

## **HR Excellence in Research Award**

### **Summary Report 2023**

#### **Institution Context**

University of Bath's mission is to deliver world-class research and teaching, educating our students to become future leaders and innovators, and benefiting the wider population through our research, enterprise, and influence. As such, we are fully aligned with UK Research and Innovation in aspiring to attract, develop and retain diverse talent and leadership; create a culture of excellence, collaboration, and inclusion; fostering partnerships; maximising the benefits of research and innovation for society and the environment; and build trust and confidence in the UK research and innovation system.

#### **Research Activity**

Driving high-impact research is one of the four strategic pillars of the [University Strategy](#) 2021-2026. Following the 2021 Research Excellence Framework, where over 90% of our research was classed as world-leading or internationally excellent, there has been a sustained focus on enabling yet more engagement in research activities at the University. Our research community has been fortified by appointments at every level, recruiting nationally and globally, including outstanding early career researchers,

Our University Strategy also affirms the importance of curiosity-driven research and a commitment to grow research strength to drive research quality, achievement, and impact. To further strengthen our research impact, sharpen our focus and increase our influence, we have identified three primary institutional research themes for collaborative working across disciplines: Sustainability; Health & Wellbeing; and Digital. These build on existing strengths, respond to international imperatives such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, and enable us to align both with local and regional priorities, as well as the national priorities identified in the UK Government's Research & Development Roadmap.

The University of Bath has a strong track record in interdisciplinary research which has been further strengthened by incentivising collaboration through our research Institutes and Centres. The [Bath Beacons initiative](#), launched in 2021, focuses on encouraging the development of new interdisciplinary networks which address grand challenges in the areas of digital, sustainability and health and wellbeing.

#### **Research Staff**

Achieving our ambition is only possible through a research culture that enables excellence, encourages originality and innovation, and enriches our students' learning experiences. Fostering an outstanding and inclusive community is key to this success and we are committed to recruiting, retaining, and developing diverse and talented Research Staff. Our [Vision for Research Staff](#) sets this out in more detail.

There are currently around 310 Research Staff, mostly comprising Research Assistants, Research Associates and Research Fellows (Grades 5-8). The majority of Research Staff (60%) are Grade 7 Research Associates. There are around 784 Research and Teaching Staff, including all staff in the Education and Research job family, of which 189 are managers of Research Staff. Our target audience for the Researcher Development Concordat are our Research Staff, whose immediate employment security and opportunities for progression are limited. A focus on Research Staff involves both tackling the challenges and enhancing the positive aspects of their experiences at the University of Bath.

#### **Internal Evaluation**

Internal evaluation of the situation of Research Staff was conducted through analysis of the 2021 and 2023 Culture, Environment and Development of Academic Researchers Survey

(CEDARS) and the Work and Wellbeing Survey. Data from these two surveys (with response rates of 21% in 2021 and 27% in 2023) were used to look at changes in recognition and value, professional and career development, environment and culture. Institutional questions focused on mentoring, opportunities to supervise doctoral students and capturing more detail in the areas of skills, career progression and community. The results were analysed by the [Research Staff Working Group](#) (RSWG) which is comprised of 10 members of Research Staff, the Researcher Development Manager (RDM), and jointly chaired by a member of Research Staff and a senior academic. The RSWG meets six times per year to monitor progress against the Concordat. Senior representatives from HR, Staff Development, and with responsibility for different facets of Research Culture, are invited to attend and to update on progress. Together with the actions from the 2021-23 plan, the RSWG analysed gaps, identified areas of significant change and priority actions.

Data from the Work and Wellbeing Survey (conducted three times/year, average response rate 25% for Research Staff) were used to support the gap analysis derived from the CEDARS results. To ensure a joined-up approach with other University initiatives, the proposed recommendations are shared and developed together with the Research Culture Working Group (RCWG), chaired by the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research).

### **Governance Structures**

The RSWG and the RCWG are overseen by the [Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee](#) (RKEC), chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) and comprised of senior research leaders. Membership of RKEC includes representation of Research Staff, through a research associate, who is also the Co-Chair of the RSWG. An annual progress report against the Concordat is presented by the RSWG to RKEC. The RCWG also reports to RKEC. RKEC reports to the University Executive Board that oversees the implementation of the Concordat.

Overall responsibility for the action plan lies with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) supported by the RDM. The Concordat actions are connected to other accreditations and initiatives through the RDM e.g., membership of the Athena SWAN University Self-Assessment Team (USAT). This action plan aligns with our current Institutional Silver Athena SWAN action plan (2023).

### **Past Progress and Achievements 2021-23**

Progress is [reported annually](#) on the University's Researcher Development Concordat webpage. Highlights, in line with the Concordat principles, are summarised below.

#### **1. Environment and Culture**

Research Culture, supported by the Research England's Enhancing Research Culture Fund, has created new opportunities to create a more inclusive and connected community of Research Staff. Following activities to establish a baseline for our research culture, a Research Culture Action Plan 2022-24 was created to which Research Staff are integral.

- There was increased engagement with local Research Staff events and networks, such as a new Postdoc Away Day in the Department of Mathematical Sciences and the British Academy Early Career Network events.
- Research Staff continue to be recognised for their contribution to the University via the Peter Troughton prize. There have been 10–15 nominations/annum across all faculties.
- The RSWG continues to increase its membership to ensure Research Staff representation across the university. All three faculties are now represented by at least two Research Staff members, and five out of the six departments with the highest numbers of Research Staff are now represented.
- There was higher Research Staff engagement in CEDARS with a 6% increase between 2021 to 2023 (from 21% to 27%).

- University-wide activities were run across National Postdoc Appreciation week in September 2022 and 2023. “Postdocs and Pizzas” proved popular in 2022 and was extended in 2023, with Research Staff being asked about how we can foster a stronger community. As a result of this feedback, new engagement events are scheduled in the 2023/24 academic year. These events are especially valued by Research Staff where there are too few to run departmental networking events.
- Our first annual Research Culture Week in 2022, saw events held every day, including an Images of Research competition. There was high engagement with 234 attendees at events across the week.

## 2. Employment

- An anti-casualisation agreement with the University and College Union was established in March 2023 with the aim of reducing job insecurity by moving people onto fixed term contracts.
- A two-year pilot with three different research groups/departmental teams was launched in 2022 to assess the impact of moving Research Staff on fixed term contracts onto open-ended contracts. There are now 13 Research Staff who have made this transition.
- Every recruitment panel is chaired by a member of staff who has completed our essential training in recruitment practice, and we have adopted an anonymous shortlisting procedure to help to remove unconscious bias from our selection process.

## 3. Professional and Career Development

- A fortnightly newsletter provides all Research Staff with professional development opportunities, including information about funding opportunities, workshops, events and relevant policies, in an accessible format. This is opened by >90% of Research Staff.
- The Academic Career Academy continues to prepare Research Staff for a lectureship position. From 2017-2022, 83 Research Staff have attended this programme. Of those Research Staff who have completed the Academy, >40% have obtained a lectureship position or independent fellowship, with 11 being promoted at the University of Bath.
- A pilot Fellowship Academy was run January-October 2023 to increase the success of early career researchers (including Research Staff) in gaining research fellowships. This competitive programme included 16 researchers from across the university.
- Leadership in Action has been completed by 25 Research Staff, through collaboration with other UK universities and our [GW4 Alliance](#) partners.
- In May 2022 'Researcher Careers Month' saw a combination of workshops, panel events and bespoke 1:1s developed for Research Staff.
- A structured 'Careers Beyond Academia' programme was piloted for Postgraduate Researchers and Research Staff in January-June 2023. This six-session programme focussed on careers beyond academia and included invited external speakers.
- The CEDARS 2023 results showed a large increase in the number of Research Staff who had a career development plan (50% in 2023 compared with 25% in 2021).

Overall, however, progress has not been in line with our ambition. The pandemic and changes in staff during this period saw a loss of momentum and engagement, and evaluation has been limited to survey data. We recognise that a more joined-up approach is needed. In 2023, there has been increased investment and coordination of our research culture activity and we see integrating our work on the Concordat into this new approach as the way to make sustained progress. We recognise that we need to do more to identify and strengthen our activity for early career researchers and to evaluate the impact of these actions e.g., through gathering qualitative data using focus groups. In 2024, we have set aside £20,000 of our Research England research culture funding to address this.

## Lessons Learnt

We have identified the following areas for improvement and their associated actions have been included in the Future Action Plan (2023-26).

- Governance needs to be strengthened. Action will be taken to clarify roles and responsibilities of key actors and wider stakeholders in the delivery of the action plan and planned reporting will communicate progress in the implementation of our key actions.
- With changes in staff roles, particularly the four months vacancy in the RDM post in 2023, gaps in the delivery of the action plan have become evident. Stronger integration into our approach to enhance research culture will address this.
- A key role in communication and support for Research Staff are the Departmental Research Staff Coordinators (DRSCs). Across the University these roles have a low profile and not all Departments have allocated this role to a member of staff. We will address this through improved induction, engagement, and coordination.
- There is a need to refresh the “infrastructure” for Research Staff - the consistency of induction, the support for Research Staff managers and funding to enable a strong community to be built.
- Decisions to refocus the University Careers Service towards students has reduced the support for Research Staff careers. This will initially be addressed through a specific project “Changing Expectations: Transforming Careers” supported by Research England’s Enhanced Research Culture Fund.
- Some of the activities in the 2021/23 Action Plan were not achieved. For example, the pilot “Managing Researchers Programme” did not run due to low engagement. Subsequent analysis of data from CEDARS 2023, has shown a gap in research managers’ confidence to manage poor performance and the new “Academic Talent Initiative” will offer an opportunity to address such challenges.
- We recognise that we fall below the sector benchmark of 16% of Research Staff taking up 10 days or more spent on training and CPD activities” (CEDARS 2022: 11%; CEDARS 2023: 8%). Research by the Public Engagement Team has explored the reasons for low uptake of training by Research Staff. We will utilise the lessons from this to inform our approach to engagement and training design.

## Strategic Objectives and Implementation Plan

The vision for research articulated in the University of Bath Strategy 2021-2026 is to be an outstanding and inclusive university community of researchers, committed to partnership in support of the global common good. A central aspiration is that Research Staff are connected in an inclusive, collegial, and ambitious learning community. Recruiting and developing outstanding Research Staff are key to driving high impact research – one of the four pillars of the University strategy. We see the support that we provide for our Research Staff as a key indicator of our research culture at the University.

The strategic objectives, and the implementation plan for the Concordat are embedded within, and aligned to, the broader commitments of the University Strategy. We have developed three areas of priority to deliver this strategy:

1. Strengthening governance and engagement
2. Developing a deeper sense of community and belonging
3. Increasing career development opportunities for careers beyond academia

Over the next period of the action plan 2023-26, [we are committed to improving our research culture](#) and ensuring that the experience of our Research Staff reflects this. The appointment of a Research Culture Manager in Autumn 2023 provides opportunities to further catalyse cross-institutional efforts, embed learning, and align the activities of RSWG and RCWG.

We have conducted an exercise to understand current institutional strengths and weaknesses and have established [six research culture 'pillars'](#). Work in each of these areas is essential to the continual improvement of our research culture for Research Staff. Our approach to supporting the further enrichment of our research environment and culture, as experienced by Research Staff, will be characterised by critical reflection, consultative planning, and practical action across these six pillars. Within the next year, we will develop our research culture strategy, by launching and completing a consultative process to clearly set out refreshed objectives and KPIs for Research Culture across all six pillars. Research Staff are critical stakeholders, and their engagement will be pivotal as consultees and co-creators, ensuring that our objectives and activities are shaped by the needs, aspirations, ideas, and strengths of our research community. This will further strengthen the integration of the work on the Concordat to the other initiatives within the University.

The HR Excellence in Research Action Plan 2023-26 outlines 64 actions, that will address the lessons learnt and the gaps identified by the RSWG and enable us to progress towards our [Vision for Research Staff](#). These actions include the following commitments:

### **Environment and culture**

- We will work with our Research Staff to 're-imagine the postdoctoral experience' at Bath, making £20,000 available to enable excellent ideas to be initiated quickly.
- We will raise awareness of how to deal with bullying and harassment. Our action is to further promote our #NeverOK campaign and 'Support and report' tool.
- We will develop a communications campaign to promote the University's Workplace Wellbeing Wheel which supports researchers to reflect on different aspects of their work, what is working well or what could be done to make a positive change.
- We will re-establish DRSC roles and develop a supportive network of DRSCs to ensure that each member of Research Staff has access to consistent mentoring support.
- We will ensure Research Staff representation on Departmental Research Committees.

### **Employment**

- We will continue with our innovative approach to anti-casualisation through our pilot programme which sees a selection of Research Staff being transferred to open-ended contracts, breaking the connection between research funding and contract type.
- We will strengthen our communication to new Research Staff regarding the Concordat principle in adverts and offer letters, to ensure they are aware of the principle of taking a minimum of 10 days per annum for their continuous professional development.
- We will support our RSWG with two key initiatives to enable a joined-up approach to induction and to improve communication and clarity of promotion opportunities for Research Staff.

### **Professional and career development**

- We will increase engagement in career development reviews by managers of Research Staff through an annual, targeted communications campaign.
- We will increase support for career development for those seeking careers beyond academia through the Enhancing Research Culture Fund initiative "Changing Expectations: Transforming Careers."
- We will establish a Postdoctoral Academy to bring together the information, support, and professional development for our Research Staff to maximise their potential.
- We will pilot a new programme for early career researchers to develop leadership skills: "The LEAD Programme 2024".
- We will build on the pilot "Fellowship Academy" in 2023 to deliver a more flexible programme, tailored to the varying needs of different researchers.