

Brunel University London 10-year Report – EU HR Excellence in Research 2022

Institutional Context

This report provides an update on activity and planning aligned to the UK Researcher Concordat (2019) for Brunel University London. We provide an institutional context as we reach our 10-year anniversary of award and outline our strategy going forward.

At the start of the reporting period, the University produced a new strategic plan, supported by the vision of our then Vice-Chancellor (Prof. Julia Buckingham, Chair of the Concordat review 2019) which placed researcher development at the heart of our strategic goals. Like most HE institutions, during 2020 – 2022, the COVID pandemic led to the refocus and reprioritisation of activity in many strategic areas. However, we were able to deliver progress on most of our reporting measures through the continued activity of the Graduate School and Concordat Implementation Group and sub-groups. Our research staff were significantly impacted by the pandemic as our connections to Heathrow and other West London industries, local businesses and communities were challenged by the changing priorities and restrictions.

Our research community and researchers were central to the University's wider response to COVID through a range of initiatives that included producing resources for schools, AI modelling, data analysis and tests for primary and secondary care diagnostics. As we enter the next phase of our action plan, we are refocusing our efforts onto the goals underpinned by our 2030 Research Strategy and supporting our research staff as they resume their research plans and progress in their careers.

Research Strategy and commitment to researchers

Brunel is a broad-based multi-faculty institution organised around 3 Colleges¹ and [5 inter-disciplinary thematic research institutes², with aligned research centres and groups](#). The university builds on a history of strong collaborative partnerships with industry and other businesses / organisations, which successfully drive research internships and industry-based PhDs, researcher mobility awards, fellowships, and the transition of researchers into industry-based careers. For example, between 2019 and 2021, our researchers had a 100% success rate for competitive mobility awards from YERUN (Young European Research Universities Network). Alignment with our research centres and groups is voluntary and is open to all research staff. We are encouraging research staff to actively join and so far over a third have done so, facilitating their interdisciplinary networks and opportunities to collaborate.

Our Research Strategy ([Brunel 2030 Research Strategy and Strategic Plan](#)) makes explicit our commitment to '*...optimize the potential for development of all researchers, including research staff (those on research-only contracts), build internal capacity and engender a better understanding and appreciation of research*' (p.13) in accordance with the core principals of the Concordat. It commits to **training and mentorship** at all career stages and to developing our research staff, with a key strategic goal of creating: '*A strong, vibrant and inclusive research culture and environment, embedding an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit throughout, in order to attract, develop and retain exceptional PhD students, early career researchers and academic staff (at all levels) ...*' (p.6 Brunel 2030 Research Strategy). It also specifically commits to supporting ECRs to focus on their **career development and wellbeing** in its statement to '*strengthen the structures responsible for supporting PhD students and ECRs allowing them to succeed within an environment that values equality, diversity and inclusion, wellbeing and positive mental health*'.(p.14)

Our research strategy is overseen by a quarterly Research Steering Task and Finish Group (RSTFG). It includes broad representation from across the University and has a standing item on the Concordat. EDI is also supported through a Researcher EDI Strategy Group. Annual reports on Concordat achievements and plans are made to the University's Senate and Council. For our researchers the Graduate School acts as a focal hub offering a point of contact, direction, EDI and wellbeing support.

Research staff and the researcher development continuum

Researcher development is coordinated by a central Graduate School. The Graduate School oversees concordat activity for the University with the support of a Concordat Implementation Group, chaired by the Concordat Champion – the University's Vice-Provost (Research). The group meets quarterly and includes a range of internal stakeholders, including research staff.

Strategically, we aim to support the whole researcher journey, from doctoral up to and beyond post-doctoral levels, within an inclusive work culture. With a cohort of only 163 dedicated research staff (see Table 1), an integrated approach is critical to this aim, as is an understanding of the overlap in roles within parts of the University, particularly between DR and research assistant / fellow and this is reflected in our research strategy for the Graduate School. Our internal policies have successfully transitioned DRs into post-doctoral roles and also from post-doctoral roles into academic or professional positions. This has further influenced our

¹ the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences (CBASS), College of Engineering, Design and Physical Sciences (CEDPS) and the College of Health, Medicine and Life Science (CHMLS).

² Five strategic challenge areas: (1) Health, (2) Communities, (3) Digital, (4) Sustainability, and (5) Manufacturing.

approach, which aims to optimise outcomes for individuals, encourage inclusion and cross-group networks, and maintain cost-efficiencies.

The size of our post-doctoral research staff cohort also means that we are able to specifically involve them in a range of decision-making discussions, and consider bespoke support for them as they transition within Brunel and beyond. For example, research staff are represented in central University committees (e.g. Senate, Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee), and our unique offer of careers support extends to all research staff up to 3 years after the end of their Brunel contracts. In 2022, a random sample of the destinations of just over 60 researchers who had left in the last two years suggested that about 60% moved into industry or other non-academic roles, and a further 40% remained in academic roles. The number moving to a full academic role with research and teaching responsibilities was roughly equal to the number taking another research post. About 10% of leavers took up positions with our research partners including Constellium, a cultural centre in Leeds, the National Physical Laboratory (NPL), Spirax Sarco and TWI.

Having improved our digital access and coordination of opportunities, our Inkpath professional development app remains accessible for life to support researchers' continued personal, professional and career development as they move forward. One of our future actions relates to creating a stronger mechanism for monitoring next destination outcomes as well as gaining a better understanding of internal transitions and journeys (with and between staffing categories) and we anticipate that usage data from Inkpath might facilitate our understanding in this area.

Table 1: Research staff demographics 2021/22 (total = 163)

Category	Research Staff (number)	%
F	53	32.52%
M	110	67.48%
Asian	34	20.86%
Black	4	2.45%
Mixed	1	0.61%
Not Known	10	6.13%
Other	47	28.83%
White	67	41.10%
Disabled	4	2.45%
Non-disabled	100	61.35%
Withheld	59	36.20%
FT	139	85.28%
PT	24	14.72%

There are 163 dedicated research staff at the university, comprising 20% of the overall academic faculty (n=818 – 'teaching and research' and research staff combined). The number of research staff has remained fairly constant over the last 10-years, and table 1 provides an overview of current demographics for the group.

Review and Evaluation

Surveys: The University planned to distribute CEDARS, which replaced CROS and PIRLS in 2020. However, due to the circulation of a large number of surveys and feedback from researchers (focus group – May 2020), weekly researcher drop-ins – from April 2020) some frustration and survey fatigue was evident. These were exacerbated by anxieties over access to laboratories, travel restrictions, industry volatility and the related impact on some research staff contracts and employment. Consequently, the survey was not conducted during 2020 or 2021, and activity focused on qualitative support for researchers, with a particular focus on wellbeing. The University also postponed plans to run its own biannual staff survey with a focus on surveys to evaluate specific policy areas (e.g. Hybrid working survey 2021).

Concordat activity over the last two years has been informed by researcher input and feedback through round table discussions, pulse surveys and focus groups. An online Teams group for research staff provides a regular touch-point for information and updates, and the Universities 'Yammer' system has enabled special interest groups, research and training updates to be circulated more widely. The range of input from researchers enabled us to obtain rapid insights in relation to specific researcher needs and maintain agile provision during 2020-21. Contact with PIs was maintained through College Research Strategy Group meetings.

A highlight of concordat activities and achievements specific to research staff during the period is presented below (number denotes related concordat principle 1. Environment and Culture, 2. Employment and 3. Professional and Career Development).

Activities 2020-2021

With employment precarity a main concern for research staff, our activity has particularly focused on the enhancement of support and resources for **researcher career development and transition** (3). This has included:

- The appointment of a dedicated researcher careers consultant (February 2020)
- A new quarterly 'Researcher Futures' series, including expertise from Brunel researcher alumni and industry professionals
- Development of dedicated webpages and online resources providing career options and case studies.
- Our unique offering of continued access to careers support for all research staff up to 3-years after the end of their contracts at Brunel.

In May 2021, following a successful pilot (Sept 2020 – Apr 2021), we introduced a **new platform for the central coordination of researcher development** – Inkpath. The platform, available as an App, provides a one stop, lifelong career and professional development tool for all researchers, enabling them to set personal goals, plan, record and reflect on formal and informal activities, from internal and external providers (3). **81 research staff** (4.9%, including 6 part-time researchers) are actively using Inkpath for personal and professional development with data indicating 265 staff attendances at workshops since the launch of the system. The app, along with any development plans and records, is portable and accessible after they leave Brunel (3).

A targeted communication channel was established on Teams to provide coverage of events, funding opportunities, jobs and internships specific to research staff. All research staff are automatically given membership to the group.

Researcher contributions / engagement

There has been stronger integration of doctoral and post-doctoral research into University activities, contributing to better central engagement and inclusivity (1). These include contributions to the Brunel Research Festival, Postdoc Appreciation Week, Interdisciplinary Research Forum and Climate Change Symposium, and participation in a broader range of working groups and committees. An inaugural [Brunel Research Festival](#) was celebrated in May 2021, to celebrate the research carried out at the University (70 events; 180 presenters; 2, 600 attendees). Researchers play an active role in the festival which in turn provides a range of development opportunities including expert round table debates, professional development masterclasses and industry sandpit session. The aim for future Research Festivals is to have 15% participants from the wider public, 15% industry and external academics, 15% doctoral researchers, with 25% Brunel staff and a KPI of 30% engagement from the Brunel community.

As part of engagement activity for the concordat, with a specific focus on those managing research staff, the University's Academic promotions were revised in 2020 to include explicit reference/recognition to/for the Concordat and support for researchers, along with EDI-related activities (2). Revisions received positive feedback from academic staff involved in these areas.

Planned activities 2021-2022 – highlights

Our new action plan (2022 – 24) seeks strong integration with other university concordats / action plans and frameworks (e.g. Research Integrity Concordat, OD / EDI strategies and Athena SWAN action plan) (1) and also seeks to heighten intersectional considerations within discussion and planning for researchers (1).

A number of priorities address identified gaps and areas for improvement specifically for research staff. These include to:

- Implement outcomes from the **Research Staff Recruitment Working Group**, established to improve the practices and timelines for recruiting / extending research staff, and to facilitate better understanding of research staff needs through the creation of HR Research Champions (2).
- Involve research staff in the new PDR development working group (2) ensuring that it is inclusive of their needs.
- Strengthen engagement with PIs and managers of researchers to enhance key stages, such as researcher induction, and end-of-contract career management and planning.
- Increase linkage between industrial, business and community partners and researcher alumni, and, working with the sector, better understand and capture researcher next destinations (3).
- Drive up research staff engagement with Inkpath by at least 20% through the renewed promotion of our portfolio of development opportunities – 'Take Ten'. The campaign will encourage researchers to make use of their 10 days of development, include a repository of examples and case-studies, and provide linkage to skills-based digital micro-credentials (3).
- Extend a range of piloted peer-support initiatives for wellbeing specifically to research staff, with further linkage to the University's new staff wellbeing and the OD strategy (3).
- Improve the support and involvement of colleagues working to support researchers (2).
- Pilot a new route for research staff to gain professional recognition within the UKCGE Research Supervision Recognition Programme (3) and engage more research staff in supervisor development and training.

Success will to be measured through collated feedback – discussion and focus groups, pulse surveys and the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS), to be run internally in 2022.

APPENDIX

GLOSSARY

APDU – Academic Practice and Development Unit	OD – Organisational Development
AS – Athena SWAN	PDC – Professional Development Centre
BUL – Brunel University London	PDP – Professional Development Plan
CIG – Concordat Implementation Group	PDR – Performance and Development Review
CMSR – Communications, Marketing and Student Recruitment	PIRLS – Principal Investigators and Research leaders Survey
CROS – Careers in Research Online Survey	RIs – Research Institutes
DCI – Dean of Culture and Inclusion	RDP – Researcher Development Programme
DoGS – Director of Graduate School	RKT – Research and Knowledge Transfer committee
DR – Doctoral researcher	RSA – Research Staff Association
DTP – Doctoral Training Partnership	RSTFG – Research Steering Task and Finish Group
VP – Vice-Provost	RSCFG - Research Staff Contract Task and Finish Group
VP (Research) – Vice-Provost (Research)	RSDO – Research Support and Development Office
EDI – Equality Diversity and Inclusion	RSIG – Research Strategy Implementation Group
ECR – Early Career Researcher (also research staff)	SD – Staff Development
GS – Graduate School	UKCGE – UK Council for Graduate Education
HR – Human Resources	ULRSD – University Lead for Research Staff Development
LTT – Learning Technology Team	VC – Vice-Chancellor
	VLE – Virtual Learning Environment

The Concordat Implementation Group (CIG) oversees and coordinates concordat activity. It comprises members from across the University including the Concordat Champion – VP (Research), Director of Graduate School, ECR representatives, academic staff / PI representative, Planning Manager, Associate Director OD, and EDI Manager. It reports to the University’s **Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee** and Research Steering Task and Finish Group. Reports are provided for other University committees as required. Membership of CIG is reviewed annually and its terms of reference updated accordingly. These can be sent to the [Researcher Concordat Implementation Group](#) via the Graduate School.