

University of Aberdeen
HR Excellence in Research Award 12-Year Review
Summary Report

Institutional Context

The University of Aberdeen's strategy – Aberdeen 2040 – lays out a 20-year plan to make our research more inclusive, interdisciplinary, international and sustainable. The Concordat work focuses particularly on contributing to a research culture and environment which is both inclusive and sustainable, by supporting early career researchers to thrive. As part of the 2040 strategy the University has created five Interdisciplinary Centres, each addressing global challenges, and we are currently recruiting new Interdisciplinary Fellows who will work within these Centres to push boundaries in their chosen areas.

Our target audience for the Concordat is researchers on open ended but funding limited contracts, spanning Grades 6-8 (Research Fellows, Advanced Research Fellows and Senior Research Fellows) and their managers. There are currently 360 research staff who meet these criteria.

Governance

Overall responsibility for the Concordat sits with the Vice Principal Research, who chairs the University Research Committee (URC) and sits on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, ensuring that the Concordat is visible across decision-making fora. Both the Concordat Steering Group and the Postdoctoral Research Committee (PDRC) report into the URC, which also has an Early Career Researcher representative. URC in turn reports to University Senate, chaired by the Principal, ensuring that both research staff and academic staff have the chance to inform Concordat planning and review at all stages. In addition, all School research committees are expected to have a research staff member and in most cases they also sit on the PDRC. The final report and action plan was also reviewed by the Senior Management Team.

The University's overarching work on Research Culture uses the Researcher Development Concordat and HR Excellence in Research Award as key drivers and aligns them with other accreditations and awards, including Athena SWAN, the Race Equality Charter, the Concordats for Research Integrity and Knowledge Exchange, and our work on the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment.

A reset for researcher support

The original gap analysis for the Concordat was undertaken at the start of 2020, with a view to consulting with the research community shortly afterwards. This piece of work was complicated by several factors, most obviously the pandemic, and we chose to report against the old Concordat principles for our last HR Excellence in Research Award review in January 2021. The period since has been one of consolidation, consultation, alignment and review.

For this review, the University of Aberdeen has taken the opportunity to transform our provision and support for research staff, and the planning for 2023-26 aims to embed new and refreshed processes, initiatives and mechanisms of support which will contribute significantly to the culture and environment we provide. It therefore offers a reset from previous work, positioning the Concordat firmly within our work on research culture and drawing a line under the previous action plan, building on the Past Achievements below. This new focus draws on insights from a number of different groups (below), which have moved forward at different speeds, and have overlapped in their aims. The forward-looking action plan brings this work together to offer a coherent starting point for future work, and puts forward a new and exciting vision for research culture and a renewed institutional commitment to the Concordat.

1. The Research Culture Task and Finish Group

A core part of the University's work on sustaining a positive research culture is informed by the principles and obligations within the Concordat. The Research Culture Task and Finish Group oversaw a large piece of work in this area which reported in March 2022. It was led by the Dean for Interdisciplinary Research and Research Impact and included researchers from PhD to Professor, and colleagues from across Professional Services, including a Technician representative, in its membership. The group

produced a report with 22 recommendations, based on a series of focus groups led by Researcher Development in 2021. The final recommendations covered: Research Careers, The Experience of Working in Research, Inclusive and Respectful Environments, and How We Do Research. Where appropriate, these recommendations have been converted into actions and included in this plan.

A Research Culture Oversight Group has now been formed, to ensure a co-ordinated and aligned approach to improving research culture across the University.

2. The Concordat Steering Group

This group was established in October 2021 and was led by the Dean for Industrial Engagement in Research & Knowledge Transfer and included three researchers. To facilitate detailed planning, this group formulated a series of high-level principles which informed our action plan. These covered: the expectation of support for postdocs to reach research independence, the 10 days' development time pro rata, expectations around mentorship, promotions process and criteria, postdoc membership on School and University committees, and postdoc eligibility for University Pump Priming funds.

3. The Postdoctoral Research Committee

This committee includes research staff representatives from all Schools and has provided scrutiny and feedback on the work of the groups above. The PDRC's suggestions for professional and career development provision have also been included in this plan, after consultation with research staff colleagues in their Schools.

4. Scheduled reviews of HR processes

Over the course of 2022 the University undertook a review of its Academic Promotions process, led by the Senior Vice Principal, including good practice in relation to research careers. The University has included a narrative CV element in the application form, in line with its ambition to support an inclusive research culture. A review of the University's Annual Review process, scheduled for 2022, will begin later this year, as will a review of the Staff Development Policy.

This refreshed approach will be underpinned by the following:

- A new Code of Practice for Researchers and their Managers. This will offer comprehensive guidance and outline underpinning policies that direct how Research Fellows are supported, mentored and managed throughout their careers. It will articulate expectations for a nurturing environment where researchers' wellbeing is prioritised, enabling them to thrive professionally and personally while fostering a culture of respect, inclusivity and continuous development. It will equip researchers with the necessary tools and freedom to innovate and collaborate in their respective fields, and with agency to pursue their chosen paths.
- Specific reference within the institutional Staff Development Policy which makes clear the entitlement to 10-days development time for research staff and supports researchers and their managers to plan for this, including planning for careers in other sectors.
- A clearer evaluation strategy which draws on a wider range of evidence. This will ensure that i) we can reach researchers who may not respond to surveys and ii) that whole-staff initiatives will from now on be evaluated with reference to the postdoc population specifically.

Past progress and achievements

Environment and Culture

- Delivery of the Research Culture Task and Finish Group report, with implementation through different Concordats and initiatives. Creation of an Oversight Group to co-ordinate this and link work together. (Pan-institutional group which included researchers and managers).
- The establishment of a Research Culture Award as part of the annual Principal's Excellence Awards, this year awarded to a PI with an exceptionally inclusive leadership style. (Institutional award open to researchers and managers, as well as research support staff).

- Agreement on the six principles put forward in support of the Concordat work, to embed an inclusive culture where researchers can thrive. (Developed by researchers and managers and agreed at institutional level).

Employment

- As part of the Promotions Review, a change of title for Grade 7 research staff, from 'Research Fellow' to 'Advanced Research Fellow', acknowledging the accumulation of experience relative to Grade 6 researchers and facilitating clarity on the requirements for progression from Grade 6 to 7. This forms part of a Research career track with the potential to reach Grade 9, in line with Teaching and Research, and Teaching and Scholarship. It was also ensured that the requirements to reach Grade 7 were defined so that Research Fellows could potentially demonstrate them. (This action was prioritised by the PDRC and agreed at institutional level. It will form a key part of communication with managers to ensure they can support researchers through this process).

Professional and Career Development

- A dedicated Postdoc Development Week which supported research staff across disciplines with sessions on personal, professional and career development. One participant commented in feedback that following the sessions they were 'more focused, empowered and productive at work, as well as enjoying it more'. (This action was focused on researchers, but resulted in institutional learning which will inform research leadership training for managers of researchers).

One of the more challenging aspects of this work has been the distribution of ownership of different elements of the Concordat across teams and institutional initiatives. Having this embedded in the research culture work has offered the opportunity to think about this in a more holistic way, and to develop a shared understanding of what the University wants to achieve within our environment and culture to enable researchers to thrive.

How researchers' views were taken into account

- Through the Research Culture Task and Finish Group which included two Research Fellow members and oversaw a series of focus groups. These were targeted by career stage and included three research staff-specific groups with a total of 15 participants.
- Through the Concordat Steering Group which formulated the six principles and included three Research Fellow members. Having previously been members of the Postdoctoral Research Committee the Research Fellow representatives were central to discussions as to what the underpinning six principles should address, and were able to contribute based on their knowledge of the University as well as their understanding of the benefits to Research Fellow colleagues. Feedback from the focus groups above also informed the Steering Group's thinking.
- Through the Postdoctoral Research Committee which gave feedback on training and development provision.
- Both the Steering Group members and the PDRC were representatives with a remit to engage with fellow researchers within Schools to bring forward collective and collated viewpoints from this larger group.
- Of the six principles the first is high-level (an expectation of developing research independence) while the others were more specific (10 days' entitlement, mentorship, reform of the promotions process, membership on School and University committees, and eligibility for University Pump Priming funds). The Steering Group wished to establish these big-picture changes as being necessary to increase visibility and inclusivity for Research Fellows, and so they were progressed through the University committee structure to the highest level, independently of their overlap with other work. With these in place the group was better able to consider how best to address the more detailed requirements of this action plan.

Strategic Objectives and Implementation Plan

The University has taken this opportunity to transform our provision for researchers, and to align the work above so that different strands and initiatives can easily inform and scaffold each other. This sits firmly within our Aberdeen 2040 strategic commitment to Inclusion, to support and develop people to reach their full potential.

Environment and Culture

- Create and launch a refreshed online Postdoc Development Hub, to include a new Code of Practice for Researchers, links to all relevant policies, and information on support and development. **Success Measure:** Feedback from Research Fellow focus groups will show that 85% are aware of the Hub and find it helpful to use.
- A new Research Staff Network will be established to encompass all Schools and Disciplines, making closer links between campuses. Work has begun on this, with 70 researchers signed up. **Success Measure:** Survey of members will show that 60-85% of members find the network to be useful and supportive in the first year rising to 80-85% in subsequent years.
- The University's Pump Prime Funding competition will be open to all research only staff (as opposed only to REF-eligible researchers), to be used as part of the 10 days' development time where appropriate. **Success Measure:** Researchers' applications and reports describe the benefits of the funding to their careers.

Employment

- A new Researcher Induction which will ensure research staff are aware of university expectations, processes and support, and will be linked to the Code of Practice. **Success Measure:** Feedback from Induction will show 90% found it useful.
- A review of the Annual Review process across the University, later this year. The paperwork for researchers will align with the new promotions criteria, code of practice and development plans. **Success Measure:** Improvement of ten percentage points in answer from research staff in Staff Survey question relating to usefulness of annual review.
- A refreshed mentorship programme for researchers, allowing flexible options for different purposes. **Success Measure:** Data demonstrates 100% satisfaction with mentoring provision and 50% uptake of mentoring offer.

Professional and Career Development

- Creation of a formal Career Development Policy for research staff and embedding of 10 days' development time across all Schools. **Success Measure:** Data from both-surveys, focus groups and Schools will show 80% of respondents to be undertaking activities.
- Bespoke leadership training for managers of researchers, to ensure best practice in supporting research staff, including with professional development planning. **Success Measure:** feedback across a range of metrics related to leadership improve.
- Research Staff conference and support for Postdoc Appreciation Week, to support development of research identity and leadership. **Success Measure:** EV: Feedback from conference is 90% positive/useful.