

University of Birmingham

Researcher Concordat 2016-20 4 Year Review

Purpose

The University of Birmingham (UoB) received its HR Excellence in Research Award reaccreditation in 2016. This document reviews our progress since then and outlines our vision and the practical actions that demonstrate our continued commitment to supporting and developing our research staff. The accompanying 2018-20 Action Plan Review and 2020-22 Action Plan provide more detail on specific achievements and actions for the future.

Background

The University Strategic Framework “Making Important Things Happen” 2015-2020 underpinned our activity in 2016 – 2020. We have created a “vibrant intellectual environment” by cultivating and investing in intellectual talent and ideas. Our commitment to The Concordat through the strategy is evidenced by our intention to “recruit, develop and support talented staff” and to “grow the depth of leadership capacity at the University”.

We are in the very early stages of developing our next strategic framework, which will guide our direction to 2025. Linked to this we are refreshing the career framework of The Birmingham Academic.

Since the first submission in 2011, an underlying principle for Birmingham has been that HR best practice is applied across the entire University. This pragmatic approach provides the most appropriate environment for all staff, including those engaged in research, and best supports the achievement of University goals. However, where there is a demonstrable need, specific support and interventions are applied. Since 2016, local researcher support and development groups have taken a much greater role in creating local opportunities for researcher development and creating a supporting environment. Additionally the University senior leaders have taken a much more active interest in the views of and challenges faced by early career researchers.

As of December 2019 UoB has 1200 staff employed primarily to carry out research. These are distributed as below:-

College of Social Sciences (CoSS)	85
College of Medical and Dental Sciences (CMDS)	405
College of Life and Environmental Sciences (CLES)	221
College of Engineering and Physical Sciences (CEPS)	434
College of Arts and Law (CAL)	55

While overall research staff (RS) matters are the responsibility of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) Research & Knowledge Transfer, the size and diversity of the RS population means that most development and support is designed and carried out locally. In general, this involves College Directors of Research, Heads of School, local researcher representative groups and appropriate specialist support services e.g. College Research Support teams. These are supported by College Heads of HR and College aligned People and Organisational Development (POD) Consultants. Additionally, a Researcher Development Manager for Life Science was appointed. This strategic, permanent, senior management role provides professional and personal development support to 50% of the University’s research staff. The HR Excellence process is managed by POD, reporting to the Director of HR and the HR Leadership Team. A new cross-institutional group, the Researcher Support Development Group, reporting the University Research Committee, was established in 2017. The terms of reference for this group include supporting and sharing of best practice between Colleges and championing change at institutional level.

How the evaluation was undertaken

The primary source of data underpinning this review is the Careers in Research On-line Survey (CROS). We have compared responses from 2017 and 2019. In addition, surveys were also carried out for specific purposes e.g. Induction 2017 & 2019 and programme evaluations e.g. Research Team Leader Programme, CMDS research development programme. The university senior leadership (Vice Chancellor, Registrar and Provost) have also met 3 times per year, with early career researchers, to identify key issues and look for associated solutions. As a result, Colleges have carried out focus groups to explore specific issues in the local context. E.g. Induction, workload allocation and mentoring. College researcher groups continue to review and update local development provision, in consultation with their staff.

They have engaged with researchers on specific topics e.g. teaching development opportunities for ECRs in CEPS. Where appropriate, existing data systems have been used and specialist support teams have contributed to the evaluation e.g. HR, Research Support.

Key Achievements by Concordat Principle

A significant number of policies and guidance documents underpin the development of the HR environment. These are continually reviewed and updated to maintain best practice and ensure compliance with legal and statutory requirements. Recruitment and Selection, Promotion and Appointments, Re-deployment, Equality and Code of Practice for Research have all been updated since 2017.

1. Recruitment, selection & retention of researchers

The University maintains its commitment to best practice in recruitment and selection (R&S).

- Attendance on R&S briefings before sitting on any promotions or selection panels continues to be mandatory. Since September 2019, 161 staff have attended the briefings, which include input on unconscious bias. Additionally, since 2018, the recruitment team have launched quick guides to the recruitment process. This includes guidance on researcher specific elements e.g. Fixed Term Contracts and job description templates.
- A survey of the institutional induction experience was completed in 2017. Key actions implemented following the survey included all Colleges launching induction micro sites and new infographics for academic induction clarifying roles & responsibilities. The survey was repeated in May 2019. This noted that 88% of Research or Teaching focused staff on fixed term contracts who joined in the previous 12 months reported a positive reaction to induction compared to 72% positive in 2017. The CROS 2019 survey revealed a 16% reduction in ECRs not offered University Induction and a 10% reduction in ECRs not offered Department Induction when compared to CROS 2017.

2. Researchers recognised & valued

- When compared to CROS 2017, CROS 2019 revealed a similar response to whether researchers feel they are valued and recognised for their contribution to key activities. The most positive responses remain with respect to publications (78%), grant & funding applications (53%) and public engagement (55%). These are slightly higher than the national responses.
- 79% researchers report feeling integrated into their local research community (CROS2019). This in line with their response in 2017 (81%). 66% report feeling integrated into their department more widely – a slight increase (5%) on CROS 2017. 57% report feeling integrated into the institution's research community. These responses are slightly higher or broadly in line with the national picture as reported by CROS2019.
- Performance Development Review (PDR) remains a challenging area. Only 67% of researchers report engaging with a PDR in the previous two years. This is a 7% drop since 2017 and a similar percentage below the national average.
- During 2018, a number of Colleges recognised their existing PDR process risked a negative impact on reward and recognition for ECRs. This was addressed by requiring PI / Research Leaders to act as PDR reviewers and providing relevant training.
- Unfortunately, there appears to be a consistent downward trend in the perceived general and specific usefulness of PDR for researchers, 55% in 2019 compared with 63% in 2017.

3. Researchers Equipped & Supported; and

4. Personal & Career development of researchers

Progress against these two principles has shown the most significant improvement. Primarily in the provision of local development opportunities and encouraging engagement with these programmes. Since 2016 ...

- All Colleges, in consultation with local staff, now provide an annual programme of researcher development activities. For example across CLES and CEPS 413 staff attended local activities in 2018/19. This is a 4% increase over 2017/18. All Colleges now provide a full range of development support in the area of grant capture. Over 1200 participants have engaged with a variety of opportunities over the previous two academic years.
- Two Colleges have formally announced the expectation that researchers are entitled to 1 day per month for CPD activities.
- Significantly, there has been greater emphasis on providing local careers guidance across the University. Colleges are providing a combination of technical training (e.g. CV and Interview training) and careers seminars to raise awareness of careers within and without academia. This is in response to staff demand.

- The appointment of a Researcher Development Manager for Life Sciences is a permanent, senior management role providing professional and personal development support to 50% of the University's research staff.
- CMDs has maintained its commitment to supporting researcher development through its ongoing funding of dedicated project and administrative support. CLES & CEPS also agreed in October 2017 to provide similar internal funding following the withdrawal of external funds. CoSS and CAL have now also approved funding for administrative support. The appointment of an administrator in CLES/CEPS had an immediate impact on researcher engagement with a variety of support and development activities. It is likely that there will be a similar effect in CAL & CoSS, and that this will result in much more consistent communication and engagement across the University.
- CROS 2019 indicates that 70% of respondents have engaged in more than 2 days training or CPD in the previous 12 months. This is a 4% increase since 2017. Similarly, there has been a 4% reduction in staff engaging in 1 or fewer days training or CPD.
- A consistently high percentage, 75%, of researchers report being encouraged to engage in personal and career management.
- Centrally provided researcher specific training & development activity from POD, has evolved over the period. Researchers appear to value local and specialist provision over central generic development, resulting in a significant reduction in engagement with centrally provided training. This prompted the withdrawal of Impact & Engagement and Career Planning programmes between 2017 and 2020. Grant and Journal Article Writing are still in demand due to their specialist nature(119 participants since January 2018, 88% positive feedback)
- The early career academic leadership development programme has continued to expand. Since September 2017, 87 early career academic staff have attended. This programme continues as the introductory level of the University's integrated leadership development portfolio. Over the same period, 221 senior and mid-level leaders attend their respective programmes. Participants overwhelmingly report a positive impact on developing a broader range of approaches to leading and managing teams, having a positive impact on the organisational climate they create for their teams and developing a personalised approach to leadership.
- Provision from other specialist areas has also evolved. As indicated above, researchers appear to engage more readily with local and or tailored support. The Public Engagement in Research Team has launched a tiered and tailored support programme, which replaces the previous POD programme. They have provided over 100 hours of development activities in 2018/19. The Ethics and Governance team have also updated their on-line and classroom based development tools.

5. Researcher Involvement

- As mentioned above local researcher support and development groups have become increasingly active and collaborative in providing development opportunities and in sharing best practice. Groups meet monthly to identify, plan and review development activities and related topics. Highlights include Early Career Researcher conferences, careers seminars – as part of annual schedule of events, technical support groups.
- Researchers are also represented on the Researcher Support Development Group
- As mentioned above researchers have contributed to a variety of engagement activities across all Colleges. Key topics include Pre / Post Award improvements, probation support, induction, teaching & learning experience opportunities, community building.
- Following a high of 30% participation in 2015, engagement with CROS fell to 21% in 2017 and 19% in 2019. On reflection the 22% increase in and possible broadening of the potential population for the 2019 survey will have had an impact on participation.

6. Equality & Diversity

- CROS 2019 reports that
 - 78% of researchers believe the University is committed to E&D. This is a 12% reduction since 2017
 - 86% of researchers feel they have never been discriminated against – a 4% reduction since 2017
 - 82% of researchers believe they are treated fairly with respect to access to training & development – a 5% reduction since 2017
- We recognise the concerning downward trend in the above results. It is hoped that the review of ED&I activity mentioned below will begin to address this and that the new all staff engagement survey will provide further detail.
- Of the three STEMM Schools remaining to apply for Athena Swan accreditation in 2016 one has achieved Bronze a second submitted their application in November 2019. The final School will submit in April 2020.

- Two non-STEMM schools have now achieved a Bronze Athena Swan award. The remaining schools are working towards this.
- Following a review The University has decided to consolidate its Equality Diversity and Inclusion planning and submission activities. This will ensure consistency, remove duplication of effort and improve efficiency in this area. To this end the overall University Equality Scheme will be updated and re-launched in 2020 to include
 - College level Equality Action Plans
 - Race Equality Charter Submission – February 2020
 - Institutional Athena Swan resubmission
 - Individual School Athena Swan (re)submissions.
- The institutional Athena Swan action plan includes researcher specific career development actions and benchmarks for female academics

7. Regular Review

Review activity over the last four years has included

- CROS 2017 and 2019
- Local surveys and review of RS support activity by College support networks
- Specific data recording RS development interventions as a distinct population within UoB
- Specific evaluation of researcher specific central training activity
- Annual reporting to Research & Knowledge Transfer Committee

Actions for the future

Birmingham 2026 is an ambitious yet achievable plan to raise the academic performance of the University by growing research activity and increasing our student and staff numbers over the next decade. This includes the aim to recruit 1400 new academics and research focused staff.

To facilitate this ambition the University is embarking on two important initiatives, which will underpin our commitment to the Concordat

- We are beginning work on our **“Strategy 2020 – 2025”**. This includes a specific theme of People and Culture, and recognises the central importance of people to delivering our strategy, and the ways in which we can continue to develop a vibrant culture. Key aspects will include academic career pathways, equality and diversity, and workplace wellbeing.
- In addition, we have begun the process of refreshing the **Birmingham Academic Career Framework**. Key work-streams include
 - Career Pathways
 - Academic Development Programme
 - Early Career Staff

The Early Career Staff work-stream clearly aligns with the target population of the 2019 Concordat. Its key milestones is to develop “A programme of support for the development and progression of early career staff to be devised and embedded in each College”. This work, in conjunction with the other work-streams will create a consistent framework and environment across the University that will support new and developing academic staff. Proposals for career pathways and the associated development programme will be submitted by October 2020.

The University will also launch its next “Have Your Say” survey in January 2020. This will provide a benchmark across all staff groups for Engagement, Wellbeing and Leadership & communication.

Key Area of Focus	Key Principle
Environment & Culture	
• Develop People & Culture themes within the “Strategy 2020 – 2025”	1,2,6
• Identify key researcher related actions emerging from the Have Your Say survey	2,5,7
• Carry out a gap analysis that identifies the University’s alignment with the 2019 Concordat	1,2,7
Employment / Professional & Career Development	
• Clarify potential academic career pathways	3,4
• Deliver a development programme to support new and early career academic staff	3,4
• Review in more detail completion and quality of academic PDR	2,3,4,

As these key activities are in their very early stages of development, more detailed outputs and measures of success will evolve over the next 12 months.