



Brunel University London  
EU HR Excellence in Research  
Award: Six-year report



## 1. Institutional Context

Brunel University London (BUL) has held the EU HR Excellence in Research award since 2011. Over the last six years, we have made systematic efforts to evaluate the needs of our researchers across the institution through regular consultative forums, with actions monitored by the Researcher Concordat Implementation Group (RCIG).

Our achievements and challenges sit within the context of ongoing institutional changes and developments, some relevant enhancements to the environment at BUL are highlighted below:

**Project TIGER** aims to provide a fully integrated information management system to improve information flow, data capture and reporting capabilities throughout the University. The project is due for conclusion in the next 12 months and will enable us to better monitor and report on processes and outcomes.

A new **Learning and Teaching Centre**, due to be completed in 2020, has been designed to provide a central campus space that will encourage innovative teaching, blended learning and better internal and external collaboration, including with industry. A **STEM Learning Centre** will provide a new learning and teaching facility designed to engage STEM professionals and learners at all levels. It will include adaptive learning spaces and cutting-edge equipment, and learners from local, national and international schools and community groups will be encouraged to collaboratively use the facilities.

A **Design Engineering Centre** (DEC) will build on Brunel University's reputation for engineering excellence and provide a series of technically rich, interdisciplinary engineering spaces.

The [University's strategic plan 2030](#) presents a longer term vision, and builds on the core values and achievements that made the University unique at its inception 50 years ago, with its focus on innovative research aligned to the needs of industry and society. We now have a number of doctoral researchers working in industrial partnerships and have built on a profile of over 500 research students within our largest College of Engineering, Design, Computing and Physical Sciences (CEDPS). We aim to have 40 – 50 percent of our research students in partnerships with Industry by 2019, and are also recruiting new cohorts of researchers across a range of disciplines through our five doctoral training partnerships (NERC, EPSRC, STFC, ESRC and HRC Consortium).

The University has established a new internal communications platform that provides a central, interactive portal for research funding information. There is a dedicated site for Fellowship opportunities, supported by a Research Development Officer providing more targeted support for Fellowship applications. Greater coordinated support for early to mid-career researchers has been evidenced by a steady increase in the research income gained by non-professorial staff within the University (see Table 1 below), while 66% of research fellows and 74% of research assistants have published through the University in the last two years.

**Table 1:** Percentage of research income gained by non-professorial staff, including research staff.

Year	% Grant income
2014 – 2015	26%
2015 – 2016	42%
2016 – 2017	69%

## 2. Evaluation

Our activity against the 2015 – 2017 Concordat Action Plan has been overseen by RCIG, chaired by the University's Dean of Research (senior academic staff) and coordinated by the University Lead for Research Staff Development (Graduate School). Other group members are the University's Planning Manager (Research Strategy), Senior HR Business Consultant, Equality and Diversity Manager, Athena SWAN coordinator, and three research staff representatives, including the Chair of the BUL Research Staff Association (RSA). The group met 12 times between Sept 2015 and Sept 2017. To maintain momentum in core areas, four activity sub-groups were created: (1) HR, (2) Equality and Diversity, (3) Researcher development and training (4) Communication with other stakeholders. Subgroups met termly and report activity to RCIG.

The membership of RCIG and the subgroups has been configured to support the integration of various institutional evaluations and corresponding plans (e.g. Athena SWAN, Equality and Diversity, REF, College strategies, research integrity, ethics and research governance). Progress against the Concordat Action Plan was specifically reviewed by RCIG at four dedicated meetings throughout the review period, with updates noted and circulated. In addition, three meetings with



research staff were convened to gather views on future actions and priorities. The input and views of senior management, including the director of HR, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), and the Vice-Chancellor were also sought in preparation for this review.

The **Research Staff Association (RSA)**, created in 2014, has taken a lead in coordinating discussion of issues amongst research staff and collating feedback. To that end, they facilitated four focus groups during the review period, and produced corresponding reports evaluating 1) Researchers' understanding of the concordat 2) The adequacy of induction processes for new researchers 3) New PDR processes and 4) Career development needs. The resultant reports were circulated to RCIG for reference, and to all research staff for further comment. These were used to inform agendas and planning. RSA members were also involved in specially convened meetings with senior management, HR and the Unions to help consider issues such as redeployment processes, promotions criteria and fixed-term contracts.

The **research staff representatives on Senate** provided regular feedback on relevant strategic issues to all research staff via email and invited comments from staff.

Four to six central **Research Staff Networking meetings** were held each year, focusing on specific themes. These enabled research staff to provide input on topics that might inform central provision and policy formation, with feedback from the meetings being taken back to respective departments. This included consultation on the University's support for grant applications (Research Support and Development Office), planning for REF2020 (Planning and Policy) and research staff induction (HR). These meetings were attended variably by between 10 and 23 percent of research staff.

**CROS and PIRLS (2011 – 2017):** We have participated in these surveys since 2011 (CROS since 2009), and the results have provided us with regular insights into researchers' opinions on local support for their development. Our completion rates for both surveys have been consistently above the sector averages, with completion rates in 2017 of 31% for CROS and 32% for PIRLS (corresponding sector completion rates were 24% and 21% respectively).

In the 3 to 12 months following the completion of the 2017 surveys, outcomes are presented to research staff, reported to College and Research Institute committees and to senior management.

#### **University staff survey**

In 2015, the University (HR) introduced an annual staff survey – Brunel Voice, run on the same schedule as CROS and PIRLS. We hypothesize that this may have contributed to lower completion rates for CROS and PIRLS in 2015 and 2017, potentially creating some survey confusion and survey fatigue amongst respondents.

However, Brunel Voice has provided helpful insights from across the institution (all staff groups) against which to consider researchers views. The 2017 Brunel Voice survey had a response rate of 61% (n= 1328) (response rates of 59% and 62% for 2015 and 2016 respectively). Unfortunately, the survey report does not yet include sufficient granularity for analyses at staff group level. However, feedback from the three years surveyed has highlighted issues around communication and transparency and reward and recognition across the University. Data from the 2017 Brunel Voice had not been published at the time of this review, preventing more detailed analysis and reporting at this stage.

### **3. Key achievements and progress against strategy**

#### **A: Recruitment and Selection; B: Recognition and Value – Principles 1 and 2**

The university currently has 156 members of research staff, less than we had in 2015. We have proposed refinements to our exit procedures for staff to help us better understand these changes and the movement of our researchers.

A HR sub-group of RCIG, including the HR director, was created in 2015 to oversee HR-related actions specifically. Sub-group meetings gave particular momentum to these actions and ensured they remained on the agenda at senior management level. Our update on progress highlights the changes that were instigated in this area. This included greater involvement of research staff within the Athena SWAN committee and working groups, and consultation of researchers by HR and senior management to address identified shortcomings within the University's promotions criteria for researchers. The latter will be adapted in coming months to accommodate changes for improved communication, relevance and accessibility.

#### **Appraisal / performance and development review (PDR)**

CROS data from 2017 showed an increase in the proportion of researchers having appraisals and PDRs, showing a rise from 50% in 2013 to 73% in 2017 (against a sector average of 72% - Mellors-Bourne R & Metcalfe J (2017), 5 Steps Forward, CRAC).



Of those receiving an appraisal, 70% reported finding that it helped them identify their personal strengths and weaknesses and 62% that it helped focus career aspirations.

The university's new mandatory PDR system was launched only 2 years ago with the priority being to encourage initial culture change in this area. The data is made up of employees (part-time, full-time, perm and fixed-term contract staff) but completion rates are not currently extractable by employee group. In its first iteration in 2015, 66 % of all 1,569 staff completed PDRs, in 2016 the figure rose to 87%. The PDR completion deadline for 2017 had not been reached at the time of this report, but we anticipate will reflect a further improvement in completion rate. Efforts to improve the engagement of research staff with the PDR process will continue.

A consultation and review of the University's compulsory induction training – Welcome to our World – was completed in 2016 and revisions made, to include a lunchtime forum to signpost central support and resources. A new induction for 'staff involved in research' was also designed collaboratively by RSDO, the Graduate School, Planning and Policy, and the Scholarly Communications Office to provide an overview of research-specific processes, procedures, resources, and training. It will be delivered once a term to new staff with an interest in, or role aligned to research, including all new research staff and all new project leaders.

### **C: Support and Career Development – Principles 3 and 4**

We have continued to work with other London Universities to broaden collaborative training and networking opportunities for researchers. Seven such events were run during the review period, including two instances of Vitae's *Leadership in Action* programme. The programme has been popular and successful, training over 80 researchers in total and receiving over 10 applicants for every available place. Pre and post course evaluations showed that positive shifts in attitude and planned behavior occurred for all the participants.

Feedback from researchers (PhD and post-docs) had indicated that there was confusion over the availability and provision of development opportunities within the university. Therefore, we have achieved better central coordination of researcher development opportunities through the creation of a central **Researcher Development Portal – [Researcher Development @ Brunel](#)**. Alongside opportunities for professional development through the Graduate School, researchers now have online access to opportunities organized by all internal stakeholders, including the Graduate School, Library Services, and individual colleges and departments. Researchers are able to register online, maintain personal records and certificates of attendance, and provide regular feedback to providers on activities through this 'one stop' platform. Research funding and fellowship opportunities are also now clearly signposted through a new interactive communications platform.

We have enhanced our online suite of researcher development courses. These are accessible to all Master's and doctoral students as well as all members of staff across the University. We have two new video and podcast resources for 'career development' and six online researcher development courses with integrated tests. The Graduate School participated in the development groups for all but one of these courses, and are also members of three ongoing international implementation groups.

We have observed increased integration of the online course material into face-to-face training provision. The Research Integrity online course is mandatory for all research students at the University, and a four-year Integrated Pathways PhD programme, run by the Graduate School, includes completion of four of the courses as module assignments. Limitations with our virtual learning platform – BlackBoard Learn – has restricted our ability to accurately quantify engagement with the courses. However, we are exploring moving the courses to an external platform to address this issue. Students on the Brunel Integrated PhD programme have reported high satisfaction and improved learning from completing the courses.

Our CROS 2017 data indicated that 90% of our research staff felt fairly treated in terms of their ability to access training and development, and the University's central Staff Development provision reported 700 attendances on their workshops by research staff between 2015 and 2017. Focus group comments from staff indicated good awareness of a range of development opportunities within the University, but a lack of recognition of their relevance to future career development. Correspondingly, researchers still demonstrated some hesitance to prioritise training over their research work. Career development management continued to be highlighted as an area in which additional support was desired, along with opportunities to be mentored.



## Coaching and mentoring

In 2016, the University appointed a Coaching and Mentoring Ambassador from amongst its senior academic staff to support the continued development of a coaching and mentoring culture within the University.

There are 10 active coaches within the University's coaching pool and fifteen coachees have formally accessed the coaching provision through that mechanism in the last year. Dedicated webpages highlight the coaching and mentoring resources at the University, and a dedicated coaching expert coordinates provision in this area from within the Staff Development team. Additional access to coaching and mentoring exists through other 'programmes' within the institution. For example, the Graduate School offers dedicated coaching and mentoring to researchers via its Graduate School Tutors.

A centrally run Brunel Mentoring Network was created in September 2016. At present, 27 people have undertaken the mentors training and signed up as mentors. Workshops for two cohorts of mentees (48 participants) have also been run. The University has also supported 36 women to attend the LFHE Aurora programme, which also requires mentorship for all participants from within the University. This has identified additional mentors who have joined the Brunel Mentoring Network.

### D: Researchers' Responsibilities – Principle 5

Along with more visible representation and involvement on boards, committees and working groups throughout the University, researchers became more involved with teaching and supervision activities, increasing their scope of influence. The Brunel Education Excellence Centre (BEEC) ran APEX Open, which offered research staff input on learning and teaching skills.

The **Research Life** project, developed and managed by research staff, has grown to include 36 interviews, with national figures sharing knowledge and guidance on different aspects of research, research management and researcher careers (for further details see: <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/our-research/support/research-life> and <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoEdKdgGPg-goQBAC4sITA8SVtiVte8Cn>).

Workshops have encouraged researchers to take responsibility for planning, monitoring and recording their own professional development and they have been signposted to professional development planning (PDP) tools. For research students, both the Brunel 3D Researcher Development Tool© and (for a subset of students) the Vitae RDF Planner were utilized for PDP. Research students were also provided with additional support by the introduction of Researcher Development Advisors (RDAs) within their supervisory teams across all departments. Completion of the Brunel 3D Tool is required for successful progression at 9 and 20 months for all doctoral students. Annual focus groups have been run by the Graduate School since 2016 to monitor and evaluate the students' perceptions of the tool and their development needs.

The Vitae RDF planner has been integrated as a compulsory element of activity within the Brunel Integrated Pathways PhD and has received positive feedback from the researchers using it within that programme. It is offered as an optional tool to research staff, 12 percent of whom currently have active accounts within the programme.

### E: Diversity and Equality – Principle 6

The University's Equality and Diversity Manager and Athena SWAN coordinator have participated as members of RCIG since 2015. This has ensured a coordinated approach to understanding issues relating to Principle 6 of the Concordat. Equality and Diversity training is mandatory within the University, with both face-to-face and online provision through Staff Development. Participation in training is recorded and monitored centrally by the University. Over 90% of CROS respondents reported having undertaken E&D training, and reported that this is an area in which they feel the University excels.

However, a review of qualitative responses to CROS 2017 highlighted that BME researchers themselves, who made up less than 10% of respondents, identify some issues. It was noted that over 60% of BUL's students, across all study categories including PGR, are BME students, yet this diversity is not reflected amongst the academic and research staff at the University. This suggests the need for more sophisticated understanding of the potential impact of intersectionality on researchers' experiences, perceptions and needs (e.g. female BME researchers). The new concordat action plan proposes better collation of data about BME researchers and their transition through the academic pipeline. Staff network groups, including a BME staff network, Carers' network, and LGBT staff network, continue to meet regularly with central support, including provision for external speakers. Corresponding Black History and LGBT events have been held within the University, and in November 2016, 25 members of staff from different sections of the University received Stonewall training.



Since achieving a Bronze Athena SWAN award in April 2012, we have submitted five departmental applications, of which three have been awarded. A Bronze renewal in November 2015 was unsuccessful, partly because we failed to demonstrate adequate impact from our 2012 Bronze Action Plan. Recognising this and assimilating the 2015 feedback, the University has increased focus on Athena SWAN, improved the engagement of senior management in the process, and subscribed to the expanded Charter. The outcome from an Athena SWAN resubmission in 2017 is being awaited at the time of this report.

In order to monitor gender equality for women (highlighted as an issue in CROS 2015), the University has introduced better data collection and monitoring procedures and appointed a data officer to the E&D team in 2016. Analyses revealed that female membership of the University's Council and Senate have both increased from 33% and 36% respectively (2014/15) to 43% (2015/16) for both committees. An Athena SWAN action aims to implement proactive encouragement measures to ensure diverse Senate nominations. The University has also implemented a mechanism of regular data-collection and analysis by gender and race for all committees and boards throughout the University.

### **Future direction and next steps (2015 – 2017)**

**Job satisfaction, health and wellbeing** will receive additional focus within our new plan of activity, following feedback from our own researchers and data from across the sector. We hope to build on our involvement in a Vitae / HEFCE case study to identify strategies to identify and support needs amongst researchers in this area.

**Careers provision.** We will seek greater coordination with stakeholders that might inform an understanding of career options, including the Professional Development Centre, Alumni Office, Innovate UK project links and industrial research collaborators. We will make better use of the latter to inform training and information about industrial careers and other non-academic pathways.

More sophistication in understanding the impact of intersectionality on researchers is required. Therefore, we will consider some focused pilot work with BME students and researchers to gain an understanding of the potential barriers within the UG–PG–researcher pipeline, especially considering BUL's position with one of the most diverse student populations in the sector. This builds on collaborative discussions about support for BME researchers with King's College London and University College London. For disability history month (Nov – Dec 2017), the University will also run a reasonable adjustment staff survey with a view to developing a reasonable adjustment policy.

**Going forward** the University will target more PGR students and postdoctoral researchers to work within our Research Themes, which have developed strong and supportive research cultures. For example, the pipeline of PGR to postdoctoral researcher is reflected in the fact that about 20% of our current TWI staff (an industrial research collaboration based in Cambridge), or those employed by our industrial partners, were BUL PGR graduates. There has been a steady annual growth in this proportion but it warrants closer monitoring so that we might gain a perspective on what BUL researchers do after completion of their doctoral and post-doctoral research.

The Concordat will continue to be implemented under the leadership of the Graduate School, with activity and outcomes monitored through the Researcher Concordat Implementation Group (RCIG), with its broad representation of institutional stakeholders. We look forward to the publication of a revised Concordat in 2018 as a catalyst for renewed discussion, promotion and engagement about how best to support the next generation of researchers, informed by an understanding of the global and national context as well as the needs of our researchers themselves.

Our ability to map local CROS outcomes against the sector's aggregate report has been helpful, and we have observed that our local responses align with feedback from across the sector. However, the nature of the surveys and transient nature of the survey population prevent us from capturing changes in perceptions amongst the same researchers over time. Consequently, we will aim to capture richer exit data from our researchers, following up a subset after they have left the university, and linking to University plans to enhance exit procedures and data collection for all staff.

With the completion of the TIGER project, we will become better at monitoring progress and outcomes, and in identifying ongoing areas for improvement. However, we need to improve the signposting of resources and provide better guidance (e.g. for supervisors / PIs / new staff). Having encouraged a critical awareness of areas for continued improvement, we also note the need to celebrate and communicate successes, and to reflect on areas where there has been positive change. Consequently, we plan to broaden our communication of plans and achievements against the Concordat, appoint College-based ambassadors, and seek to involve University staff at *all levels* who may identify themselves as having an interest in researcher development.



## APPENDIX

### Glossary

**APEX** - Academic Practice and Professional Excellence Framework

**BEEC** – Brunel Educational Excellence Centre

**BME** – Black and Minority Ethnic

**BRAMNET** – Brunel Research Administrators and Managers Network

**BUL** – Brunel University London

**CROS** – Careers in Research Online Survey

**E&D** – Equality and Diversity team

**GS** – Graduate School

**HR** – Human Resources

**HRE** – HR Excellence (in Research)

**LGBT** – Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender

**MINT** – Monthly Internship Scheme for Postdoctoral Researchers

**PDC** – Professional Development Centre (containing the Graduate School, Careers, Innovation Hub and Modern Languages)

**PDP** – Professional Development Plan

**PDR** – Performance and Development Review

**PIRLS** – Principal Investigators and Research leaders Survey

**RCIG** – (Researcher) Concordat Implementation Group

**RI**s – Research Institutes

**RSA** – Research Staff Association

**RSDO** – Research Support and Development Office

**ULRSD** - University Lead for Research Staff Development

**VLS** – Virtual Learning Environment

### Links:

RESEARCH LIFE resource – <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0EdKd9GP9-goQBAC4sITA8SVtiVte8Cn>

BUL Concordat implementation plans and strategy - <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/administration/policies-and-other-important-documents> (under 'EU HR Excellence in Research').