

Brunel University London 8-year Report – EU HR Excellence in Research

1. Institutional Context

Brunel University London (BUL) acquired the EU HR Excellence in Research award in 2011. For the scope of this review, we define researchers as those primarily employed to undertake research on fixed-term or open-ended contracts (research staff / ECRs, n = 160), recognising that our development of both doctoral researchers and those supervising and managing them is essential to this pipeline of talent. This report provides an update on activity since our previous internal review (2017).

Brunel’s disciplinary-based research is primarily organised in research centres and departments in three multi-disciplinary colleges – the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences, College of Engineering, Design and Physical Sciences and the College of Health and Life Sciences. Over the last two years, the University has undergone a number of core strategic developments, including a strategic review of research in 2018. This inclusive process collated views from all university staff through focus groups, workshops and surveys. Focus groups were conducted with doctoral (DRs) and early career researchers (ECRs) as part of this process, and the Graduate School, which centrally coordinates researcher development at the University, was reviewed and refocused to enhance provision for researchers at all levels, including those involved in the management and supervision of researchers more broadly.

Summary of research-active staff within the University

Professor	141
Reader	90
L / SL	383
Research Assistant	44
RF / Senior RF	108
Total	766

A **Brunel 2030 Research Strategy and Strategic Plan** were published in July 2019. Implementation of this plan is coordinated through a Research Strategy Implementation Group (RSIG), chaired by the Provost, that meets monthly to review actions. A focused work stream on researcher development is led by the [University’s Vice-Provost \(Education\)](#) and the [Director of the Graduate School](#). This embeds the development of researchers and concordat activity within central strategic planning within the University and broadens accountabilities in this area.

One of the university’s newer initiatives has been to provide competitively-awarded flexible funding for staff to build knowledge exchange projects from global challenge research activities. This has generated various outputs, outcomes and impacts in an international development context. We have also received more awards from Innovate UK under the Newton Fund than any other UK institution, and in the last year have created new post-doctoral global research fellowships focused on applying excellent interdisciplinary research to global problems, such as global flood risk and resilience and sustainable energy.

Brunel recognises that a cornerstone to research integrity is adherence to the principles of Open Science and Responsible Metrics, and thus it has invested heavily in research information management systems and is an Open Access and Open Data sector leader. The Brunel University Research Archive, BURA, currently contains over 20,000 full text articles, placing it as a top 10 repository in the UK, and ranked 29th in the world for our proportion of outputs in Open Access ([CWTS Leiden, 2019](#))

Review and Evaluation

In addition to consultations that formed part of our recent strategic review of research, the Graduate School has conducted termly researcher review meetings over the last 24 months. These have consisted of lunchtime networking / briefing meetings for ECRs, focus groups and consultations with doctoral researchers, and meetings of the Concordat Implementation Group (CIG) and its sub-groups. The Concordat Implementation Group, set up in 2015, is currently chaired by the Director of the Graduate School and is inclusive of research and academic staff, planning manager – research strategy, HR associate director, and Equality & Diversity manager. A HR sub-group met once per fortnight

during 2018 / 2019 in order to revise promotions criteria for research staff and review fixed-term contracts. These various meetings have acted to collate opinions, sense-check developments and ensure that decisions are informed by the researchers themselves and a range of key internal stakeholders. We also continue to have three protected places on the University's Senate for **research staff representatives**, who are also part of CIG.

Surveys: The University participates in both CROS and PIRLS biannually and has done so since 2009 (CROS) / 2011 (PIRLS), with findings reported to relevant committees at various levels, including Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee. In addition to PIRLS, the University runs its own biannual staff survey – Brunel Voice (BV) (2015 – 2019). This year, the timing of Brunel Voice for the third time, overlapped with that of CROS and PIRLS. It is possible that staff experienced some degree of survey fatigue during the survey period this year, as they would have been invited to participate in BV, CROS (or PIRLS), focus groups *and* a research strategy review survey. Parallel surveys for students and doctoral researchers (NSS, PTES, PRES) will have also demanded some administrative attention, leading to a high volume of surveys overlapping over a short time frame. The timing of surveys needs some consideration in future years. Response rates for CROS and PIRLS were observed to be lower in 2019 than in previous years, when it had exceeded the sector average. The response rates for BV have increased over the same period.

Survey response rates

Year of Survey	Participation rate (%)		
	BV	CROS	PIRLS
2015	59	30	44
2017	61	31	32
2019	66	19	19

The BV survey highlighted steady and increased satisfaction with learning and development opportunities and showed improvements in a range of areas between 2017 and 2019, with similar outcomes observed for CROS and PIRLS.

89% of BV respondents reported having clear goals from job chats and PDRs with managers, and questions relating to supervision and management relationships showed improvement in a variety of areas such as supervisory / manager availability (89% agreement), personal support (92% agreement) and fair and consistent treatment (90% agreement).

2. Summary of key achievements and progress against strategy

Our 'progress against actions 2017-19' provides more specific details of activity. However, highlights include:

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

We revised the use of fixed-term contracts for research staff so that all staff employed for four-years or more were moved to 'open ended' contracts. Implemented from April 2019, 44 open-ended contracts have been issued to staff on fixed-term contracts meeting the new criteria. The numbers continue to increase each month as continuous service and extensions to contracts change / increase, and we are monitoring and reporting impact on a regular basis.

C: Support and Career Development – Principles 3 and 4

Our research strategy explicitly aims to improve mechanisms to support academic staff at all stages of their careers, with a special focus on doctoral and early career researchers. We have appointed a dedicated researcher careers advisor to further develop the portfolio of careers support and resources. New internships for researchers have been created at home and abroad, with further plans to broaden opportunities in this area through strong strategic partnerships. We have graduated over 100 doctoral researchers through our industrial collaboration with [TWI](#), with over 10% of them successfully transitioned into an international spin-off company (Plant Integrity) and secure post-doctoral roles.

We enhanced our recognition of excellent supervisory practice through our *University Supervisor of the Year* award, as part of our annual University Teaching Awards. 59 nominations were received this year, within a rigorous process highlighting active engagement with supervisory practice and personal development. The award has helped us to celebrate and reward good practice within the research community, providing a focus for discussion, networking and mentoring.

As part of an overall strategy to enhance well-being, the university introduced and financed free club memberships and Active@Brunel in 2018. This resulted in a 46% increase in participation in sports activity, with a large rise in staff and postgraduate memberships. This initiative has also received national recognition (the BUCS Physical Activity Excellence Award, 'Top Rated' for our Sports Scene in the Which? University Student Survey, and shortlisted for an Excellence in Student Sport Experience Award 2019).

We have run SPRINT – an international development programme for female researchers, annually for two years with extremely positive feedback from attendees. 20 women have completed the programme to date, with many maintaining peer support groups beyond the events and playing an active role in the recruitment of other researchers to new programmes and development opportunities.

D: Researchers' Responsibilities – Principle 5

We have reviewed and updated our online courses and resources for researchers, and with the help of our Communications team, have initiated a redesign of internal and external websites to create better signposting of researcher development opportunities for different stakeholder groups. We have co-created with researchers resources highlighting processes such as training needs analysis and progression reviews, with both areas receiving positive feedback in PRES 2019.

Our researcher-led podcast resource – Research Life – has grown and now contains over 40 interviews, with new podcasts created on *wellbeing for researchers*, *publishing 4-star papers* and *collaboration in research*. The group have actively recruited new researchers to support the continued development of this resource.

E: Diversity and Equality – Principle 6

The university has a strong history of internationalisation, and has the 5th most diverse university community in the UK, with 63% BAME doctoral researchers. This year we were one of the first Universities to publish Ethnicity and Gender Pay Gap reports. We are currently working on a collaborative strategy with our Women's and BME networks to consult and create an action and communications plan based on findings, and will be identifying a senior champion for this area.

We have supported 13 BAME members of staff on Advance HE's Diversifying Leadership programme over the last 2 years (with a further five funded for next year) and have invested £81,000 in the Aurora women's development programme, with 32 delegates having attended since 2017 alone. We have also delivered the Women in Engineering scholarship scheme with a £1.5M award from HEFCE that funded 40 female PGT students to undertake Engineering MSc programmes. Alongside this, the university operates a mentoring scheme for all female PG students in STEM disciplines. These initiatives help to strengthen the pipeline of women entering academia in disciplines where women are under-represented.

The university has received a Disability-smart award and Disability Confident Gold award from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). We are the fourth University to hold this award nationally, and the second in London, and will now act as champions for Disability Confident within our local and business communities.

Over the last two years we have analysed our promotions data by gender, ethnicity and age, and run specific promotions workshops to support applications from under-represented staff groups. For staff attending workshops, there was a 62% success rate compared to a rate of 49% for those not attending training, and women were found to have had a higher success rate than men (69% versus 46%).

We facilitate nine **staff** networks within the university, including BME, Women, and a Carers network, and we have re-launched our LGBT network with a new Chair, leading to increased visibility for our LGBT+ community across campus.

We successfully renewed our **Athena SWAN** Bronze award under the expanded Charter in 2017 and in the last year have successfully achieved two additional departmental Athena SWAN Bronze awards. Our Athena SWAN financial scheme provides up to £15,000 research support to applicants returning to work after a career break, from which twelve people have benefited so far.

3. Factors considered and strategies going forward

Research staff champions – Over the last two years, many of our research staff have transitioned to new posts both within and outside the University (45% of our CROS 2019 respondents were in their first post-doctoral appointments

compared to 27% in 2017; 30% having been a year or less at the university). This has provided challenges in terms of continuity and capacity for some of our peer-led activities. For example, at the end of 2017, all members of our research staff association (RSA) committee moved to permanent positions outside the University. Consequently, we have worked to re-engage and support new staff in taking up leadership of the association and related activities, highlighting a need for stronger mechanisms for continuity. One of our strategies involves strengthening the engagement of permanent academic staff with the concordat. Therefore, we have identified 'research staff champions' amongst our academic staff to play a more active role in cascading information, advice and support for research staff within the three colleges. All our champions have formerly been ECRs at the university and thus have a good understanding of the issues that might arise.

Increased funding for conference attendance – 48% of CROS respondents reported feeling unfairly treated in comparison to other staff in this area. The Graduate School awards travel prizes to doctoral researchers which provide up to £750 of travel and conference cost reimbursement to successful applicants. We will expand this scheme to include competitive awards to ECRs from 2020.

PGR forum and research education enhancement – We have created a PGR Forum which will report to the University's Education Committee to ensure that doctoral and supervision issues have a focus for discussion and improvement, and the annual monitoring of our educational programmes includes enhancement conversations for doctoral research provision from October 2019. Led by the Vice-Provost (Education), the activity helps to identify enhancement priorities that will be a focus for each department within the university over the next year. More broadly, it will enable us to identify shortcomings in our data systems and potentially inform provision and future actions.

Building on our annual Supervisor of the Year award, we are exploring the integration of the UKCGE framework and standards for Supervision within our development opportunities for supervisors. As PIRLS (2019) data suggested that PIs do not feel adequately recognised by the institution for their support of research staff, we will explore options for better recognition in this area, and would like to establish a parallel award for research leaders / PIs and good research management. We will enhance promotions criteria for academic staff to take greater account of good practice in researcher development and support.

Links between industrial partnerships and doctoral programmes – We are building on our profile of innovative research aligned to the needs of industry and society and plan to pilot new doctoral programmes that create opportunities for industry employees to engage in doctoral research, bridge cultural gaps and enable stronger interactions and collaborations. With co-funded projects with organisations such as Heathrow, our overall portfolio of researchers working in collaboration with industry continues to grow. We have five doctoral training partnerships (NERC, EPSRC, STFC, ESRC and HRC Consortium) and have increased our portfolio of internship opportunities for researchers. We are currently one of four Universities selected to award fixed-term internships within the government's Cabinet Office to our doctoral researchers. New partnerships will provide more opportunities for researcher internships, nationally and internationally.

The University's Research and Support Development Office (RSDO) has built on initiatives reported in the previous review period (e.g. the establishment of an internal communications platform for research funding information), strengthened provision for post-awards (through the creation of a dedicated post-awards team) and provided greater transparency around grant holders and the division of labour and responsibility within research teams.

A transparent workload allocation model is being introduced throughout the university following a successful pilot. The model includes allocations for collegiality and research-related activity, and offers the potential to identify the breadth of activity (e.g. teaching / supervision) currently undertaken by our researchers, and enhance their visibility and recognition in that domain.

We are building our international research networks and partnerships and broadening the scope of engagement through high level visits to strategic partners, a lively GCRF Visiting Expert Seminar Series and by providing financial support for future research leaders to build development-focused networks.

At the beginning of October 2019, our Executive Board agreed to sign the new Researcher Development Concordat (launched 12 September 2019). We will actively engage in evolving sector discussions and ensure that the Concordat continues to inform the support and development of our researchers.

APPENDIX

Glossary

APEX – Academic Practice and Professional Excellence Framework

AS SAT – Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team

BAME – Black Asian Minority Ethnic

BUL – Brunel University London

BV – Brunel Voice (internal university staff survey)

CIG – (Researcher) Concordat Implementation Group

CROS – Careers in Research Online Survey

CWTS – Centre for Science and Technology Studies

E&D – Equality and Diversity

EDI – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

GCRF – Global Challenges Research Fund

GS – Graduate School

HR – Human Resources

HRE – HR Excellence (in Research)

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender

OD – Organisational Development

PDC – Professional Development Centre (containing Careers, Placements, Enterprise and Innovation Hub)

PDP – Professional Development Plan

PDR – Performance and Development Review

PIRLS – Principal Investigators and Research leaders Survey

RSIG – Research Strategy Implementation Group

RSA – Research Staff Association

RSDO – Research Support and Development Office

Membership of CIG (Concordat Implementation Group):

The Concordat Implementation Group comprises [Director of Graduate School](#) (Chair), [three ECR representatives](#), two [academic staff representatives](#), [Planning Manager](#) (Research Strategy), [Associate Director HR Business Partnering](#), [Equality and Diversity Manager](#), [Equality, Diversity, Diversity & Engagement Analyst](#).

Useful links:

RESEARCH LIFE resource – <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoEdKd9GP9-goQBAC4sITA8SVtiVte8Cn>

BUL Concordat implementation plans and strategy – <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Our-research/EU-HR-Excellence-in-Research-Award>