

Concordat to Support the Career Development of Research Staff and European Commission HR Excellence in Research Badge

Introduction

The University of Bedfordshire received the *European Commission HR Excellence in Research Award* in 2013 and this was renewed in 2015. The award recognises the University's commitment to supporting the career development of researchers in accordance with the *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Research Staff*. This report summarises the new actions presented in the updated action plan for 2019-2021, which reflects the University's new Strategic plan and the activities in preparation for REF2021.

Research at the University of Bedfordshire is organised through its ten Research Institutes, each of which is located within one of the university's four faculties: The Bedford Business School; Creative Arts, Technology and Sport; Education and Sport; and Health and Social Sciences. The Research Institutes are not only the centres of research expertise and excellence within the University: they are also responsible for the supervision of postgraduate research students and the training and career development of research staff. As such, they organise training activities, seminars, and conferences, and provide mentoring for early career researchers those who have come to the university as experienced professionals but who have less experience of academic research. There are additionally a number of specialised research centres and groups across the university, which attract significant external research funding, visiting scholars and postgraduate research students.

There are currently 213 members of Research Institutes, with full members (research-active staff with significant responsibility for research) comprising approximately 45% of the membership (95 staff), and associate members (ECRs and research-active staff without significant responsibility for research) making up 55% of the total (118 staff). The University provides opportunities for CPD in research both centrally and at the Research Institute level.

There is a central Research Skills Development Programme developed and overseen by the newly appointed Head of Research Development (from November 2018); the sessions, representing the four quadrants of the Vitae RDF, are generic and therefore delivered to staff and students across the University. The teams delivering these sessions comprise research active senior academics and central services providing support for research. The programme covers generic research skills development, procedural training, regulatory and practice updates, and training for PGR supervisors, examiners and viva chairs.

There are currently just over 400 Postgraduate research students registered at the university across MA and MSc by Research and doctoral programmes including a range of professional doctorates. Approximately 55% of the group are UK/EU students, and approximately 55% are full-time. The largest numbers of students are in the Business and Management Research Institute; the Institute for Health Research; the Institute for Applied Social Research; and the Institute for Research in Applied Computing.

The review of the action plan has been framed by two major university initiatives, each of which has implications for the support and career development of researchers. The first of these is the new University Strategic Plan, which identifies research as one of its priority areas and makes explicit reference to the development of PGR students, early career researchers, mid career research leadership capacity, and the development of a self-sustaining research infrastructure. The action

plan presented in relation to the *Concordat* aligns well with the University Strategic Plan. As the strategic plan is developed and put into operation, this will be reflected in the elaboration of the action plan; and the monitoring and evaluation processes put in place to support work on the *Concordat* will in turn feed into reflection and review on broader strategic priorities.

A further development has been the expansion of the original role of Director of Research Development into that of Head of Research Development (HRD) with a remit aligned to the concerns of the *Concordat*. This has improved oversight and liaison between the different departments across the university concerned with research and researcher development.

The Evaluation and Action Plan Development Process

Following the existing procedure (as outlined in the Action Plan 2017-19), the plan underwent the internal evaluation through the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee which disseminated the Action Plan to the Directors of Research Institutes (9 institutes). The plan was then discussed at the Research Institute boards (on which ECRs and PGR students are represented), and the outcome of the discussion was sent to the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee for incorporation in the plan. This document reflects the changes in the University research culture and reflects the development of the new Strategic Plan (to come into force from January 2020).

Information collected and reviewed included: Research Institute reports; records of participation in training and CPD activities; details and evaluations of training programmes and events, both centrally delivered and Research Institute-specific; and the development of the REF Code of Practice. The findings informed the 2019-21 Action Plan, with particular focus on the new HR practices (the new periodic review system) and preparation for REF. Several scoping exercises were also conducted, including research mentoring practices, support for early career researchers to develop as PGR supervisors, and the use of research data management plans for PGR projects and research projects.

In summary, the evaluation continued the practice established for the previous evaluation cycle (2017-19) and synthesised a number of information sources from the UK higher education sector, university-wide planning and evaluation processes, reports from institutes and university services, and scoping exercises to gain deep understanding of the sector-wide practices and the way the University's practices compare to these.

Achievements and Progress

The following represent particular areas of progress, highlights and successful implementations; further information about each of the examples provided can be found in the Action Plan. The evaluation process identified areas of success (e.g. the implementation of the new PDA system; re-structuring of the UREC; updating of the ToRs for Research Institutes), and the areas where more concerted effort was needed to provide consistent and effective support for researchers (e.g. generic research skills training; research ethics and integrity training with the focus on research data management).

The key achievement of the 2017-19 cycle that pertains specifically to researcher development is the development of a university-wide programme of research training and development, mapped against the RDF (Actions 2C, 3E). The programme combines delivery of generic research skills development sessions by the Head of Research Development, Library and Information Services, Research Graduate School, Communication Services (for academic language support), and other central services; these are complemented by the discipline-specific delivery at the Research Institute level. Attendance monitoring is carried out by the Research Graduate School.

The programme includes a suite of training for PGR supervisors, examiners and viva chairs; attendance of these sessions is compulsory for all involved in PGR supervision and examination. The

Research Graduate School monitors attendance and liaises with the Directors of the Research Institutes to ensure that PGR supervisors attend refresher courses every two years to keep up to date with the regulatory and practice changes. Continuous attendance monitoring aims to ensure that at least 75% of current supervisors are up to date on training by the end of 2019-20 and the remaining 25% catch up within 18 months.

Since the introduction of training for examiners and chairs, all eligible academics are expected to attend these sessions; at present 40% of eligible viva chairs have completed training and we are expecting to have at least 75% of eligible viva chairs to complete the training by the end of the 2020-21 academic year. For examiners, the numbers are 25% completion to date and at least 60% completion by the end of 2020-21. Recent changes to the PGR regulations strengthen this commitment by specifying that, when being considered for appointment to supervise, examine or chair vivas, supervisors, examiners and viva chairs are to be fully aware of the current regulatory and practice requirements.

Future Strategy

The Action Plan will align with, inform and be informed by, current University-wide initiatives (the Strategic Plan and preparations for the next REF).

Given the timescale these larger scale developments and the proposed actions in the plan, we anticipate conducting regular reviews as indicated in the action plan, and a substantive evaluation of progress and outcomes against the action plan in two years' time (2021).

Key developments over the period 2019-21 will include:

- Continue to integrate the new Research Skills Development Programme (including the mid-career research skills development suite – Action 3E) into a wider Staff Development training provision and monitor staff uptake of the sessions (Action 5D). We will continue to monitor staff uptake of the session, aiming for the annual increase in attendance by early career researchers from 10% (currently) to 25% by the end of 2019-20 and 50% by the end of 2020-21;
- Develop a research and research supervision mentoring scheme to increase the number of research active staff and eligible research degree supervisors (Action 2F). We aim to provide at least 20 mentors by the end of 2019-20 with the view to increase the number to 40 by the end of 2020-21, with the uptake of the provision at 3-5 mentees per mentor. For the programme to be successful, by the end of 2020-21, it will produce at least 100 PGR supervisors eligible to supervise without mentoring, thus significantly increasing supervision capacity, particularly in the areas where supervision capacity is low (e.g. Business – we aim to add at least 30 mentored supervisors in this Research Institute by the end of 2020-21);
- Establish the Research Data Management Plan support system involving a variety of central services and with support from Research Institutes (Action 5C). By the end of 2019-20, all PGR students enrolled from October 2019 will be implementing Research Data Management Plans into their primary data collection cycle; by the end of 2020-21, a University-wide Research Data Management system will be available to students and staff;
- Organise participation in CROS or a similar feedback mechanism to systematically collect data on researcher experience (Action 4B). A successful outcome will be at least 60% participation from researchers, with at least 75% satisfaction with the training and support provided;
- To align the actions set out in the action plan with the University's strategic priority to "develop our research environment to engage with our communities in addressing significant challenges, regionally, nationally and internationally" (Action 2G). A successful outcome will be the incorporation of researcher development into the University's strategic plan with research figuring prominently in the periodic review and a transparent process of monitoring and evaluation of PGR supervision at the Faculty level.