

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

Name of Institution	Queen's University Belfast
Reporting period	2024-25 (Sep to Aug)
Date approved by governing body	23/09/2025
Date published online	02/12/2025
Web address of annual report	PDC Researcher Development Concordat page
Web address of institutional Researcher Development Concordat webpage	PDC Researcher Development Concordat page
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Date statement sent to Researcher Development Concordat secretariat via rdc@ntu.ac.uk	02/12/2025

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 strong emphasis on nurturing a vibrant research culture, with an ambitious and empowered community of researchers at its core.

In support of this, Queen's continues to invest in dedicated structures for early career research staff, including the Postdoctoral Development Centre (PDC) and the Fellowship Academy.

Building on the 2021–24 Research Culture Action Plan, in 2024–25 the University significantly advanced its institutional and sectoral leadership in research culture through development of the Research Culture Roadmap, which sets out clear priorities for the next 5 years. The Roadmap represents a step change in Queen's approach: from discrete actions to a holistic framework that aligns people, processes, and partnerships to deliver sustained culture change. The Roadmap also establishes a Research Culture Community to oversee delivery, identify gaps and coordinate institutional initiatives. With the Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group (PROG) and the PDC representation, research staff voices are embedded in decision-making.

The roadmap consolidates a range of initiatives – including the Researcher Development Concordat, Research Integrity Concordat, Technician Commitment, EDI in Research Action Plan, and open research initiatives under a single umbrella. It aims to increase visibility of key actions, foster collaboration across teams, and introduce new initiatives aligned with institutional priorities. One such initiative, piloting 'group handbooks', aims to enhance local research culture and improve the day-to-day experience of research staff.

Alongside this, Queen's has introduced targeted measures to strengthen inclusivity and wellbeing, including a carer fund to support conference attendance, enhanced onboarding resources for international staff and students, and a Responsible Research Assessment policy.

Queen's continues to play a leading role in shaping research culture regionally and across the island of Ireland. The Wellcome-funded Research Culture NI (RCNI) project has provided direct career support to postdocs in Northern Ireland through a dedicated Research Careers and Employability Officer, whose contract was extended by Queen's for an additional year. RCNI has also commissioned a CRAC-

Vitae report on the strengths and challenges of the Northern Ireland research culture landscape and fostered cross-sector collaboration through the NI Research Professionals' Network, which piloted a flexible Insight Exchange Programme for research-related staff. Queen's also jointly leads the All-Island Research Culture Network (AIRCN) with University College Dublin. In 2024–25, Queen's hosted the AIRCN Conference, in Belfast, convening 140 academics, professional staff, and policymakers to share practice, develop collaborations, and drive forward an all-island agenda.

In March 2025, Queen's was selected as Lead Delivery Partner for the British Academy Early Career Researcher Network's (BA ECRN) North East and Northern Ireland cluster. Working with Durham and Northumbria Universities, Queen's is co-developing a programme shaped by early career researchers' input to deliver targeted initiatives that address the specific needs of the region's SHAPE research community.

Queen's leadership in research culture is widely recognised. In addition to receiving an institutional Athena Swan Gold Award in 2024, the University was awarded Civic University and University of Sanctuary status in May 2025, and became the first UK university to achieve a Gold STARS sustainability rating.

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

A new Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan was published in September 2024, the second action plan since the University signed the revised Concordat of 2019. The previous action plan drove significant progress in how research staff were supported in the university, notably through the growth and embedding of the Fellowship Academy and the establishment of a central Postdoctoral Development Centre (PDC). The 2024-27 action plan aims to strengthen and complement this provision, deliver on actions that couldn't be completed, and build on previous work, new staff, and other institutional initiatives to enhance the research staff experience.

Environment and culture

Key priorities under this pillar include enhancing line management practices, supporting international staff, improving wellbeing and mental health resources and signposting, and ensuring appropriate recognition of postdoctoral contributions, notably to supervision and teaching.

Regarding improving researcher line management, we plan to: deliver campaigns to identify and showcase good practices; develop a line manager hub stating clear expectations and signposting to relevant support, as well as include line management performance as part of the academic progression criteria. Similarly to the line manager hub mentioned above, another resource hub will be created to highlight the wellbeing and mental health resources available to postdocs. As part of the Athena Swan Gold action plan, multiple initiatives will be undertaken institutionally to support the relocation and onboarding of international researchers, notably investigating financial visa support, enhanced onboarding and access to accommodation. Efforts will be made to further embed previous work to recognise supervision activities, as well as to develop policies to support access and training for researchers to engage with teaching as part of their development.

Overall, success will be indicated by the delivery of the different resources, policies, and initiatives, notably including reporting to relevant committees like the Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group, as well as engagement metrics.

Employment

Existing activities like inductions, postdoc awards and networking opportunities will continue and a new network for postdoc parents will be established.

In line with the institutional strategy and Research Culture action plan, a key piece of work aligned with the employment pillar is the launch of a 'Research-only' career pathway, including well-defined profiles across a wider range of grades and a progression mechanism. This will then enable the development of new guidance for costing research staff pre-award to support staff moving into higher-grade roles based on the level of responsibility planned in the grant.

In order to complement the institutional redeployment process, the action plan includes the development of pilot bridge funding to mitigate gaps between research contracts, as well as to explore the possibility of creating permanent research roles for specialist shared activities.

<p>Success will be demonstrated by actual launch and introduction of initiatives, engagement reports and feedback, pilot outcomes, and recommendations presented to PROG.</p> <p>Professional Development of Researchers</p> <p>A key area of the action plan is to maintain, complement and update the range of workshops, events, information sessions, writing retreats and individual support introduced in the previous period. This notably includes introducing a career development programme for women researchers, support with AI, promoting access to teaching certification and delivering a Crucible programme for fellows.</p> <p>Thanks to the Wellcome funding of the Research Culture NI project, a Research Careers and Employability Officer will be recruited and will develop a comprehensive and integrated suite of career workshops, bite-size sessions, career exploration events and individual support across Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University.</p> <p>A specific piece of work will also aim to promote the usage of the 10 career development days, notably by identifying and showcasing examples of activities undertaken by research staff, and support planning as part of the Personal Development Review process.</p> <p>Delivery, engagement and satisfaction with the overall programme of training, events, one-to-one support and individual initiatives are the principal indicators of success for these priorities.</p>
<p>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]</p>
<p>Environment and Culture</p> <p><i>Institution</i></p> <p>The institution has been reviewing the academic profiles used for progression of academic staff, in order to reward a wider range of contributions. In 2024-25, working groups reviewed different aspects of the exercise, from criteria to process, and proposed changes such as a more narrative approach to the application. Consultation took place over the summer, and refinement will follow in 2025-26.</p>

Two Postdoc Life sessions offered targeted development opportunities: one introducing Queen's Responsible Research Assessment policy and the responsible use of metrics and one focused on computing support for researchers (covering the Northern Ireland High Performance Computing (NI-HPC) service, sustainability considerations in computational research and Queen's Digital Research Toolkit). These sessions were attended by 41 research staff and received a 100% recommendation rate.

In-person and online workshops were delivered to 16 academics, 10 research staff, 3 PGR students and 4 members of professional services staff on good practice in publishing, with a strong focus on the fair attribution of authorship. This was aligned with the launch of the institution's new 'Guidelines on authorship and publication' in February 2025.

Queen's continues to strengthen its support for international staff. In 2024 – 25, new International Staff webpages were launched, providing comprehensive guidance on visa applications and related processes. Dedicated advice is also available for current international students transitioning to work-based visas, ensuring a smooth move from study to employment. The University also has a dedicated staff network for Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and International Staff.

To complement these resources, a detailed International Staff Guide has been developed, offering practical information to help staff settle into life and work at Queen's. Alongside these online resources, the University continues to provide one-to-one advice and support for both new and current international staff, ensuring tailored guidance is available when needed.

Academic Managers of Researchers

A comprehensive resource hub has been developed to support Principal Investigators and other line managers of research staff, with input from the PDC Representatives' Network and PROG. The hub sets out clear expectations for managers across the research staff lifecycle, including recruitment, onboarding, career development, wellbeing, and progression. It consolidates institutional policies, guidance, and external best practice, with a strong focus on enabling managers to support their staff's career development. It also includes resources to help support PIs with their own professional growth and mental health. The hub aims to equip managers to create a positive working environment for their research staff and will be launched alongside an awareness campaign in 2026.

Researchers

The Postdoc Society delivered a varied and successful programme of events, including their annual pizza and networking evening, writing retreats, and social and wellbeing initiatives. A standout new initiative, 'Yoga Sessions for Postdocs', attracted 40 participants across four sessions and received an average rating of 4.8/5. The Society also hosted the annual Postdoc Showcase, themed "Helping to Shape a Better World," which brought together 88 attendees from across the University. In total, Postdoc Society events engaged 201 attendees, achieving an average satisfaction rating of 4.8/5 and 100% recommendation.

At a School level, activities led by postdoc and academic representatives helped to strengthen local research cultures. These included welcoming schemes, coffee mornings, research symposia and seminars, social events and outings and targeted career development initiatives such as the 'Pathway to Independence' fellowship support programme in the School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences. Other activities included mentoring programmes pairing postdocs with PhD researchers, skills workshops (covering topics such as qualitative and quantitative methods and research impact), and family-friendly events.

Queen's seeks to enhance the research environment for fellowship holders by creating networking opportunities, through bi-monthly networking lunches and Faculty Fellows meeting. Fellows can also join peer-coaching groups, and a recent round of the Queen's Staff Coaching Service was provided for fellowship holders. These activities have provided support for Fellows to address workplace and work-life challenges.

Employment

Institution

Further work was carried out to enable the establishment of a Research career pathway. Recommendations have been finalised regarding the roles and profiles, as well as principles for the progression process and draft application forms. This work will continue in 2025-26 as part of a broader programme of work on Enabling Academic Excellence led by the institution's new Provost.

The New Postdoc Induction programme was delivered to 59 research staff, supporting their transition into Queen's by introducing key institutional structures, support services, and development opportunities. The induction programme was enhanced during 2024-25 through direct input from the new Research Careers and

Employability Officer, placing further emphasis on the importance of research staffs' career development and building skills to boost future employment prospects (either within or outside of academic pathways).

An institutional 'Postdoc Parents Network' was established during the 2024-25 reporting period to provide a dedicated space for research staff with parental responsibilities to connect, share experiences and access support. The Network is supported by member-led Network Champions and a family-focused blog.

The Fellowship Academy Operations Group continues 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 and supporting the career development of fellowship holders on fixed-term contracts.

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.

The 'PI hub' resources were developed to strengthen delivery of the Concordat's employment principle by equipping line managers with clear guidance on their responsibilities throughout the research staff employment lifecycle, including recruitment, onboarding, probation, navigating fixed-term contracts, and progression. By consolidating HR policies and best practice in one resource, it promotes consistent, fair and transparent employment practices across the University.

Researchers

In September 2024, 8 PDC Postdoc Awards and 5 commendations were awarded in 'Research', 'Support' and 'Citizenship and Outreach' categories (61 nominations received, mainly from academics but also from research staff and students).

During 2024–25, 14 research staff attended a launch event of the Postdoc Parents Network. The establishment of a dedicated MS Teams channel (with 24 members) provides ongoing peer support and connection. Five members have volunteered as 'Network Champions' to help shape provision and drive the Network's

development. To further promote engagement, a family-friendly blog has been created, featuring contributions from members.

A flagship Careers in the Public Sector event was delivered as part of the Research Culture NI project, attracting 61 researchers. Feedback was extremely positive, with participants rating the event 4.5/5 and giving a 100% recommendation rate. The programme featured speakers from a range of government departments and agencies, including the Department for the Economy (DfE), the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, the Public Health Agency, and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Attendees also benefited from small-group networking sessions, which provided opportunities to ask questions directly and gain practical, first-hand insights into public sector career pathways.

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 27 workshops or programmes designed for research staff in 2024-25 (rating is available for 14 of the courses, reaching an average of 4.8/5). This included the new workshop 'Preparing for your PDR for Research Staff', the new 4-part 'UNIQUE Book Club for Women Researchers' programme and three new careers workshops (detailed further below).

The appointment of a Research Careers and Employability Officer through the Wellcome-funded Research Culture NI project enabled an expanded programme of career development activities in 2024 – 25. Highlights included Career Exploration Interviews with academic and non-academic guests (shared online and via the Theory of the Postdoc Evolution podcast), three new pilot workshops; Career Audit and Skills for the Future, Overcoming Imposter Phenomenon, and Decision Making: Career Choices, and a flagship 'Careers in the Public Sector' event. In total, 266 participants attended these events, which received an average rating of 4.8/5.

The University also supported the certification of research staff for their teaching practice (36 Associate Fellows and 14 Fellows of the HEA) via the Queen's Merit Award.

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.

A survey of how research staff are using their 10 allocated career development days was conducted to gather insights into uptake and impact of the policy. The findings, including real-life examples of activities and good practice are informing the development of enhanced guidance including a series of case studies designed to promote engagement with the policy and showcase its value.

The PDC provided personal support (application feedback, interview preparation and 1:1) in 20 instances, which received an overall 4.9/5 rating and 100% said that they would recommend this service to a colleague. This was complemented by 12 1:1 careers consultations with an external consultant.

Central funding supported 32 research staff with conferences, training, bids and partnerships development, and engagement.

The Fellowship Academy provides a range of opportunities to encourage and support the growth of the community of Fellows at Queen's. This included Funding Circle groups to support research funding applications. A series of Insight sessions were held for Fellows, focused on topics such as commercialisation and entrepreneurship for Fellows and Applying for and Managing a Research Grant.

The Fellowship Academy and PDC have collaborated to provide postdocs with opportunities to meet with fellowship holders to learn from their experience of applying for fellowships. This initiative also includes mentoring of postdocs by the fellowship holders to enable further support for postdocs applying for fellowships.

Academic Managers of Researchers

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

Academic staff within the PDC Representatives' Network were actively involved in the development of a resource hub for the line managers of research staff, providing input and feedback on the content and format of the hub.

Researchers

Research staff from across faculties engaged in institutionally-provided professional development workshops, with 438 research staff attending sessions

specifically designed for postdocs. Additionally, a Networking Event with Fellowship holders from within the University saw 25 attendees and received a 4.9/5 rating.

The Postdoc Group Mentoring scheme had 44 postdocs participating as mentees. This group mentoring programme provides an opportunity for postdocs to explore career options, receive support with career planning and insights into funding and fellowship applications, and other 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 20 postdocs, in addition to 12 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 50 research staff were successful, including 36 at Associate Fellowship level and 14 at 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.

In response to engagement data, including 'no shows', and feedback analysed for new programmes such as the UNiQue book club and new career workshops, we will slightly modify the length and format of these to maximise engagement. This includes increasing in-person sessions for UNiQue and providing more career content as bite-size online 'lunch and learn' sessions. Further promotion of career support, especially one-to-one, as well as investigating the benefits of hot-desking and drop-in opportunities with the Research Careers and Employability Officer will also be undertaken, notably with postdocs in Ulster University.

The expansion of the PDC team, notably through the recruitment of the Research Careers and Employability Officer, and its embedding within a Research Culture team, enabled to enhance the day-to-day provision for postdocs, especially in the careers space. It has also promoted engagement, collaboration and sharing with peer institutions, notably by receiving a 'train the trainer' formation by colleagues from Imperial College London to deliver a workshop in-house in the future, presenting our openly shared new Personal Development Review resources for researchers at the All-Island Research Culture Network Conference and engaging with the Prosper Practice Exchange. In addition to career support and workshops being offered to postdocs from Ulster University, online career exploration events were open to all interested to attend live (and released later as podcasts) and

advertised via the Prosper Portal. We aim to continue to share resources with the sector where possible.

Like many other Higher Education Institutions, Queen's University Belfast is facing financial challenges and measures have been put in place to mitigate spending in 2024-25, with the situation expected to last for a few years.

This included a voluntary severance scheme (VSS) that ran in 2025, resulting in the departure of academic and professional services staff. The organisation and delivery of the VSS required significant staff time and resource, temporarily reducing capacity across key areas – particularly within the People and Culture Directorate. In addition to this short-term impact, the reduction in funding and staffing levels has created an ongoing capacity challenge that continues to affect the delivery of some actions. For example, work to establish bridge funding for research staff was paused as a result. Over the same period, Professional Services underwent a broader restructure, consolidating several directorates and appointing a new Provost. Such changes are delaying the delivery of some actions, such as the launch of new academic profiles and progression as well as the research career pathway, though this is expected to take place in 2026. For the upcoming year, we plan to respond to changes in the institutional (e.g. restructure and reduced funding) and sector (e.g. changes in how REF values research culture and researcher development) in an agile manner, to deliver as much as possible of the daily activities postdocs rely on, as well as to progress longer term policy projects. Some delivery will also be delayed because of the maternity leave of a member of the PDC team.

Outline your key objectives in delivering your plan in the coming reporting period (max 500 words, current 445 words)

In 2025-26, Queen's will continue to deliver its extensive suite of workshops, events, information, reward and support for research staff, including via inductions, in-person and online sessions, mentoring, coaching, podcasts, awards etc., as well as embedding the programmes introduced last year, such as the UNique book club, parents' network and enhanced career development support, in its 'business as usual' provision.

This will notably include another in-person speed-networking event on careers beyond academia and further efforts to engage with postdocs in Ulster University as part of our research culture priority of supporting the career development of postdocs within Northern Ireland as a whole. This will be complemented by direct engagement with local companies and employers to raise awareness of the

postdoc talent pool and better advise postdocs on transitioning their careers outside of universities, as well as investigating ways to gather information on postdoc career destinations.

The work on enabling Academic Excellence, including the review of the academic profiles and progression, and the addition of a research career pathway will be finalised. This will allow for the development of guidance for PIs to appropriately cost research staff on grants as well as investigating best practice in capturing research staff contributions to grant writing and delivery.

A key priority will be the launch of the 'PI Hub', a centralised resource for Principal Investigators and line managers of research staff, developed during the current reporting period. The launch will be accompanied by a targeted awareness campaign to maximise visibility and adoption. This will inform the development of a pilot project to promote and support the design of 'research group handbooks' by research group leaders, as part of the institution's research culture priorities.

Embedding wellbeing support into provision for researchers will remain a priority, including through the development of enhanced resources to inform research staff of the mental health and wellbeing support available to them. Efforts to build community among research staff will also continue, including further development of the Postdoc Parents Network through regular events and consultation to grow membership and engagement, continued support of the Postdoc Society and piloting a dedicated mental health event during National Postdoc Appreciation Week.

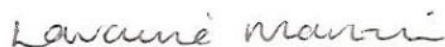
Work on enhancing guidance around the use of career development days will be completed, including publishing case studies showcasing eligible activities and best practice, with the aim to improve the clarity and uptake of this important policy. Furthermore, consultation with the PDC Reps' Network and PROG will assist with the identification of postdoc contributions that are either not captured at all or not appropriately captured by processes and systems and make recommendations for improvement, to ensure appropriate representation of their contributions for processes such as progression, visibility, profile-building and enhanced employability.

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, as well as 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