

Aberystwyth University: Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers Implementation Plan: 2 year report for the period 2014-16

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 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 completed a structural review in autumn 2016 and is now the Institute of Professional Development (IPD) and encompasses CDSAP, The Graduate School, the Careers Service, the Centre for Widening Participation, Information Studies, Lifelong Learning, Welsh for Adults and CAA (The University's educational resources publisher). During the past two years, the departments involved in the Concordat have been operating in a challenging financial environment, and this has had an impact on the delivery of some of the objectives from the 2014-16 action plan. Despite this, progress has been made and new initiatives have been developed that are part of the 2017-18 action plan.

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 IPD, Director of Equality, Deputy Director of Human Resources, the HR Business Partner to IBERS¹, Director of the Graduate School, a Researcher Development Skills Officer from the Graduate School, a Research Development Officer from RBI, and researcher representatives from each of the six academic Institutes, including PDRA representation.

Evaluation: internal evaluation for this review was undertaken through the ARCG and from a focus group of PDRAs who undertook a SpringForward taster session in Spring 2016.

Specific feedback from the PDRA researcher community identified that in one Institute there was a lack of understanding of the support available for PDRAs and little awareness of initiatives such as the Concordat and Vitae etc. There were also comments about the perceived lack of support from the University, their Institution and their PI, especially in terms of researcher development and career management. This feedback has given the ARCG some serious concerns and whilst the focus of previous action plans has been the researcher community more broadly, the 2017-18 plan focuses on PDRAs.

One significant hurdle to communicating directly with the PDRA community or their line managers (PIs) directly has been the University's HR system and the inability to distinguish between researcher categories and consequently communicate to them as separate communities. This has been a major hurdle to any initiatives. From the 2016-17 academic year all new research recruits are categorised appropriately on the HR system (academic, fellow, PDRA etc.) and email group lists will automatically be updated. A data cleansing process is underway with RBI supporting HR in liaising with departments and institutes to ensure staff are correctly categorised. This is one of the major achievements of the past period and is an action for the first phase of the next action plan.

Unfortunately the plans to run focus groups with a broader range of researchers could not be undertaken due to the resource challenges mentioned earlier in the introduction.

¹ Institute for Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences

The 2015 CROS survey had another disappointingly low response rate of 25%, and whilst this is comparable to other Institutions, the ARCG noted that the effort in distributing and communicating this survey and the time and effort required to complete it was not delivering sufficient impact nor was the data, based on a limited number of responses, a reliable source from which to make decisions on development and intervention initiatives. The ARCG has decided to develop and introduce an internal survey that will be shorter with a maximum time of 5 minutes to complete.

Feedback from the PDRA representative on the ARCG has been invaluable, especially in terms of checking the appropriateness of initiatives for the PDRA community. The key issue has been communication, which hopefully can now be resolved.

2. Recruitment & Selection

The University has continued to train staff in recruitment and selection and the University aims to ensure all staff undertake their in-house on-line Equality and Diversity training, and this training has been updated in the period being reported, and a further revision of the training is underway. As a minimum HR ensure that anyone sitting on a selection panel has completed the training. The role of Director of Equality and Ethics was separated into two part-time roles, and an administrator has been appointed to support the diversity activities, including arranging training, and supporting the Athena Swan applications.

All research contracts now incorporate a statement that advises of the expectations of researchers and the support available.

3. Recognition and Value

A review of the University's Annual Incremental Points Contribution Scheme was undertaken, specifically to improve the form, and guidance on completion and expectations of the scheme. This scheme is available to all staff.

The researcher development area of the RBI website was refreshed and information and links to external organisations such as Vitae, LFHE and Welsh Crucible are available. The Vice Chancellor's office held a number of open presentations on a variety of subjects, including research, with an open invitation to all staff across the University. One programme that has helped to ensure PI's are aware of their project management responsibilities, the 'top tips for managing your research grant' ran 3 times during the period.

121 Inductions of new academic researchers have continued and this induction includes an overview of researcher development and the University's commitment to the Concordat for Researcher Development.

Two of the proposed initiatives to support and recognise research and the different roles across the University did not come to fruition due to the limited resources mentioned in the introduction. For details please see the associated report as mentioned in the introduction.

4. Support and Career Development

A major planned initiative during this period was the development of a researcher development programme jointly with Bangor University. Unfortunately, this has proved more difficult than expected, because of resource challenges at both Universities. We continue to work together to try and develop joint training on matters that lend themselves to on-line video tutorials or other distance learning resources. The first phase is to determine an appropriate platform to utilise.

In the absence of a joint scheme, RBI has proposed, and Research Committee agreed, that the variety of courses they already offer be put into a suite of programmes that, as well as being offered openly to all staff, become a compulsory part of probation for ECRs and for all PDRAs. This supersedes the development of specific PDRA programmes (which were difficult to promote due to the HR database issue). The subjects will include:

- Research Ethics
- Open Communication of Research (Open Access and Research Data Management)
- Engaging the Public with Research (Impact)
- Applying for Research Grants
- Managing Research Grants, including project management skills
- Recording Research Activity on PURE (Aberystwyth's CRIS).

The CDSAP Masters level Leadership Programme aimed at academic staff was successfully launched and the first cohort's projects were being marked in December 2016.

Researcher induction continues to be undertaken by RBI, and although an optional researcher induction was offered following on from the general staff induction, due to low attendance it was decided to replace with a stand. 121 inductions continue to be undertaken with new academic researchers and this includes information about the different Concordats and the support available in the University. All research staff are made aware of the researcher induction handbook, updated in autumn 2016, when they are offered a contract, and going forward this will be emailed to all new PDRAs and their line managers, who will also be advised on an induction process that requires completion and registering on the HR system, and a completed tick box form signed and returned to RBI by the PDRA.

The University has introduced a mentoring scheme and on-line video training is available for mentors and mentees

All research staff continue to have access to the range of courses offered by RBI, CDSAP and HR, and competitive access to funded women's leadership development programmes (SpringBoard and Aurora) is available to all staff at the correct stage of their career.

The Graduate School continues to develop its programme that is made available to all research staff. In particular in this period, key developments were a career management module and also PhD Supervision training, which has been attended by some PDRAs wishing to up-skill themselves for a future academic career.

5. Researcher Responsibilities

As well 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 (EPIC) Meetings, all contribute to a significant improvement in communication of researcher responsibilities. Also agreed by Research Committee in Autumn 2016 has been compulsory training through RBI for ECRs, as part of probation, and for all PDRAs.

6. Diversity and Equality

AU was awarded the Institutional Athena Swan Bronze Award and the Gender Equality Chartermark in 2014. The associated action plan has been implemented over the last 2 years, and we have signed up to the new 'post-2015' principles for the institution-wide Athena Swan Award. In September 2015, a new Director of Equality was appointed to work across staff, students and visitors to the campus, alongside their substantive post as Manager for the Centre for Widening Participation.

Aberystwyth have continued to receive the 'Two Ticks' award for employing and working with those with disabilities, we have entered the Stonewall Workplace Index and have worked towards the Gold Corporate Health award. The main focus of 2015-16 has been the implementation of a high quality and layered training programme - from an updated e-Diversity course, to bespoke training for academics, professional services and importantly research staff. Research matters are a standing item on the Equality Champions network meetings and reported onto the Staffing Committee.

Next Steps

The aim of the 2017-18 implementation plan is to build on the significant developments since December 2010. The main foci are:

- To ensure the PDRA community, and other sub groups of the researcher community, can be contacted easily through an automatically updated email list driven by the University's HR system. It is critical that this is delivered by April 2017, otherwise all other initiatives will be delayed.
- To focus limited researcher development resources on PDRA initiatives and maximising the potential of existing provision.
- To increase the awareness of this Concordat, the ARCG, Vitae and the Concordat for Research Integrity, through the new training scheme for ECR and PDRA and the new PDRA induction process.
- More engagement and feedback from the research community through short in-house surveys and focus/discussion groups to continually develop the Action Plan.
- To ensure career management development and opportunities are presented, including training and access to the University Conference Fund for PDRAs researching projects without external funding.
- To continue to develop diversity and equality initiatives, including applying for a re-accreditation of the Athena Swan Award
- To support PDRAs and increase their understanding of the Concordat, and develop initiatives to support their career development.

The implementation plan can be viewed at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/research/aber-research/concordat/>