

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

## Universities and Research Institutes

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| Date statement sent to Researcher Development Concordat secretariat via <a href="mailto:CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk">CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk</a> | 12 December 2024   |

**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 (max 500 words)**

Ulster University's People, Place and Partnership Strategy articulates the University's vision for embedding a research culture that promotes an inclusive environment for researchers at every stage of their professional journey. Enhancing the working lives and creating development opportunities for staff are key priorities within the Plan.

The University aims to realise these visions through the development of Operational Plans across all key functions, and through the ongoing implementation of action plans for the Vitae HR Excellence in Research Award, Technician Commitment, Athena Swan, and the Concordat for the Career Development of Researchers ('the Concordat'). The University is currently preparing its first submission to the Race Equality Charter and has recently achieved an institutional Silver Athena Swan Award in recognition of its commitment to gender equality.

Directly aligning with principles of the Researcher Development Concordat, the University's Values of Inclusion, Integrity, Enhancing Potential and Collaboration set the tone for the culture across the multi-campus university, fostering a supportive and inclusive research environment and guiding researchers to excel in their career ambitions.

Building upon the University's highest ever performance in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021, the University recognises that diversity in thought, background, and expertise is essential in the pursuit of excellence in research. This has been reflected in the University's Research Strategy 2023-2028. Co-developed and informed by the work of over 300 staff and PhD researchers, the insights and recommendations identified key themes to nurture the University's research community and culture, including: Career Development; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI); Practice as Research; Research Leadership and Open Research.

The University has held the HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award since 2012. Underpinned with a themed action plan based on the principles of the Concordat, the Award recognises the University's commitment to the professional and career development of researchers.

The establishment of The Doctoral College, demonstrates the high importance that the University places upon the researcher pipeline, with a particular emphasis on

the cultivation of innovative interdisciplinary research and the further internationalisation of the University's PhD researcher community. The Doctoral College provides a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme of over 150 face to face and online workshops, PhD researcher-led initiatives and personal development activities, directly mapped to Vitae's Researcher Development Framework with participation from 75% of the total PhD Researcher cohort. This Programme is complemented by a programme of events designed to enhance the research culture and community for the University's PhD Researchers, for example, the annual Festival of PhD Research, which was recognised through Ulster's Doctoral Development Manager's shortlisted nomination at the inaugural Vitae Impact, Culture and Engagement (ICE) Awards in 2023.

The latest Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES 2023) placed Ulster University 4th in the UK for postgraduate researcher satisfaction. The national benchmarking exercise surveyed postgraduate research students from 105 universities across the UK about their postgraduate research experience.

Integral to the transformational change at the University, has been the appointment of the Dean of Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility to develop and support sustainability initiatives with research staff, PhD researchers and external partners across research activities. The first Dean of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion was also appointed in 2023, to provide strategic leadership and oversight in relation to the University's focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

The strategic re-alignment has also been supported with the appointment of a new Research Culture Manager. Recognising the importance of enhancing research culture, the Wellcome Trust launched an 'Institutional Funding for Research Culture' initiative in 2023, inviting 43 universities from the UK and Ireland to apply for grants. Ulster University partnered with Queen's University, Belfast (QUB), to secure approximately £660,000 over two years (2024–2026) to establish Research Culture NI, which is dedicated to building a cohesive, inclusive and vibrant research and innovation ecosystem in Northern Ireland.

Acknowledging the key role of colleagues in professional services to support researchers, the University is involved in a number of external Networks, such as the All-Island Research Culture Network led by University College Dublin, Ulster University and QUB. The University is represented on the steering group for the pilot Vitae Peer Mentoring Circles Steering Group. The group-based approach aims to facilitate sharing of knowledge and good practice, and the creation of small, accessible professional networks for researcher developers.

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 (*max 600 words*)

### **Environment and culture**

Integral to the Concordat Action Plan 2022-2025, is the commitment by the University to foster an inclusive, supportive and positive research culture that promotes diversity, equality and open communication.

By raising awareness of the Concordat and embedding the Concordat Principles into the University's systems and processes, the University has implemented several new policies that go beyond what was originally anticipated in the plan, including the development of a Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework.

During the academic year 2023/24, the University undertook a comprehensive and wide-ranging survey to secure and act upon feedback from employees. 63% of staff responded to the Valuing Voices survey, with responses from Contract Research Staff (CRS) at the higher rate of 71%. The Survey has been followed up with an extensive programme of engagement including focus groups, panels and campus conversations, to support the development of a detailed action plan. Researchers are represented on both the Valuing Voices Oversight Group and the Employee Experience Panel. Launched in September 2024, the Action Plan has six key themes, including Workload, People Development and Employee Wellbeing, with actions aligned to the Concordat Principles.

As part of the Research Culture NI initiative, the University will be involved in leading a cross-sectoral Steering Group to examine the wider research culture and disseminate findings at an all-island level through participation in a new All-Island Research Culture Network.

### **Employment**

In line with commitments in the Concordat Action Plan and in the University's People and Culture Operational Plan, there is a dedicated resource across the Portfolio that supports 'Investment in People', with a focus on recruitment and onboarding; recognition, reward and promotion; training and development.

The University has placed renewed emphasis on Induction, with Welcome Events taking place every four months, and rotating around all campuses. Since 2022, the New Colleague Welcome and Experience initiative, which gives a holistic overview of the University, is hosted by the Senior Leadership Team with the Vice-Chancellor also attending and meeting new staff. As part of the induction journey and the University's ambition to create a sense of belonging, the Researcher and EDI Staff Networks are in attendance to provide support and to provide an opportunity for new staff to join the respective networks. Complementing the Corporate Induction, there are eight scheduled Introduction to Research Support Services each year, to support new colleagues. The session covers all areas of Research and Innovation; Research Training Programmes; Research Systems and Introduction to the PURE online research portal.

The University is currently engaging in consultation and negotiation meetings with Trade Unions on the review of policies, including the Academic Promotions Scheme; the Academic Workload Allocations Model; and Professorial Salary Progression. Since its introduction in October 2022, the Workplace Agreement has been successfully implemented supporting pathways to permanency for fixed term contract staff including contract researchers.

### **Professional Development of Researchers**

The University recognises the importance of continuous professional and career development and is committed to providing opportunities, structured support, encouragement, and time for researchers to engage in professional development.

The Academic Workload Allocations Model, which is currently under review in consultation with Trade Unions, aims to allocate Continued Professional Development that goes beyond the commitments in the Concordat Action Plan.

The University invested in a suite of e-learning modules, 'Advancing your Research Career – Strategies for Research Leadership.' Taking a streamlined, modular approach, the course helps ensure that researchers' career goals are well-articulated and supported by a professional knowledge base. The 10 modules can be taken at any time, and each recorded as CPD on the University's Learning Management System.

Within the People and Culture Portfolio, there is now a dedicated People Partner to support Research and Innovation, including support to advance the actions in the Concordat Action Plan.

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]

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| <p><b>Environment and Culture (max 600 words)</b></p> | <p><u>Institution</u></p> <p>The Research Staff Hub was developed, launched and widely promoted to Researchers through all-staff communications and an article on 'Insight' – the internal news channel for staff. The Hub includes an engaging section dedicated to the Concordat and links to events and training on Wellbeing; Researcher Resources; CPD opportunities and training; and Networking at Ulster University. Signposting to the Hub and the Concordat Principles is included each week in a bulletin to Researchers.</p> <p>The Researcher Network was established and met in October 2024. The online meeting was attended by 45 Research colleagues at various stages of their career journey, along with the Director of Research and Innovation and several Research Directors. Following social engagements on all three campuses with the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research, Campus Champions have volunteered to Co-Lead the Network, which will be officially launched at the Belfast Campus in December.</p> <p>The Network primarily provides a space for social engagement across multiple disciplines with colleagues from other campuses and with researchers at all stages of their professional career. The Network will also provide a platform to raise the researcher voice and for the group to network with senior decision makers.</p> <p><u>Academic Managers of Researchers</u></p> <p>There is now regular engagement with Research Directors to raise visibility of the Concordat, including through the Research Directors Forum, to help elevate the profile of the</p> |
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Concordat Principles and the commitments therein for the University.

The Doctoral College has been running the well-established Supervisor Development Programme at the University since 2017. This programme offers a suite of training aligned to the UK Council for Graduate Education Good Supervisory Practice Framework, and is promoted on various platforms, including the Research Staff Hub. The programme is informed by a Supervisor Development Working Group with representation from across Faculties, Research Directors, Postgraduate Tutors, People and Culture and the Centre for Professional Practice Enhancement. Training includes: PhD Supervision Induction; PhD Supervision – Giving Effective Feedback; Supporting PhD Writing; and Chairing/Examining a Viva. Feedback is collated at each session to help measure the impact and to inform future training programmes.

This formal training is complemented by the PhD Supervisor Network, which is a new community of practice, where supervisors – both new and established - meet on campus bi-monthly and informally discuss a particular theme around supervision. This ensures that supervisors have an opportunity to reflect on their supervisory practice, share experience, and network with supervisors from across the University.

#### Researchers

Enhanced communication through a Weekly Bulletin to the Researcher database has significantly boosted the profile of the Concordat and the Principles to support researchers. The bulletin provides a centralised communication to share information on relevant events, training, funding opportunities, signposting and resources for researchers, networking and collaborative engagements, both internally across the University and externally.

A significant investment has been made into promoting well-being with a comprehensive programme of over 100 campus-based and online wellbeing events and activities for

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|   | <p>staff across the university. The initiatives promote wellbeing across several pillars including mental health; environment; financial; social and physical. All wellbeing events are promoted on the Research Staff Hub.</p>  |
| <p><b>Employment (<i>max 600 words</i>)</b></p> | <p><u>Institution</u></p> <p>All new research staff are invited to a University Induction. In the 12-month period from May 2023 to May 2024, 530 colleagues across the university were invited to participate in a survey to capture feedback relating to local induction activity and its impact. The response rate was 36% (192 responses received). Work is ongoing to triangulate all the data captured from feedback received on both the local induction survey and as part of the corporate welcome event to identify and act on areas that would both enhance and improve the new colleague experience.</p> <p>The 2024 Academic Promotions scheme has opened to applicants and will close on 31 October 2024. Three workshops for academic staff have been held to support colleagues who are considering making applications to the scheme</p> <p><u>Academic Managers of Researchers</u></p> <p>The Engage learning series has been co-created with managers to support people management across the University. Harnessing a blended experiential design to provide managers with a pathway of support and learning across all levels of practice and experience. The series pathway includes three key stages: Preparing for People Management; Building the Foundations in People Management; and Enhancing your Practice in People Management. 17 Research Managers have completed the series.</p> <p><u>Researchers</u></p> <p>Since the introduction of the Workplace Agreement, 22 Researchers have been offered permanency.</p> |



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|  | <p>The annual Research Excellence Awards recognises the outstanding contribution of Ulster University staff members and teams in the areas of research, across six categories, with several categories specifically aimed at showcasing Early and Mid-Career Researchers. The Award categories are Senior Distinguished Research Award, Distinguished Research Award, Future Research Leader Award, Research Recognition Award, Excellence in PhD Research Supervision Award and Research Team Awards.</p>  |
| <p><b>Professional development (max 600 words)</b></p> | <p><u>Institution</u></p> <p>A refreshed online <u>Calendar of Learning</u>, which provides training and CPD opportunities across the University, was recently launched by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The Calendar, which will be circulated at the beginning of each Semester, is part of a culture of workplace learning that supports staff to thrive and grow at Ulster across a range of business skills, personal development, programmes for new joiners, compliance essentials and management and leadership development. The ‘Advancing your Research Career – Strategies for Research Leadership’ modules include the Concordat in the communications. The Calendar is promoted through the Weekly Bulletin to Researchers and through internal staff news channels and social media platforms.</p> <p><u>Academic Managers of Researchers</u></p> <p>The People Development team have continued to review and refresh the tools and supports available to help managers with the people management aspect of their roles.</p> <p>The BRAVE Leadership Culture Framework at Ulster University encompasses a central ambition to nurture leaders to be Bold, Resilient, Authentic, Versatile and Empowering, across four levels of leadership. Articulating a series of attributes that are important for all current and prospective leaders in the organisation at all stages of their personal ‘leadership journey’.</p> |

Researchers

Throughout the reporting period, there was a comprehensive training programme across all areas of Research and Innovation. The University's Research Governance team organised regular and mandatory online research integrity and ethics training for all research-active staff, including a training session on developing a Data Management Plan, which was attended by 66 Research Staff and PhD Researchers. The Impact30 includes a series of 30-minute bite-sized webinars to amplify the impact of research, with 2-3 sessions each Semester.

The 'Advancing your Research Career – Strategies for Research Leadership' online training package was relaunched at the beginning of the academic year. Since the re-launch, 70 Researchers have completed the training. Further promotion of the training will be included via the Research Staff Hub.

As well as the comprehensive timetable of programmed activities, a number of sessions have taken place since the start of the academic year in response to individual requests through the Weekly Researcher Bulletin. Media training was organised on campus with a local media company and in partnership with the University's PR team. 10 Early Career Researchers attended the half-day workshop in August and received 1-1 support with a wide range of media techniques and advice to help them amplify their own research in the media. In partnership with the Doctoral College, 45 people attended a 2-part training session Accelerating your Research using the Northern Ireland HPC cluster.

**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. (max 500 words)**

Resources to support the delivery of the Concordat Researcher Development Action Plan were not in place for the entirety of the reporting period. Therefore, there are a number of actions that have been carried forward from Year 1 and 2 to the final year of reporting, with responsibility, monitoring and impact amended to

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| <p>reflect the current organisational framework and realignment of strategic priorities.</p> <p>Monitoring progress and evaluating and assessing the impact of actions will be a key focus for the final reporting year. The refreshed Learning Management System used by the University to centrally manage and deliver training, along with regular Network activities and Campus Conversations; and the implementation of the University's Valuing Voices Action Plan with ongoing focus groups and panels, will all provide useful means to receive quantitative and qualitative feedback.</p> <p>Given the institutional focus on the wide-reaching and comprehensive Valuing Voices Survey, it was agreed that the CEDARS Survey would be rolled out in 2025, which has been reflected in the updated action plan. The sector-wide Survey will help identify trends in the researcher environment, benchmark performance and establish evidence for resource bids.</p> <p>Although only recently established, the qualitative feedback from the Weekly Bulletin to disseminate information, has been very positive. The communication, which is sent to 100% of the Contract Research Staff and Early Career Researchers, offers ongoing support and signposting to services across the University. There is an open feedback Form to receive responses on specific training requirements, which has helped develop and tailor the programme of activities to support researchers in their professional and career development at the University. This has led to greater visibility of the Concordat across key functions and institutional initiatives, and enhanced collaboration and collegiality across teams.</p> |
| <p><b>Outline your key objectives in delivering your plan in the coming reporting period (max 500 words)</b></p>  |
| <p>Ulster University's Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan (2022-2025) is in its final year. Therefore, a key objective over the next reporting period will be the development of a new Concordat Action Plan 2025-2028, with the potential to broaden the scope of the Plan to include other staff cohorts within the research community, such as, Postgraduate Researchers and Technicians.</p> <p>To support the development of a well-structured actionable plan which demonstrates commitment to the Concordat goals, while also delivering on the final year of the current Action Plan, there are several key objectives in the coming reporting period:</p>  |

- **Visibility and communication of the overall vision, objectives, and expected outcomes of the plan.** Engagement with key stakeholders across the University to enhance understanding of the Concordat Principles, including: Research & Innovation Committee; Research Directors Forum; Research Managers; Research Culture Steering Committee; Researcher Network; Doctoral College; and EDI Staff Networks.
- **Goal alignment and clarity of vision:** Ensuring that the University's long-term objectives to support researcher development are clearly communicated and understood by all stakeholders. Aligning efforts across various action plans, teams and departments, to ensure that activities complement one another and are adjusted as required to maintain alignment with overarching objectives.
- **Embed the Concordat.** Integrate the Researcher Development Concordat principles and career development considerations into project planning and funding proposals.

Other areas to support the delivery of the Concordat's Action Plan, include:

#### **NI Research Culture Initiative**

Funded through the Wellcome Trust, the newly appointed Research Culture Manager will collaborate with the Research Careers Consultant in QUB, to promote career opportunities with local employers; and organise training workshops to improve awareness of career pathways, networking and career development skills.

#### **Research Culture Steering Committee**

Established in October 2024 and chaired by the Dean of the Doctoral College, the Committee will provide strategic leadership to develop the research culture at the University and provide co-ordination of initiatives and programmes through the development and oversight of delivery of a Research Culture Action Plan. The Committee will also ensure the delivery of the University's commitments to the Concordat.

#### **Researcher Network**

The multi-campus Researcher Network serves as a platform for researchers to voice their concerns, challenges, and needs with members of the Research and Innovation Committee and provides valuable input to the institution's Concordat Action Plan. It is a forum to share information about Concordat initiatives and to foster a peer support group that promotes EDI and wellbeing initiatives, ensuring the Concordat's focus on inclusive research environments is met. The Network

encourages researchers to engage with consultations on Concordat-related initiatives and share feedback on how the institution's Concordat Action Plan is working in practice, helping to ensure continuous improvement.

### Surveys

Participation in the 2025 CEDARS (Culture, Employment and Development of Academic Researchers) Survey and the roll-out a University-wide Research Culture Survey will be continuous improvement tools for gathering data on the research environment, benchmarking across the sector, and promoting positive changes to support the long-term success of researchers.

**Please provide a brief statement describing your institution's approval process of this report prior to sign off by the governing body (max 200 words)**

Progress reports and actions relating to the Concordat and HR Excellence in Research Award are overseen by the Research and Innovation Committee, which is a subcommittee of University Senate and chaired by the PVC for Research. This report has been shared with the committee.

Signature on behalf of governing body:



Professor Liam Maguire

Pro Vice-Chancellor, Research

Contact for queries:

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](mailto:CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk)

[www.researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk](http://www.researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk)