

## **Aberystwyth University: The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers Implementation Plan: 4 year report 2010-14**

This report reviews the internal analysis of policy and practice against the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. Progress against the specific targets of the implementation plan can be viewed in the associated document available at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/research/aber-research/concordat/>

### **Background**

The Concordat was originally co-ordinated by the Research Office (formed in 2010) working closely with Human Resources (HR) and the Centre for the Development of Staff and Academic Practice (CDSAP). In 2013, as part of a University wide restructure, the Research Office was merged with the University's Enterprise Office (completed 2 January 2014) to form the Department of Research, Business & Innovation (RBI). Also, CDSAP was incorporated into a new Institute of Education, Graduate and Professional Development (IEGPD), which is still progressing through a structural review. However within this Institute, a Graduate School was opened in autumn 2013 and the Head of this and the Institute are new members of the Aberystwyth Researcher Concordat Task Group (ARCG), which reports to the Research Committee and is chaired by the Director of RBI. The restructure has inevitably had some impact on the Concordat implementation, but plenty of progress has been made.

### **Key Achievements**

Much of the action plan activity stems from the formation of the Research Office (now part of RBI) in 2010, which integrated the research finance operation in 2011 to significantly improve the pre and post award finance operation of research grants. This resulted with a turnaround from partial to satisfactory assurance with evidence of moving towards full assurance with 12 months from RCUK Assurance. A key aspect of this was regular post award financial information and also the development of a 'Top Tips for Managing your research grant' training session, which included ensuring researchers are aware of RCUKs terms and conditions including those responsibilities in relation to this Concordat. Other communication approaches are described below, and these are as a result of close working between the departments involved in the ARCG. The past four year's achievements are reviewed below.

#### **1. Concordat Monitoring and Review**

**Management:** the Aberystwyth Researcher Concordat Group (ARCG) reports to the University's Research Committee. The Group's members are the Director of RBI (Chair), the Director of IEGPD, Director of Ethics and Equality, Deputy Director of Human Resources, a Researcher Development Skills Officer from the Graduate School, and researcher representatives from each of the five academic Institutes.

**Evaluation:** internal evaluation for this review was undertaken through the ARCG. Researcher's views were taken into account through the CROS survey in 2013; surveys and focus groups around the University's Athena Swan Bronze and GEM applications in 2013 and 2014; and an informal discussion with the ARCG Chair and nine mid-career researchers in November 2014.

Much of the Action Plan activity stemmed from the formation of the Research Office, now part of RBI, in 2010. Anecdotal feedback from researchers identified that communication, the research culture and research support services have improved significantly over the four years. For example, when the research office was established, some researchers reported significant frustration with research grant management, and were reluctant to submit further grants due to the administrative burden. This has been turned around during the four years with RCUK

assurance on our research project management moving from partial to satisfactory assurance with evidence of moving towards full assurance.

Specific feedback from the researcher community, other than that via the ARCG is highlighted below.

The 2013 CROS survey, whilst only completed by 38 people did represent the range of AU disciplines and identified concerns in terms of Staff Development & Performance Review, communication in terms of awareness of initiatives such as the Concordat and Athena Swan, Vitae, induction, career management, representation on the ARCG, and some aspects of valuing individuals' contributions. The previous survey had identified potential discriminatory elements, and these have reduced in this survey. All of these issues are being addressed through the 2016-17 action plan. Communication to increase awareness focussed on Athena Swan, as the University was submitting an Institutional and Department application, other awareness was included within the new Researcher Induction booklet. Further awareness communications are planned in the next phase.

The informal discussion with researchers in November 2014 confirmed that awareness of this Concordat, Vitae, the HR Excellence in Research Award and the ARCG was limited. The group did feel part of a collegial research environment, and felt research support was good from RBI, especially for ECRs. There was some concern in terms of researcher retention due to budgetary constraints, and whilst they accepted the teaching workload, the non-research administrative requirements were burdensome. Areas where they would like further development included mentoring and promoting collegiality e.g. research teams, proactive support from Directors of Research in terms of research career planning (especially for ECRs), funding for research pump-priming activity, a shared interdisciplinary research space such as a Staff Common Room, departmental team meetings to share research and an increased researcher development programme provision.

An element of the development of the successful Athena SWAN bronze institutional award application was the collection of quantitative data via a staff questionnaire, and a series of focus groups with female staff. Both methods yielded a range of issues of concern to researchers and academic staff. Analysis of the Aberystwyth "leaky pipeline" showed that the transition from PhD to research fellow/ECR was difficult, especially for female staff. One of the key concerns was the impact of short term research contracts that made planning families and house buying difficult (see section 4). Re-gaining momentum after maternity leave was also a concern, as was the utility of research leave whilst having a young family to care for. Although these concerns are not unique to Aberystwyth they do present challenges for our research staff. Opportunities for partner employment can be particularly difficult, and together with the geographic location of the university, women reported having to make hard personal choices between work and home life. There is evidence of good and effective practice in the sector which is being actively explored by the Director of Ethics and Equality to try to address the aspects of concern. For example, a concern that was raised in the focus groups was uncertainty about the changes to the promotion system (see section 3 below), which now provides academic staff with opportunities to demonstrate their achievements across a broader portfolio. Participants were unsure of the process, and in response a series of open workshops to explain the system will be held for women in 2015 before the next promotion round commences.

## ***2. Recruitment & Selection***

The University has continued to train staff in recruitment and selection with two open programmes each year and 25 departmental bespoke courses in 2014. The University aims to ensure all staff undertake the in-house on-line Equality and Diversity training, however, as a minimum HR ensure that anyone sitting on a selection panel has completed the training. Senior University managers and those involved in REF selection were also trained in equality in relation to REF individual staff circumstances in Spring 2013.

## ***3. Recognition and Value***

This is one area that the CROS survey and the researcher discussion group identified further progress is needed and will be addressed in the next phase. A number of initiatives have been successful e.g. a communal networking space for PG researchers in the newly formed Graduate School, a number of researcher development events, for example as part 'Top Tips for Managing your Research Grant' aimed at PIs, a review of this Concordat and the RCUK's expectations of PIs in terms of providing career development opportunities for their researchers is emphasised. Also the Welsh Crucible programme, that AU contribute to in funding and also course design and delivery, has developed into a prestigious programme with an alumnus that are fulfilling the programme's aim of developing tomorrow's researchers. Development on another course looking at 'Managing Researchers' has commenced and will be developed in the next phase.

Communications to the researcher community have improved, in particular from RBI which, as well having a Research Development Officer meet with all new academic posts, offer events such as the research café and have developed a comprehensive web site with information on the Concordat, a Researcher Induction Guide with information about all aspects of research life at AU, and also a comprehensive Research Toolkit to support grant applications. Recent innovations include a Project Initiation Management File Meeting and an End of Project meeting for all research grant holders.

In terms of Career Development, the University revised its promotions process for academic staff and is in its fourth year of operation having been reviewed and improved last year. A review of the AU Accelerated Increment process was also undertaken to ensure all non-academic staff have an opportunity for progression.

#### **4. Support and Career Development**

Staff induction: since 2010 there have been a considerable improvement in the way induction has been conducted, particularly for research staff, with a biannual New Staff Induction Event with an optional follow on session for those with a role related to research. Since September 2014 the HR department hold a weekly induction session for all new staff. All new researchers are provided with a link or a hard copy of the Researcher Induction Handbook (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/research/aber-research/researcher-development/>);

All new academics are met early on by a Research Development Officer to find out about their research interests, add them to the research expertise directory, and explain the various research related processes at AU. Targeted funding opportunities are sent to individuals or research groups as opposed to blanket 'boiler plate' communications.

Researcher Development: In conjunction with Bangor University, CDSAP has successfully achieved accreditation by the Higher Education Academy of the Aberystwyth-Bangor Joint Scheme for Recognising Continuing Professional Development in Teaching and Supporting Learning. Further joint initiatives in Researcher Development are underway:

- A draft researcher development programme for all research grades; the implementation of which will be in the next phase. Both University's existing provision has been mapped onto the Vitae Researcher Development Framework.
- Coaching and Mentoring: a joint policy has been drafted. The implementation would build on AU's recent implementation of 3 year Personal Research Plans, which include mentoring for ECR and staff not returned to REF. The plans and mentorship are monitored by the Institute Directors of Research and the University's Research bi-annual Monitoring meetings with Institutes and Departments. The link with Bangor will offer mentoring between researchers at the two Universities, and will be developed further in the next phase.

**Career Development:** The probation process across the University has been standardised for all staff including researchers. In 2012 the University introduced a new Staff Development and Performance Review (SDPR) process, in which all staff are expected to participate. From January 2014, academics are expected to complete a 3 year Personal Research Plan (PeRP) that is linked to the SDPR. A review of the Probation and Staff Development & Performance Review processes was also undertaken in August 2014, and in November 2014 the Professional Development and

Staffing Committee agreed to the proposal to merge the SDPR, Probation and PeRP and the documentation for the processes will be merged, and the probation periods will be standardised to 12 and 24 months; the latter for academic staff in their first role and therefore includes completion of the PGCTHE.

To try and address concerns about short term research contracts, an initiative in 2012 was a project to review all staff with 4 years or more service on two consecutive contracts of employment and make their contract open-ended. This is now an on-going policy and close scrutiny is given to any requests to continue a contract on a fixed term basis beyond 2 years and where there is no objective reason for a fixed term contract the contract is made open-ended. When a request to recruit a post is made, an explanation of any requirement for a fixed term contract is required and reviewed by the HR team.

### **5. Researcher Responsibilities**

As well as improved induction processes for all staff, other initiatives such as the Researcher Induction Handbook, The Research Development Officers meeting with new academics, Top Tips for Managing Your Research Grant training, Personal Research Plans, Project Initiation Management File Meetings (PIMF), End of Project Life Meetings, all contribute to a significant improvement in communication of researcher responsibilities.

### **6. Diversity and Equality**

AU was awarded the Institutional Athena Swan Bronze Award and the Gender Equality Chartermark in 2014. . The aim is to seek a renewal of the Bronze award in 2017 and to support individual departments to apply for Bronze Awards. Significant promotional work was undertaken in relation to Athena Swan, including a competition for the best photograph that captured the essence of Athena Swan. The University also received two ticks accreditation for the 12<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in June 2014.

Two 'seconded' Diversity Champions were recruited from the research community to support the Athena Swan application, and also in 2014 the University appointed a female scientist as Director of Ethics and Equality, who is now a member of the ARCG.

Evidence from the revised academic promotions route indicates that more women are applying for promotion, and the success rate is comparable to that of male colleagues.

### **Next Steps**

The aim of the 2014-16 implementation plan is to build on the significant developments since December 2010. The implementation plan with clearly defined targets can be viewed at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/research/aber-research/concordat/>, and the main foci are:

- To increase the awareness of this Concordat, the ARCG, Vitae and the Concordat for Research Integrity.
- More engagement with the research community through short surveys and focus/discussion groups to continually develop the Action Plan.
- Further development of a mentoring programme and monitoring the implementation of the 3 year Personal Research plans.
- To progress researcher development provision, including working and sharing development with our Strategic Alliance Partner, Bangor University.
- Assessing the training requirement of our Directors of Research and identifying or developing a suitable training programme to ensure they are aware of the range of responsibilities, including career development of researchers
- To launch an AU Masters level Leadership Programme for academics and researchers.
- To continue to develop diversity and equality initiatives, including applying for a re-accreditation of the Bronze Athena Swan Award and at least two departmental Bronze awards. The process will be dependent on the outcomes of the 2014/2015 consultation regarding the merger of Athena SWAN and GEM.