HR Excellence in Research Award

Concordat Progress Report

May 2022

Introduction

Ulster University, a multi-campus institution, is Northern Ireland's largest university with 2,644 staff of which 180 are 'research only' staff and 579 are 'research and teaching' staff. We have approximately 27,000 students. Core business activities are focused in a balanced way on teaching and learning, research and innovation, civic engagement, and technology and knowledge transfer. Ulster is No.1 for knowledge exchange on the island of Ireland. The latest Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES 2021) has placed Ulster University second in the UK for postgraduate researcher satisfaction. Ulster University now ranks in the Top 10% of UK Universities for outstanding (4*) or very considerable (3*) research impact.

Our new 75,000m2 Belfast Campus opened in September 2021 and final phases of construction are now nearing completion. This £365M+ investment is designed to be an engine for creativity, driving innovation regionally, nationally, and globally. With a focus on ground-breaking research, the new campus will house bespoke research translation spaces supported by leading technology to maximise the interfaces between disciplines and facilitate collaboration with industry.

COVID-19 and Research at UU

COVID-19 devolved government measures necessitated the temporary halting of most of Ulster's campus-based research projects in March 2020. We established an institutional 'Recovery Committee' including a Research Recovery Working Group guided by an Expert Advisory Panel. Institutional risk assessments for return to campus activity were undertaken. By July 2020, 287 research projects were approved enabling over 500 staff and PhD researchers to resume research on campus and arrangements made to facilitate researchers working from home.

Addressing the challenges in the disruption to research activity, a new Research Recovery Fund was secured in 2020 'to replace lost research income, protect research jobs, and help focus more effort on the high priority research needed'. The Research Recovery funding of £2,176,000 was allocated as:

- Faculty Research Recovery Fund to provide support to address disruptions to research activities, loss of commercial income or disruptions to the career progression of ECRs;
- Business Recovery Support Fund to engage with business stakeholders, provide economic analysis of our contribution to the recovery and support researchers and innovators;
- PhD Research Recovery Support Fund to provide stipend extensions to doctoral researchers who experienced delays or disruptions to their research; and
- Research & Impact Support Fund to provide support for the increased administrative support costs associated with Ulster's growing research environment and the challenges presented by the COVID pandemic.

Concordat Governance and Internal Evaluation

The University recently adopted a transparent, more inclusive approach to the governance and implementation of the HR Excellence in Research Action Plan through a structure which emphasises the University's clear commitment to its obligations as a signatory to the Researcher Development Concordat. The Concordat and HREiR Action Plan feature as standing agenda items of the Research and Impact Committee chaired by our PVC Research and attended by the Vice Chancellor. The Director of R&I reports directly to this Committee on progress made by the Concordat Task and Finish Group which he chairs jointly with the Deputy Director of People and Culture. This group comprises Section and Project Leads who are directly responsible for delivering on specific actions set out in the HREiR action plan. Actions are identified through staff feedback sourced in our annual Research Staff Survey, focus groups, working groups and trade union engagement.

Key Achievements

The last reporting period saw a renewed focus on our people and our culture at Ulster University which was reflected in our institutional strategies. In 2021, Ulster University signed the new Researcher Development Concordat and simultaneously launched a series of value statements which were co-created by over 600 colleagues from across the institution to set the tone for the culture within our university – one in which values-led behaviour emphasises collaboration, inclusion, integrity and enhancing potential above all else. Our Values directly align with key principles of the Researcher Development Concordat particularly in terms of our commitment to engender a supportive and inclusive research environment.

This new approach enabled us to go further than had been the ambition in our previous 2019 Concordat action plan by strategically developing transformational new initiatives underpinned by our Values and aimed at significantly improving the employment experience across the University. We are now at the stage of implementing and embedding new people-centric approaches into our ways of working in research and this activity is reflected in our latest 2022-2024 action plan.

1. Environment and Culture

Supportive and Inclusive Culture: Following the establishment of a new Employee Wellbeing Team dedicated to supporting the health and wellbeing of our staff, the University launched its first Employee Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2022 coupled with a fully revised sickness absence policy. The strategy and policy set out an approach to employee wellbeing which recognises a broader range of life events that require greater organisational understanding and is reflective the University's commitment to enhancing an inclusive and supportive work environment at UU.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, significant investment was made to ensure that research staff received the right support. For example, in the early stages of the pandemic, UU took a 'do what you can, when you can' approach to workloads and alterations were made to the workloads of research staff with caring responsibilities and those involved in home schooling. A temporary alteration was made to the academic promotion scheme to take account of the impact of the pandemic on publishing research findings.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: The University implemented its EDI Strategy Action Plan ('Equality Action Plan') in February 2021.We moved from a primary focus on statutory compliance to an approach which resulted in the creation of three staff-led networks (BAME+, LGBT+, and Wo/Men) alongside the established Dis/ability Network. A new EDI Steering Group was established, chaired by one of our Pro Vice Chancellors and made up of colleagues representing a range of backgrounds, perspectives and experiences. The group oversees and contributes to the implementation of the EDI Strategy. The University is currently preparing an Athena Swan Silver Award application in advance of a January 2023 submission. As part of this assessment, a new CRS career progression workstream has been set up.

Research Integrity: Led by our Research Governance team, our culture of research integrity is underpinned by our Code of Practice for Professional Integrity, our subscription to the UK Research Integrity Office as well as the principles of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity with clear and accessible policies, procedures, and guidance. Throughout the period 2019-2022, we held regular and mandatory online research integrity and ethics training for all research-active staff with 96% staff completion; we set up a network of Research Integrity Co-ordinators who advise on discipline-specific activities; we implemented robust internal review processes; and we ran regular training, workshops and audits to ensure compliance.

2. Employment

Recruitment and retention of researchers: During the period 2019-2022, 100% of recruitment panel members underwent recruitment training to ensure that fair and inclusive selection methods were used throughout the recruitment process. Our redeployment process remains available to all CRS and a new academic promotions scheme was launched.

Use of fixed term and open-ended contracts: Following a period of negotiation with UCU, in May 2022, UU committed to transfer internally funded fixed-term staff with more than 6 years' continuous service and at least one contract renewal onto permanent employment contracts as soon as possible. Further negotiations are underway with UCU in relation to externally funded fixed-term CRS. Whilst recognising that it will not be possible to move all CRS to permanent contracts, we are committed to making permanent as many as possible.

People Management: UU strongly promotes excellence in all elements of people management and delivered the following initiatives during the reporting period:
- The BRAVE leadership culture development framework
- The Engage: Great People Managers @ UU programme
- AURORA - In support of the University's Athena SWAN agenda and ongoing commitment to promoting and valuing leadership development and career progression for women across the University we funded 12 places on the 2021/22 Aurora Programme.

Organisational policy and decision-making: In 2020, UU launched a Policy Framework which sets out the requirement to adopt a collaborative approach involving engagement with a broad range of stakeholders using mechanisms such as focus groups, surveys, targeted meetings, and 'campus conversations' – getting out and about to capture the views of staff across the organisation on the design of new processes and policies. During the pandemic, open online workshops were used to capture the views of a wide range of staff. During recent months, Research Strategy Working Groups representing a cross-section of research staff have been contributing to the formation of the new R&I Strategy 2022-27.

Employment during the COVID-19 pandemic: In terms of recognising the valued contribution of researchers during the pandemic, the following actions were taken in respect to employment arrangements for research staff at UU:
- Between March 2020 and June 2020, the University extended all FTC on a 'month by month' basis even where the research grant had ended. This was to protect staff from having to enter a job market which was stagnant at that time.
- In the early stages of the pandemic a significant number of research projects were paused as staff could not come onto campus. These staff were put on furlough and the University decided to 'top up' furlough payments to 100%.
- A temporary alteration was made to the academic promotion scheme to take account of the impact of the pandemic on publishing research findings.

3. Professional and Career Development

Researcher Training and Development Programmes: Whilst the volume of face-to-face events was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, UU continued to deliver our suite of researcher

training (Soaring, Impact, Rigour, etc) online to support the continued development our research staff in the modern research environment. Targets set on the 2019 action plan were met.

Mentoring: The Research Mentoring Programme was set up in 2019 to support research staff in building their research capacity and capability. Between 2019-2021, 190 colleagues participated of which 35% were CRS and ECRs.

Sabbatical leave opportunities: In 2019, the target of 30 applicants was met. In 2020, the number of applications fell to 18 as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. During this reporting period, 47%-55% were female applicants in line with University's gender profile.

ENHANCE Professional Development & Recognition Scheme: In 2019-22, this scheme continued to provide research staff with a nationally benchmarked process to gain HEA fellowship.

Looking Ahead

The 'people agenda' is one of three top-level priorities in the emerging new institution-wide strategy which will again be explicitly values-led. Ulster's new Research Strategy, which extends to 2028, will address underlying core people priorities and ambitions that will make a material difference to the researcher employment experience at UU.

The Researcher Development Concordat sits at the heart of the 'People' strand of new Research Strategy which sets out a clear trajectory to achieving a supportive research culture and environment in which researchers are enabled to achieve their potential.

The Strategy commits to developing and maintaining an open, diverse, supportive, and sustainable research culture. The progress of our Research Strategy will be assessed against our Concordat commitments and action plans relating to the development of research culture and environment.

Feedback from researchers who participated in surveys, team meetings, strategy development workshops and consultation events has exposed the necessity to go back to basics and refresh our working practices in relation to the research staff experience at UU with a clear objective to deliver a more consistent, positive impact across all stages of the research career path cutting across all aspects of the employment experience.

In the shorter term, our 2022-24 Concordat Action Plan prioritises actions which will address necessary fundamental improvements in the research staff experience to ensure that the research culture and environment at UU is reflective of our commitment to the Concordat principles and University values. UU's action plan primarily aims to deliver an enriched environment where researchers feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued. Key actions include providing improved access to support and guidance for researchers and their managers on induction, wellbeing, professional development and career progression, mentoring and networking opportunities.

Examples of longer-term commitments set out in UU's Research Strategy which will be the primary focus of in our HREiR Action Plan 2024-27 include:

- Launching an Early Career Research Academy Programme to coordinate and provide training, events, competitions, and funding
- Agreeing and implementing protected research time for Early Career Researchers across the University
- Providing financial start up packages for new and returning Early Career Researchers
- Provide Greater Support for the Development of Research Leadership aligned to the Ulster University BRAVE framework