



## 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 presents the findings of the University of Bedfordshire's internal evaluation in relation to the principles set out in the *Concordat*, and reviews progress against the actions set out in the 2-year action plan for 2015-2017, which was presented as part of the 2015 submission. This report also outlines the University's future strategy for researcher development and summarises the new actions presented in the updated action plan for 2017-2019, which accompanies this report.

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.

Following the REF in 2014, a review of Research Institute membership, focus and management took place as part of a programme of research development and intensification. Research Institutes identified focal areas for research activity and developed programmes to support those researchers already producing high quality and high-impact research outputs, while at the same time putting in place programmes of research capacity building. These are reflected in a wide range of mentoring schemes; seminars, workshops and conferences; research training programmes at institute, faculty and university level; research leave schemes and mini-sabbaticals; and seed funding of research projects. Progress and future planning in all of these areas were addressed in a review of REF Units of Assessment in the autumn of 2016, the outcomes of which were one source of evidence for this report.

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 introduction of an online Performance Development and Appraisal (PDA) process that supports the review of achievements against objectives and positive values-based behaviours. The new process, which was developed though an institution-wide working group will allow easier integration of

information relating to research activities, objectives and training needs with other professional development. The PDA process is not solely concerned with short-term objectives and additionally encourages reflection and planning related to mid-to-long term career development, aligning it well with the requirements of the *Concordat*.

The second initiative is a new University Strategic Plan for 2017-2019, the timeframe of which is similar to that of the two-year action plan that accompanies this report. This strategic plan identifies research as one of six 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 establishment of the role of Director of Research Development (DRD) with a remit aligned to the concerns of the *Concordat*. This has improved oversight and liaison between the different groups and individuals across the university concerned with research and researcher development.

## The Evaluation and Action Plan Development Process

The Director of Research Development (DRD) managed the evaluation, with support from staff in Human Resources, the Innovation and Enterprise Service, the Centre for Learning Excellence and the Research Graduate School. Directors of Research Institutes provided information and feedback on the action plan and progress against it, both as senior researchers, and as representatives of their respective institutes, the boards of which now include PGR students and staff at different stages in their research careers.

Information collected and reviewed included: Research Institute reports; records of participation in training and CPD activities; details and evaluations of training programmes and events; and submissions made to the internal mid-term REF review. The task group who developed the section of the *University Strategic Plan* concerned with research included researchers at all stages of their careers, drawn from across the university. A university-wide review of research ethics, carried out in 2016, also involved researchers at all stages of their research career development, as well as those involved in training of students and staff. The findings of this review have informed elements of the action plan. PGR students, who are represented at meetings of the Research Degrees Committee, were consulted on PGR training needs and student research environment through the PGR student forum. To complement these sources of evaluation evidence, a series of interviews framed by the principles of the *Concordat* and the 2015-2017 action plan were conducted by the DRD. These involved researchers at different stages of their research career development and included staff who are were not currently full or associate members of research institutes: early career researchers, 'career change' researchers, and those working in central university services.

In summary, the evaluation brought together information gathered as part of other university wide planning and review processes; regular reports from institutes and university services; monitoring and evaluation data from a range of sources; and additional qualitative and quantitative data gathered specifically as part of the review of the action plan.

## 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.

## **Concordat Principles 1 (Recruitment, Selection and Retention) and 2 (Recognition and Value)**

Systems to ensure equitable recruitment and career progression for research staff are well established in policy and practice. Progress has been made with respect to reduction in the number of staff on fixed term contracts, with the onus being placed on managers to justify the rationale for such appointments. Schemes to reward achievement and encourage application to senior titles have been promoted to staff, with criteria related to research being made clearer. A significant development in this area is the introduction of the new Professional Development and Appraisal process, which has been designed to support the setting of both short-term objectives and longer-term career planning, and which is tailored to support personal research capacity development alongside other aspects of professional development.

Alongside this, improved communication and liaison between Research Institutes, providers of central services such as the Research Graduate School, and the Bid Support Unit of the Innovation and Enterprise Services; the opening up of events organised by Research Institutes to broader audiences across the university; improved publicity, events management and online booking of events; and the use of mentoring and review processes to encourage staff to identify training needs and development opportunities.

The identification of research as a priority in the Strategic Plan has been welcomed by researchers and provides a framework to undertake further development work in this area, as outlined in the Action Plan 2017-2019.

## **Concordat Principle 3 (Support for Adaptable and Flexible Researchers)**

Existing professional development opportunities have been better-coordinated and new programmes and events have been introduced. Mapping training and development opportunities from the many providers across the university against the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) has allowed the identification of training and support needs and has led to innovative provision. As the RDF has become better established, it has allowed more responsive and targeted provision of training and support, to which consultation through Research Institute Boards and the PGR Student Forum has also contributed. Examples include:

- The development of the Innovation and Enterprise Service 'Professional Practitioner' programme, which addresses a range of areas within RDF Domains B, C and D including research funding application processes, project funding and management, open access publishing and IPR.
- The subsequent tailoring of some elements of this programme for researchers in particular disciplinary areas; and for PGR students approaching the end of their programmes of study who highlighted the need for advice and training about seeking post-doctoral positions and funding.
- The identification through content mapping and PGR student feedback of priority areas for research training was limited; leading to the introduction of new training activities and a day-conference on 'Creativity in Research', explicitly addressing RDF Subdomain A3.

A particularly positive development is the increasing numbers of staff participating in applications for research funding, including early career researchers, some undertaking PI roles for the first time.

## **Concordat Principle 4 (The Personal and Career Development of Researchers)**

In response to requests from PGR students who wished to receive recognition for teaching activities, as well as in response to the requirements of the *Concordat* and the RDF, the University Professional Teaching Scheme (PTS), a portfolio-based route to Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy has been made available to staff and PGR students; uptake of this has been limited for practical reasons. However, a less time-intensive 'Teaching and Supporting Learning in HE' course leading to the award of HEA Associate has been very successfully introduced, with 60 students currently enrolled.

All Research Institute boards have representation from PGR students and research active staff who have not, as yet, achieved Research Institute membership. The participation of these groups in this way has provided a valuable mechanism for consultation and feedback.

### **Concordat Principle 5 (Supporting Pro-Active Researchers)**

PGR Student, PGR Supervisor and New Research Staff induction now features the RDF as a central element. It is used as the basis of the regular Training Needs Analysis that is carried out by students in consultation with their supervisors. Induction for PGR students now includes information about external sources of research training and support such as Doctoral Training Centres, and external training events, conferences, and publication opportunities targeted at students and early career researchers are publicised through the online community run by the Research Graduate School.

### **Concordat Principles 6 (Diversity and Equality) and 7 (Sector Wide Development and Review)**

Policy and monitoring procedures are well established in relation to Diversity and Equality. The new PDA process, which is behaviour based includes specific behaviours concerned with equality and diversity issues. The University engages with VITAE and UKCGE and has drawn on resources in order to inform many of the initiatives outlined above. Research proposals draw on the *Concordat* and cite the award of the *HR Excellence in Research* badge to evidence our HR practices and commitment to researcher development and capacity building.

## **Future Strategy**

The Action Plan will align with, inform and be informed by, current University-wide initiatives (the Strategic Plan, the implementation of the PDA 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 (2019).

Key developments over the period 2017-2019 will include:

- Continuing development of a university-wide programme of research training and development, mapped against the RDF and other CPD frameworks where appropriate (Actions 2C, 3E) including the development of programmes of development (RDF 'lenses') tailored for specific groups of researchers - notably 'career change' researchers in different areas (Action 2C).
- The development of existing resources and provision into a comprehensive programme of research ethics training and support for researchers at all stages of their development, framed within the broader notion of research integrity as set out in the Concordat to Support Research Integrity (Action 5F).
- Exploration of the viability of a Masters in Research Methods programme (Action 5G).
- Investigate of the potential for, and benefits of, participation in CROS or a similar feedback mechanism to systematically collect data on researcher experience (Action 4B).
- The establishment of an Early Career Researcher Forum (Action 7E). This will involve researchers representing the range of ECR's now identified by Research Councils UK (pre-doctoral, post-doctoral, independent) as well as 'career change' researchers. Amongst the roles for this group would be the regular review of the action plan for which they would act as an evaluation panel.
- 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).