

Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

HR Excellence in Research Award, Eight Year Review (January 2020): 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 Award in 2012. Queen's was the first University across Ireland to receive the Award. An action plan has been updated every two years, most recently in 2018. This report outlines the progress that has been achieved, as well as challenges faced and emerging opportunities. The accompanying action plan provides more detail with success measures.

The current [Corporate Plan](#) outlines clear strategic priorities intended to deliver Queen's Vision. These focus on growth in research income and international and postgraduate student populations. Of particular relevance to this review is [Queen's Research Strategy](#) and the focus on the enhancement of postgraduate and postdoctoral culture.

Queen's University Belfast is a research-intensive institution, ranked 8th in the UK for Research Intensity ([REF 2014](#)). We are a leading University in addressing gender equality issues, holding an [Athena SWAN Charter](#) institutional Silver Award as well as 15 SWAN departmental awards, including two Gold. Queen's has also demonstrated best practice in staff and student Equality, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives through the achievement of eight awards during 2018-19.

2. A Successful Research Environment

Queen's [research aims](#) are aligned to our academic strengths. As the results of REF 2014 demonstrate, we are recognised globally for the breadth and depth of social, economic and cultural benefit delivered through our research. Research at Queen's takes place in Core Disciplines, Pioneer Research Programmes and interdisciplinary [Global Research Institutes](#). With external, international peer review, these centres bring researchers together to tackle global challenges and will play a key role in increasing our commitment to internationally-leading research and collaboration here at Queen's.

Our Research Strategy priorities seek to develop a culture of research ambition, connecting to tackle major societal challenges and establishing vibrant and nurturing Postgraduate and Postdoctoral communities. Queen's is a [signatory](#) of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA).

The University develops an annual Research Income Action Plan which identifies actions across all three Faculties and associated professional support functions. The current plan prioritises the improvement of our ability to attract and retain the best early career researchers (RIAP Action 4). Priorities for 2020 onward include: support throughout the grant lifecycle, targeted learning and development, support for career progression, establishing a Fellowship Academy and encouraging a 'Culture of Idea Development'. To ensure accountability, progress on the Research Income Action Plan will be reported via University Executive Board, Research Strategy Group and the Research and Postgraduate Committee. The [Engaged Research Action Plan 2019-21](#) values and promotes knowledge exchange, collaboration and partnership and also highlights Capacity Building as a key priority area, with objectives to provide training and opportunities with regard to knowledge exchange and forums to share best practice and information exchange.

3. People First

During the review period, Queen's has launched a number a number of major People and Culture strategies and initiatives positively impacting on all staff groups, including researchers. Our new [People First](#) strategy aims to support the strategic priorities and Queen's [Core Values](#) by putting people at the centre of everything we do. Under three pillars of Employee Experience, Culture and Talent, we have committed to listening and taking action to ensure staff have the best possible experience while empowering and enabling staff to learn,

develop and progress. A number of actions arising from the People First strategy align very closely to the Concordat in relation to their significance and emphasis on support for personal and career development. These are detailed below:

- Our [Staff Forum](#) provides the opportunity for all staff to make their voices heard and help shape a more positive employee experience for all those working at Queen's. Since its inception in 2018, the Forum has been instrumental in gathering feedback to shape the review of appraisal, supporting the analysis of the Staff Survey results and informing a working group on career progression.
- The all [Staff Survey](#) took place in March-April 2019 in order to gather feedback from all Queen's staff; a 64% response rate meant that 2700 staff had their say about their experience of working at Queen's. The institutional action plan was released in October 2019 and is currently being implemented, while action planning within Schools and Directorates is underway at local level.
- Following significant review of Appraisal and connected processes, a new approach to Personal Development Review [PDR](#) launched in November 2019. PDR aligns to our People First promise to 'create opportunities to build the capability of our staff', providing the framework for ongoing conversations between for staff about their contribution and focus on development and progression.
- New staff [reward and recognition](#) schemes have been introduced in response to staff feedback with the aim of supporting exceptional performance and contribution.
- Our [Learning and Development](#) offer has been refreshed and enhanced during 2018-19 with an offer to enable all staff to access and take responsibility for their own career and development regardless of category and grade.
- A new [Management and Leadership Framework](#) has been developed to support leaders and managers by defining leadership behaviours and levels and providing a self-assessment tool.
- A new [Career Development Hub](#) has launched, offering an online resource for staff to understand and manage their development and career aspirations.
- We have enhanced our focus on [Mentoring](#) with additional guidance for mentors and mentees.

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

The review was co-ordinated by the Organisational Development team within People and Culture, in consultation with the Concordat Implementation Review Group (CIRG). The CIRG 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.

In order to identify progress, potential challenges and future priorities, additional stakeholders were also consulted, including the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research & Enterprise), leaders from the People & Culture and Research & Enterprise Directorates, Deans of Research, those who manage researchers and the Postdoctoral Forum.

A series of meetings were held with research staff - primarily in areas with researcher societies/forums across each of the three Faculties - focussing on the provision of development activities, the research staff experience, identification of best practice and areas for improvement.

5. Key Achievements and Progress – From the HR Excellence Action Plan

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:

Development of Faculty-based Action Plans (Action 1.4, Concordat Principles: 1-6)

The Medicine, Health and Life Sciences Postdoc Society (established in 2009) continues to offer an annual schedule of events, led by postdoctoral researchers and which aligns with the MHLS Postdoc Development Centre. An additional outcome now achieved, is the creation of societies in the Faculties of Engineering and

Physical Sciences and Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, where their societies also support and deliver local initiatives, enhancing engagement and a sense of community among researchers within their Schools.

Medicine Health and Life Sciences Postdoctoral Development Centre (*Action 1.5, Concordat Principles: 1-6*)

A further outcome within this Faculty is the establishment of the MHLS Postdoctoral Development Centre: there is a full time staff member whose role is dedicated to supporting their researchers, offering tailored advice, one-to-one career development support co-ordinating delivery of a dedicated programme of events and workshops.

Postdoc Showcase (*Action 2.15, Concordat Principles: 2, 4, 5, 6*)

A second successful [PostDoc Showcase](#) event took place in September 2019 with 120 participants attending. Co-ordinated by the Research Policy Office and the Postdoctoral Development Centre, this event celebrated postdoctoral, early career research staff and coincided with a programme of events in Queen's recognising National Postdoc Appreciation Week. It included representation across all three Faculties, keynote talks, mini 'research pitches', poster presentations and Postdoc Prizes offered by each Faculty area. This event was rated positively by attendees: 91% who responded to the event evaluation would recommend to others; overall event rating was 4.2 / 5 and over 90% of attendees engaged with research topics and colleagues new to them.

Postdoc Forum (*Action 2.18, Concordat Principles: 1-6*)

Co-ordinated by the Research and Enterprise Directorate, with support from the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research & Enterprise, the Postdoc Forum continues to meet four times each year and is now an embedded mechanism for research staff to highlight issues impacting on their roles and careers. It aims to enhance the postdoctoral research culture across the University, provide opportunities for two-way discussion, highlight advice and support for staff and facilitate networking for participants. This forum has had a positive impact on a wide range of topics during this Concordat period, including: awareness of Postdoc travel funding, promoting L&D engagement, Concordat consultation, clarification on Assistant PhD supervisor role for postdocs.

Staff Survey – engagement and findings (*Action 1.6, Concordat Principles: 2, 3, 4, 5*)

The second Queen's University Staff Survey, launched in 2019, for all staff groups provided a clear mechanism for engaging and encouraging all staff to have their say (therefore, Queen's did not participate in the specific surveys for research staff and their managers - CROS and PIRLS). There was a 41% response rate among research staff, and although this was lower than the overall response rate of 64%, it is higher than previous CROS and PIRLS surveys. When considering responses for Researchers only, there were some noticeable positive trends, with a higher proportion of Researchers answering the following questions positively ('Agree or 'Strongly Agree') compared with all staff.

- *My manager gives me regular and constructive feedback* (63% for researcher staff vs 48% overall)
- *My manager motivates and inspires me to be more effective in my job* (65% for researcher staff vs 52% overall)
- *I believe I am valued for what I offer* (65% for researcher staff vs 54% overall)
- *I find my work interesting* (97% for researcher staff vs 89% overall)
- *I believe I have opportunity for personal development and growth at Queen's* (59% for researcher staff vs 53% overall)

The survey has also identified areas for improvement, in particular, the two questions below had lower proportion of positive responses from Researchers when compared with all staff:

- *I believe I have opportunities for career progression* (36% for researcher staff vs 41% overall)
- *I have a clear understanding of priorities for my School/Department* (48% researcher staff vs 64% overall)

Engagement in learning and development activity (*Action 2.3, Concordat Principles: 3, 4, 5*)

A specific programme of Researcher Development workshops is offered, mapped to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework. Engagement in centrally organised L&D activity among Research staff increased by 28% from 2017-18 to 2018-19. The new MHLS Postdoc Development Centre has increased engagement in L&D activities by 43% (145 to 208) in the same period. All staff have increased access to online learning including Vitae website resources, Nature Masterclasses online and Professional Skills for Research Leaders. Investment in new resources during 2019 include: Writing for Academic Publication online programme (31 participants

worked on and completed journal articles) and LinkedIn Learning. This reflects a new approach to L&D within People and Culture which enables and encourages employees to take responsibility for their own development.

Policy Development (*Action 2.3, Concordat Principles: 1-6*)

In October 2019, the University Executive Board formally committed to enabling all research staff to have access to up to 10 days learning and career development activity per year. This approach, led by our academic Faculties, and endorsed by the PVC for Research & Enterprise, has successfully been in place within MHLS since 2017 and will now be extended to research staff in all Faculties in line with the expectations within the revised Concordat. The new policy will be communicated to all research staff once the ongoing equality screening is complete.

Management and Leadership Development (*Actions 2.6, 2.7; Concordat Principles: 1-6*)

A new [Management and Leadership Framework](#) has been introduced. The outcomes of this approach to date, are: the availability of a new self-assessment tool, a new programme of People Manager Essentials courses, and development of a suite of Connected Leaders programmes supported by online resources for managers.

Mentoring (*Actions 2.8 and 2.9; Concordat Principles: 2-5*)

Queen's continues to invest in the Postdoctoral Group Mentoring Programme and are currently trialling a new online administrative system to support mentoring schemes. 36 mentees participated in 2018-19 and 31 mentees in 2019-20 in 8 groups. A new guide has been developed specifically for line managers and mentors of Postdoctoral/Research staff.

As part of Staff Survey actions, mentoring has been identified as an essential method to support all staff in relation to their personal and career development. A project has been initiated to collate information on all mentoring schemes across the University, adopt an agreed definition of mentoring, gather best practice, provide support resources and establish a mentoring network (with research staff as active members).

6. HR Excellence Review and Future Actions

In developing the new action plan (2020-2022) actions and measures are included. Priority areas of focus are summarised below.

Commitment to the revised (2019) Concordat will provide a reference point for collective action within Queen's. Becoming a signatory will help to define responsibilities and support collaboration:

- Sign-up to new Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (**February 2020**)
- Gap analysis against the new Concordat (**September 2020**)
- Updated Action Plan aligned to new Concordat principles and obligations (**February 2021**)
- Ensuring the Concordat Action Plan continues to cross-reference to other agreed actions and initiatives across the University.

Ensuring an effective dual approach is in place to drive change and enhance the research staff experience through both centrally offered support and specific initiatives led by Faculties.

- Faculty-focused support, local actions and societies – **Annual plan** and priorities for each Faculty.
- Implement and promote new policy of 10 days learning and career development
- Increase research staff engagement in overall learning and career development activity (**10% annual increase**).
- Provision of professional careers advice via central workshops, 1:1 advice and events to connect employers of researchers with staff to promote opportunities outside academia
- Address specific issues in relation to research staff identified in the 2019 Staff Survey
- Continue engagement with research staff via the Postdoc Forum, Staff Survey and other continuous staff listening approaches
- Deliver capacity building actions identified in the Research Income Action Plan and Engaged Research Action Plan.

The accompanying [action plan](#) provides more detail with specific success measures.