online provision.

Buddy/peer mentoring for new staff has been consolidated within the MHLS Faculty but implementation of similar initiatives within EPS and AHSS was hindered by the pandemic and are now being investigated by postdoc representatives with the PDC.

Monitoring the destination of research staff remains problematic (action 3b). All staff who leave the University are asked to complete an exit survey, however response rate remains low. The PDC has created a LinkedIn group

to keep in contact with researchers leaving Queen's. The introduction of mock interview support by the PDC enables some insight into the types of non-academic roles that postdocs are applying, which subsequently informs the career and learning & development activities.

5. HR Excellence Review and Future Actions

Priority areas of focus of the new Action Plan are summarised below. The detailed action plan provides more detail with specific success measures: [Queen's Concordat Action Plan 2021-2024 \(September 2021\)](#)

Structure and Governance:

1. Launched in October 2021, the PDC represents a significant milestone for researcher support at Queens: the establishment of a central and coordinated 'one stop shop' for postdoctoral and research staff across all three faculties, providing advice, support and guidance across the 'postdoc experience'.
2. The PDC will work in concert with other professional support teams and Faculty offices to coordinate the University's Concordat Action Plan. In doing so, three main areas of priority focus have been identified: Awareness, Provision and Consistency – which each align with the Concordat principles.

Strategy, Policy and Processes:

3. Postdoctoral and Research Staff Oversight Group (PROG) will act as a single representative committee to consult on strategies, policies and procedures relevant to researchers and feed into institutional governance structures via representation on R&I Committee (EC2.2)
4. Wider institutional review of bullying and harassment policies will consider issues specific to research staff as part of its remit (EC3.3)
5. In line with commitments made in Strategy 2030 and RCAP, a review of institutional policies and support for career pathways for those employed on 'research only' contracts will be conducted, with a view to adding a dedicated 'Research' pathway to Academic Progression processes (EC3.4)
6. Wider reviews of institutional redeployment processes will consult closely with the PDC and PROG to understand concerns held by fixed-term researchers, and the PDC will work with P&C to help promote better understanding of existing processes (EC6.1)
7. Review of induction/welcome processes for new staff (EC1.2).

Engagement and Representation:

8. Reinforcement of efforts to ensure high completion rates of the mandatory diversity and inclusion training module amongst researchers and their managers (EC4.6)
9. Work with the postdoctoral community and managers to develop best-practice guidelines on work-life balance for researchers (EC4.5)
10. Work with Faculties/ Schools to ensure that School Management Board meetings include a standing item on postdoctoral researchers and ideally include a postdoctoral representative (EC6.1)
11. Establish a representative network, including postdocs and academics from across Queens, to report issues and challenges, share local examples of best practice, and champion the Concordat (EC6.3)
12. Consolidate actions to promote the commitment to 10 annual career development days to researchers and their managers in all faculties (PCD1.1)

Best Practice Support and Programmes:

13. Introduce 1:1 advisory support provided on demand via the PDC for researchers, encompassing informal advice, feedback on applications, interview preparation, and mock interviews etc., and via relevant R&E teams for e.g. research funding, collaborative research, commercialisation (PCD3.2)
14. Continue to deliver, and expand the Postdoctoral Group Mentoring programme (PCD2.5). Develop and implement a new mentoring scheme for postdoctoral researchers to support postgraduate research students (PCD4.5)
15. Fully implement the role of 'Assistant Supervisor' across the institution, building on MHLS pilot, and provide training for postdoctoral researchers taking up the role (PCD4.2)