# Birkbeck, University of London: HR Excellence in Research Award 4 Year Report

## How the internal evaluation was undertaken

Birkbeck first received the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2017. At that time we undertook a comprehensive gap analysis against the principles in the 2008 Concordat which was driven by focus groups with our research staff (defined as PhD to Professor).

Themes of mentoring, supervision and peer support threaded through each of these discussions (and in some instances were pulled into specific actions in our action plan) and this gap analysis identified four core areas of focus. In order of priority (as identified in the focus groups) these areas were:

1) Recruitment, career progression and promotion (with a clear recognition that this needed to include a specific focus on fixed term contracts and early career researchers)

2) Effective inductions for research for new staff

3) Effective and relevant training opportunities for all staff

4) Individual researchers perceived a lack of accompanying guidance and support in key policy areas

Based on this work the College planned a substantive five-year programme to address each of these areas, followed by an anticipated gap analysis exercise in year 6 to allow us to complete our 2nd action plan.

We made extremely good progress in the first 2 years, with some key achievements described below. However, as described in detail later in this report, our progress in the last 2 years has been significantly affected by COVID and we are behind where we had expected to be at this point. As such - and in line with feedback (through surveys, consultation etc.) from the research base who are struggling to recover from Covid impacts - rather than trying to widely consult with our researchers at this stage the detail of our new action plan has been developed in discussion with our AAB and Research Strategy Group. Again, and in line with the feedback from our research base, the new action plan is focussed on completing both the work affected by Covid in the last 2 years and the work originally planned for years 5 and 6, lining us up for a full gap analysis against the principles of the new concordat in time for our next full submission.

## Key achievements

**Recruitment:** Relating primarily to the Employment and Professional and Career Development Principles of the Concordat (*principle 1 in the 2008 Concordat*) a comprehensive suite of work has been undertaken to improve training and transparency around our recruitment and career progression and promotion processes and to address the issues identified in our original action plan.

Key successes which derive directly from the work undertaken as part of the HR Excellence in Research Award action plan include the introduction of mandatory training in key areas relating to recruitment (currently equality and diversity and unconscious bias). By requiring that all staff undertake this training and monitoring and following up in any areas where this wasn’t happening in a timely fashion we have been able to hit our target of ensuring 100% of people involved in recruitment decisions have received the relevant training. We are also trailing the use of a 1-page briefing sheet in the packs sent to all recruiting managers to be presented at the start of each recruitment process to ensure all members of the panel are reminded about their training and can be updated on any recent changes. Since 2019 100% of our recruiting managers have received this slide in the recruitment details form that they complete when they want to advertise. The slide is also sent directly to panel members to ensure everyone has the information.

**Career Progression and Promotion:** Another key success from our HR Excellence in Research Award process was that through our focus groups we identified that there was a lot of misunderstanding and disinformation about our promotion processes and a perceived lack of support about how to use institutional structures and processes to support career progression planning. In response to external drivers, at about this time the College was due to begin the work to introduce a new Academic Contractual Framework and as part of that work a comprehensive refresh of our promotion processes was planned. This work also picked up and delivered all the actions in this area identified in our HR Excellence in Research Award Action plan. Since the new Academic Contractual Framework has been introduced in 19/20, 88 people have been promoted and our success rates are improving. In 19/20 the success rate improved to 68%, although we were conscious that this may have been an artefact of launching the new Framework. In 20/21 the success rate once again improved to 77%. In addition, in our action plan we had suggested that FAQ sessions with senior managers would be helpful. These have now become an annual feature, led by our Deputy VC and are open to all. 48 staff attended this online briefing for the 2020-21 academic promotion round rising to 51 in 21/22. We will use staff surveys an CEDARS to collect feedback data about these processes and this will inform future refinements*. This work relates to principles 2, 4, and 6 in the 2008 Concordat*.

**Progress Against the Strategy set out in the Original Action Plan and Two-Year Review**

When we planned the work in our original action plan we had tried (as much as was practical given timelines and/or the need for other actions to happen in sequence) to address two of our core themes in the first two years (i.e. recruitment, career progression and promotion and accompanying guidance and support) and the other two areas (inductions and training) in the second two years after the interim review outcome in March 2020. March 2020 was the start of the COVID pandemic and saw us enter the first extended lockdown so our progress since then has been significantly impacted.

### Accompanying guidance and support: We have provided additional guidance documents in the key areas identified in our action plan – for example ‘how to use your appraisal to plan for promotion’ and guidance about reasonable expectations for mentors and mentees. We have succeeded in producing most of the documents we expected to as described in our action plan, and have had positive to extremely positive feedback from individual researchers who have found and used these documents*. This work relates to the Environment and Culture, and Employment principles in the Concordat.*

Our plans to pull ‘number of hits’ type metrics have not been possible because we cannot capture this data on our old IT architecture. Since COVID, our IT services have been focussed entirely on delivering College business online so work to migrate other areas of College business to our new architecture has stopped. This moving between architectures has also, on occasion, led to problems where guidance documents have disappeared and have then had to be re-instated. We are actively monitoring this and will do a comprehensive review against our original action plan when the IT work is complete.

### Inductions and training: COVID significantly constrained how much new work we were able to achieve against the action plan in relation to inductions and training, work related to the Environment and Culture principle in the Concordat. Even where we have made progress we now want to revisit these areas to consider if the switch to online and the new resources and approaches which are available as a result of COVID represent a better solution to the actions than what we have already implemented. For example, whilst the College offers training opportunities in key areas, these sessions were often run only once per year/term and at times when individual staff may not be able to attend. The new resources would allow us to offer more training online or in hybrid modes. The training offer being too restricted was one of the key pieces of feedback in our original gap analysis.

The College was responsive to concerns from colleagues at all levels about the challenges associated with working under lockdown and proactively looked for mechanisms by which it could ease the burdens on researchers and issued both guidance about activities that could be paused and responses to new training needs for researchers - for example, it was suggested that appraisal processes were not an automatic requirement for everyone at this time although they should still be undertaken if either the line manager or the individual felt it would be helpful. In this new remote working environment, researchers who had concerns about work, workload, wellbeing or support were actively encouraged to schedule a meeting with their manager, and such meetings could be initiated by the researcher, or their manager. Training was offered to support these virtual one-to-one conversations. In addition, if a researcher had not been able to undertake development plans listed in their most recent appraisal during lockdown they should be given another year to complete these activities. *This work supported the environment and culture and professional development principles of the Concordat.*

To support research staff and managers over the pandemic a comprehensive programme of events was offered using flexible and accessible approaches, including blended learning, on-line guides and shorter more focussed digital sessions, with events regularly advertised and scheduled in response to demand. We will capture learning from this experience as we move to a more hybrid environment using tools such as CEDARS. *This work supported the professional development principle of the concordat.*

Similarly, early in the pandemic (and as a reflection that the student demographic at Birkbeck is very different to the demographics of most other universities) the College made the decision that the 20/21 academic year would be delivered fully remotely (unless campus access was absolutely necessary for the course). This had a significant distorting influence on the information that needed to be conveyed to new staff by managers at all levels during inductions which constrained progress in this area. *This work was underpinned by the environment and culture principles of the Concordat.*

## Strategy for the next four years

Our overarching researcher development strategy for the next four years is to ensure that COVID-19 does not have a long-term detrimental impact on their career trajectory of our researchers and this will be reflected at all levels of our institutional strategies. Birkbeck’s current people strategy (Building Success Together) is focused on building College success, building our future workforce, building a great place to work, building workforce diversity, and building success through recognition. The College is currently in the process of updating its over-arching corporate strategy (Birkbeck Vision 2021-26) but and the development of our researchers will continue to be a fundamental component of our institutional Covid-recovery plans, and will feature under all 5 strands of Birkbeck Vision 2021-26.

As such, our key objectives to deliver this strategy over the next four years are:

1. To complete the work in the new action plan, focussed in the areas of training and inductions*. See the action plan for the detail of how this supports the principles of the Concordat but most of the work relates to the environment and culture and the professional development principles.*
2. When the situation allows, to undertake a piece of work to understand how to most effectively support researchers who have been significantly impacted by COVID-19, *supporting the Environment and Culture and Professional and Career Development Principles*. Again, tools such as CEDARS will be used to monitor the long term effectiveness of this work.
3. By year 4 at the latest, repeat our focus group work with our researchers against the principles in the revised Concordat. It will be critical to review work relating to the employment principle and the ongoing effectiveness of work form the first action plan. This will be linked to work the College will undertake as part of its COVID recovery programme so we will look to harmonise with this if it is practical to do so. Before we begin this work we will also comprehensively review our approach to HRER in light of the changes to the Concordat to ensure that it continues to be effective.

The success of this approach will be measured via SMART success measures which have been defined for all the actions in our new action plan.

## Target audience

Birkbeck was founded 200 years ago, at which point George Birkbeck stated “now is the time for universal benefits of the blessings of knowledge’. This statement embodies the institutions mission and philosophy and spills over in to everything we do, meaning we have a 200 year history of encouraging all staff and all researchers to engage in a wide range of activities to enhance their careers and wellbeing at all stages, but (in line with our mission) with a particular emphasis on those just stating their careers. Birkbeck is a small multi-faculty institution which covers the full range of disciplines except Medicine and Engineering. Being small means everyone knows everyone else and the institutional commitment to the wellbeing and development of ECRs in particular is at the heart of our research culture.

In 2020, our average staff headcount profile was:

* Academic staff (Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader, Professor) - 464
* Research Only staff (Senior Research Fellow, postdoctoral Research Fellow/Researcher, (pre PhD) Research Assistant) - 102
* Technical staff (Maintenance, Lab Technician) - 19
* PhD students (including 21 Graduate Teaching Assistants, employees with a combined study and teaching role) - 720.

Our research only staff includes a significant proportion of pre-doctoral staff on very short term contracts – these are typically e.g. students who have been employed for a very short period of time to collect data for a specific research project. We also have a larger-than-typical number of staff on permanent research only contracts. In addition, most of our postdoctoral Research Only staff are located in areas where we share facilities with UCL and so also have access to career development support through UCL. Birkbeck and UCL are both members of the Bloomsbury postgraduate Skills network (BPSN) so have a long history of collaborating in the area of skills development for researchers.

Our target audience for the action plan is individuals whose primary responsibility is to conduct research and who are employed specifically for this purpose; however, given the small proportion of our researchers who fall into this category we will prioritise actions which also have benefits for other constituencies (i.e. PhD students, technicians, early career academic staff and other academic staff in that order of priority).

## Governance

The delivery of the Action Plan is overseen by our AAB which is comprised of research staff and junior academic staff (usually in their first academic appointment) to ensure that the needs of researchers remain at the heart of the process. We deliberately established the AAB as a training opportunity for researchers and junior academic colleagues with little or no committee experience. For example, to date AAB has had 2 Chairs, both appointed shortly after their first full academic appointment. Membership of the AAB would typically comprise of approximately 6 research staff and/or junior academic staff in addition to the Chair and relevant Professional Services colleagues. A typical membership would include 2-3 colleagues employed as researchers on a grant held by a Birkbeck academic (given the nature of these awards researchers of this type tend to be researchers from our School of Science but may also be from a Social Sciences Department), 1-2 researchers who hold a personal fellowship (again, given the nature of these awards these tend to be researchers from Arts and Humanities disciplines but may also be social scientists or scientists) plus 2-3 other colleagues, such as hidden researchers (such as people employed on teaching only contracts but also hold research grants) or academics in their first permanent appointment. Because we view our AAB as a training mechanism we strive to allow space for everyone who meets our criteria and expresses interest to be allowed to join for a time but we also strive to maintain a good discipline mix, meaning we may ask people to wait for a period before they take up their membership. Most people serve for 1-2 years but we have facilitated longer and shorter terms where appropriate.

AAB formally reports to the College once per year via the HR Strategy and Policy Committee and is a standing agenda item/informal update at all other meetings, a mechanism which gives our AAB agency to drive the programme as it deems best without needing to consult the parent committee at all stages (something we felt it was important to establish given the relatively inexperienced membership of AAB) but still provides the necessary access when there are areas of concern to be escalated quickly. the HR Strategy and Policy Committee (comprising the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Chair), the College Secretary, the Director of HR, the five Executive Deans (or their nominees), a Director of Professional Services, Deputy College Secretary (Operations), the PVC(R), the PVC (Education), an Independent Governor, the Deputy Director of HR, the Head of HR Business Partnering, the Head of Organisational Development and Change, and the Head of HR Strategy, Policy and Equality & Diversity) to our Governing body (through Finance and General Purposes Committee).

Institutional strategic responsibility for Research sits with the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research) (PVC(R)) supported by the Head of Research Strategy Support (HRSS). The PVC(R) chairs the College’s Research Committee (RC, currently supported by five working groups and sub committees) and is also the Director of our Graduate Research School. The HRSS, with the Head of the Research Office (HRO), holds day-to-day responsibility for compliance with the concordats. Research Committee reports (through Academic Board) to our Governing body. The annual reports to HRSPC are also sent to RC to note.

This governance structure for the Award embeds it within our current structures and processes and includes mechanisms to access all relevant departments.

## Operational oversight

Birkbeck’s HR department is responsible for our strategies relating to people development and assumes much of the overall responsibility for the operational delivery of this action plan (which sits alongside Athena and their work on our first Race Equality Chartermark submission).

The Research Strategy Group (i.e. PVC(R); the senior academic lead for research from each of our five Schools; the two senior research leads from professional services (HRO, HRSS); Graduate School Manager) and Research Students Sub Committee (i.e. PVC(R), Academic leads for Research Students from all 5 Schools, HRSS, Graduate School Manager) and the Research Support Group (Chaired by the HRSS with representative professional service colleagues with a role to support researchers e.g. HR, library, Careers Service etc.) are the key RC working groups implementing the aspects of action plan that do not sit with HR.