

HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH AWARD

Bangor University Ten Year External Evaluation and Review – 2022

1 Introduction – Institutional Context

Bangor University (BU) is a research-intensive institution comprising three Colleges: Environmental Sciences and Engineering (3 schools), Human Sciences (3 schools) and Arts, Humanities and Business (3 schools). There are 280 academic staff on Teaching & Research contracts and 227 research-only staff, the majority of which are on fixed-term research contracts (209/227). The University has 730 post-graduate researchers.

The impact of Covid-19 over the last 2 years led to huge volatility in the HE sector. The University suffered from a loss of income from student fees, student residences, catering and other commercial operations. This impact meant that savings were necessary which led to a University-wide restructuring which resulted in a challenging institutional context over the last 2 years. The restructures and changes in staffing have directly impacted the Concordat agenda and our ability to implement elements of the previous Action Plan due to the losses of key personnel and changes to roles/structures.

We have therefore had to refocus and redefine parts of our Action plan in order for it to map onto the new structures and responsibilities as well as the new strategic direction of the University coming out of challenging circumstances. Despite these challenges, we have made considerable progress towards achieving the objectives highlighted in the University's 2020 Concordat Action Plan.

2 The Review Process

The evaluation of BU's Concordat Action Plan against the objectives identified in 2020 was overseen by the University's Strategic Concordat Group (SCG). The SCG ensures the Concordat Action Plan meets the strategic requirements of the University and monitors its progress. The principles of the Concordat fall within the remit of both the Research Strategy Group and the HR Task Group; the SCG therefore has representation from both: the PVC for Research and Innovation (Chair), the Director of HR, the Chair of the Researcher Development and Concordat Group (RDCG), the Interim Director of the Integrated Research and Impact Service (IRIS), the Dean of Postgraduate Research, and the Athena Swan & Research Concordat Manager (Secretary). The SCG reports to the University Executive. The PVC for Research and Innovation chairs both the SCG and Research Strategy Group.

The RDCG provides a forum to discuss and recommend actions to support researcher development at BU. The RDCG consists of six academic/research representatives (two representatives from each College; at least one from each College is an ECR), a PGR representative, representatives from IRIS, the Doctoral School, HR and Digital Service. The RDCG reports to the University Research Strategy Group via the Chair. The six academic/ research staff are the key link between the RDCG and the researchers in the Colleges; they sit on and report to their respective College Research Committees. RDCG meeting minutes are also available on the Researcher Development web site.

3 How Researchers' views were taken into account

The input of staff and PGRs is key to the evaluation and development of the University's new Concordat Action Plan and researchers' views have been taken into account via a number of avenues including:

- A "Concordat Survey" was sent to all research-only and T&R staff
- University Staff Survey 2022
- The academic/research representatives on the RDCG invite feedback/input from all researchers in their respective Colleges via online "suggestion box" surveys ahead of each quarterly RDCG meeting
- ECR Networks in Schools of Ocean Sciences and Medical & Health Sciences were consulted to discuss what early career researchers would like included in the new Action Plan; the session was open to ECRs from across BU (13 attended).
- College Institute Directors and College PGR Directors were consulted on the development of the Action plan, invited to add comments/suggestions to the shared document and encouraged to share with others in their Colleges.

- The PVC Research & Innovation led a session with staff who had completed the Research Leadership Programme 21/22 to identify next steps in terms of their development as well as the development of the programme.
- The parts of the Action Plan highlighting Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and bullying/harassment were informed via Concordat updates at BU's Athena Swan Committee (which has academic representation from each School and a Contract Research Staff representative), as well as a focus group with ECRs and PIs discussing issues around Sexual Harassment on Research Fieldtrips.
- A focus group on the impact of remote working on Contract research staff during the pandemic (14 attended).
- The action plan was also shared with UCU for information.

4 Key Achievements and progress against the Concordat Principles since the 8-year Review

The key objectives in our eight-year plan were to:

1. Ensure that researcher's health and wellbeing are promoted and supported, and to ensure that researchers' workloads are effectively managed in the University to ensure good work life balance (Environment and Culture).
2. Improve support and management for fixed term contract staff and ensure that all eligible staff are provided with open ended contracts after 4 years employment; to standardise induction best practice for all new researchers, and to review the promotion and progression process and criteria to ensure an equitable and transparent system to support researcher career development. (Employment)
3. Develop a comprehensive development provision which will ensure that early career researchers can undertake 10 days professional development; to ensure that all researchers have a formal opportunity to discuss their career development and objectives through the PDR process, and to ensure that all research managers have the confidence and skills to effectively and positively lead research staff. (Professional & Career Development).

These objectives have been met; some measures have been superseded and others impacted by the pandemic. Specific measures of progress in relation to these objectives are noted below and in the Action Plan update.

Principle 1 – Environment and Culture

- BU's Health & Wellbeing (HWB) strategy was published in December 2021. An Associate PVC for HWB, a HWB Project Manager and a HWB Project coordinator have been appointed. A number of HWB initiatives specifically aimed at researchers (funded by HEFCW) were offered in 2021, including a workshop on "Staying well in your research career" and a social (outdoor) event during remote working with the aim of supporting networking and reducing staff isolation.
- The workload allocation model was piloted in four Schools during 21/22; a review of draft tariffs is currently being undertaken.
- In REF 2021, 4 of our 9 UoAs were in the top 20 in terms of Research Environment (one in top 5).
- Commitment and progress towards embedding EDI has been evidenced via four successful School Athena Swan Bronze awards since 2020.
- A four-year Strategic Equality Plan (2020-24) has been developed in consultation with staff.

Principle 2 – Employment

- Anti-Casualisation Group (a joint HR and UCU group) has developed a new draft fixed-term contract policy. In addition, a Bridging scheme policy has been developed that will support the retention of contract research staff.
- Researcher Inductions are held twice a year and all new research staff are invited to attend. The University's commitment to the Concordat and development opportunities are highlighted in the induction. A welcome email is sent to new research staff in the first weeks of their employment.
- A review of the University's promotion policy, process and criteria has been undertaken to ensure criteria for success are transparent therefore providing candidates with a clear pathway to promotion.

Principle 3 – Professional & Career Development

- A comprehensive Researcher Development Programme was re-launched in March 2022 (following the restructure of our research support office and Covid-related impact on delivery of training). The majority of sessions are delivered by IRIS with Digital Services, HR, Doctoral School and Corporate Communications also contributing sessions. A total of 36 sessions were delivered during 21/22 with over 300 attendees across all sessions.
- BU has committed to the Welsh Crucible, an award-winning, pan-Wales Research leadership programme (funded by HEFCW and participating institutions) for another 3 years.
- A joint Research Leadership Programme with Aberystwyth University 21/22 was undertaken with 12 participants from each institution taking part.
- The Academic Mentoring Scheme and Senior Academic Mentoring Scheme is now in its 4th year. A total of 105 mentoring pairs were matched in the first three years of the scheme.
- Ongoing support for ECRs centrally and at School-level with ECR networks in the School of Ocean Sciences and the School of Medical and Health Sciences being particularly active.
- Regular Doctoral School and HR meetings are held in order to jointly develop researcher support in areas such as EDI, Health & Well-being and Careers.
- KESS 2 and KESS 2 East, ESF funded projects led by Bangor on behalf of the HE Sector in Wales, offer funded PhD and Research Masters opportunities (550 projects in Wales), in collaboration with a company partner that create opportunities for academics to develop research links outside academia and opportunities for co-supervision. These industrial links frequently lead to larger grants.
- 155 PhD Supervisors have completed the Effective Doctoral Supervision and Examining Doctoral Candidates training delivered by the Doctoral School since 2020.

5 Next Steps – 2022-2025 Action Plan

Our key objectives support both the University's Research Strategy and the People and Talent Strategy and further enhance and develop key objectives defined in our previous Action Plan:

ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE

1. Building an inclusive, supportive and fair research culture by embedding EDI into our policies and processes (ECI3a-e; ECR4a+b; ECM1a+b; ECR2a).

EMPLOYMENT

2. Implementing and reviewing the launch and take up of the Bridging Support Scheme support scheme. Continue to work with the Trade Unions on the process of transferring research staff from fixed-term to open ended contracts (EI6a+b).

PROFESSIONAL AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

3. Supporting and developing midcareer researchers. This is key to identifying and developing future research leaders (PCDI4a-d).

4. Continue to implement 10 days CPD: Emphasis on developing comprehensive Researcher Development programme and communicating responsibilities of PIs/managers of researchers in regards to supporting and developing research staff (PCDI1a-i; PCDI5a+b; PCDI6a; ECI4c).

The SCG is committed to implementing the action plan and thereby enhancing the research environment at BU. The action plan has been developed jointly by key departments/ individuals supporting researchers and research at BU, ensuring shared responsibility for the implementation of the principles of the Concordat across the Institution.