

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

De Montfort University UK Implementation Summary Report (4-year review)

January 2023

1. Introduction and Definitions

De Montfort University was awarded its HR Excellence in Research Award in 2019, which was then renewed in 2021. Since the initial award, there have been significant changes, including a number that have impacted upon our ongoing work to implement the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

At DMU, the main beneficiaries of the Concordat are academics whose workload includes research. This broad group includes early career researchers (ECR) and mid-career researchers (MCR). While there are members of staff on Research-only contracts, who would normally be the main focus of the Concordat given the precariousness of fixed-term contracts and the lack of opportunities for tenured posts in academia, at DMU the majority of those on Research-only contracts (there were 17 returned at the point of review), there was only one who had a doctorate, the others being Research Assistants and Associates who had not completed a doctoral degree. The number of Research-only contract holders tends to veer between 10 and 20 in the course of the year.

The majority of academic staff are on Teaching and Research contracts (DMU currently does not have Teaching-only contracts). ECRs are defined at DMU as academics who are early in their research careers (within 10 years of their PhD, allowing for career breaks), or those who have recently come to research after a career in another sector. ECRs tend to be Lecturers or Senior Lecturers. MCRs are those who have been academic members of staff for over 10 years with a record of publications as well as research grants, and tend to be at the Associate Professor stage. It is worth noting that the line managers of research-active staff at DMU may not be research-active themselves. A review of appraisal processes is currently under way to ensure oversight of senior researcher oversight of research-related objectives and plans.

2. Institutional Context (2021-2023)

The last two years has seen DMU face challenges linked to the effect of the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges contributed to a significant 'Change Programme' that began in the autumn of 2021 and resulted in the launch of Education 2030 – a new course structure that introduces block teaching in October 2022 for undergraduate programmes. It also saw the review of internal systems, such as the Staff Innovation Allowance – the system by which academics request and are allocated time for research.

DMU has an academic staff (on teaching and research contracts) population of approximately 1,200 (with another 15-20 on research-only contracts), distributed over four faculties. Currently there are 31 institutes and centres beneath this, which tend to function as the disciplinary/research identity points for researchers. However, the University has identified a need to streamline better the structure of research, pooled under fewer larger institutes (with centres beneath them), and with the institutes driving research (and the Units of Assessment that sit within them), with more senior researchers mentoring and supporting early and mid-career colleagues in their research endeavours. The restructuring is to happen early in 2023/24.

It is also worth noting that of the approximately 1,200 staff on T&R contracts, less than 500 were deemed to have significant responsibility for research and returned to REF2021. A large proportion of the staff tend to focus on teaching, and as such, response rates tend to be skewed as the rates are calculated off the total of 1,200 rather than the much smaller proportion of research-active staff at any given time. Staff have to make a case for being research-active and apply for research time allocations each year.

Aligned to the changes above, DMU launched its [Knowledge Creation Strategy](#) in 2022 which has Researcher Development and Research Leadership amongst its 4 key aims: “We will strategically invest in our future research leaders through a tailored developmental programme empowering a pipeline of diverse researchers at all stages of the academic life cycle from doctoral student to professor”. There is a



commitment to empowering researchers, increasing the number of researchers on development programmes, creating a research culture of inclusion, equity and transparency, and increasing the number and value of applications through the research strand.

3. Internal review process

The review process included two parts – first, figures and data were compiled from two internal exercises conducted in 2021 and 2022. One was a scoping exercise, including interviews with 14 research leaders (Associate Dean Research, Research Institute Directors, REF coordinators and a sample of the Professoriate), with data on research culture gleaned from Athena Swan survey questions that included ones on research culture and research career aspirations (187 responses), along with informal discussions with four SAT teams (n=45), conducted in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences (HLS) over spring/summer 2022. In total, 64% of the academic community participated in the HLS exercise. The second was a university-wide anonymous survey requesting feedback on research culture and environment (response rate was N=208/20%). This survey provided researchers the opportunity to freely express their thoughts in free-text comments. Further qualitative information was gathered from a Task and Finish group chaired by the PVC Research. The group included the Associate PVC Research, the Researcher Development Manager, the Director of Research Services, an early or mid-career representative from each of the four faculties, Associate Deans for Research from two of the faculties, and an HR representative. Given the significant structural changes at DMU, the Task and Finish Group pulled together the different strands that would then feed into the institutionally well-embedded Faculty and University Research and Business Innovation Committees from 2023/24, with the new Knowledge Creation Strategy firmly acknowledging and addressing the Concordat.

The review focuses first on key achievements and progress linked to specific principles and actions outlined in the 2021-2023 action plan. It then moves on to next steps and the strategy for 2023-2026.

4. Key Achievements and Areas to Progress

Principle: Environment and Culture

1. Creation of Research Themes fostering interdisciplinary activity

DMU's Research Transformation Programme, launched in 2021, created five interdisciplinary themes for addressing global challenges -- creative and heritage industries; lifelong wellbeing; living in a digital age; net zero; and peace, equality and social justice. Following the launch of the themes in Spring 2022, a number of sandpits and events have supported interdisciplinary working, and membership of the themes cuts across all faculties, and includes researchers across career stages (circa 170 attendees). The launch provoked some very positive informal feedback on beginning to enjoy a sense of research community and collaboration again. Particularly significant is the engagement from early career researchers, who are able to avail of small pots of money to kickstart interdisciplinary activity via funding to the five themes.

2. Online Ethics and Integrity Training

At the end of 2021, DMU procured the Epigeum Research Ethics in Practice and Research Integrity E-Modules. These were then launched in April 2022 for postgraduate researchers and all academics on our virtual learning environment. This completes an action set out in our 2021-2023 Action Plan (ECI5) to provide mandatory training on research ethics and integrity. Tracking engagement with the modules will feature in our future reports. In addition, a 'lite' version of the modules has been made available to Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught students doing research projects.



3. Knowledge Creation Strategy

Following a year of consultation with academic and professional services staff, DMU launched its Empowering University Strategy which at its core is about empowering students, staff and partners to create a fairer society. Part of this University mission is the Knowledge Creation Strategy which identifies five key areas to develop over the next five years: research excellence, researcher development and leadership, knowledge exchange and commercialisation, and a thematic focus to build inter- and intradisciplinary teams to tackle research questions that will bring together fundamental, practice-based and applied research to deliver significant impact. The creation of this strategy completes another action in our action plan (ECI7), and will be monitored going forward in terms of its impact on research environment and culture.

Principle: Employment

1. Academic promotion pathways expanded to include a Knowledge Exchange pathway

At the end of 2020/21, a knowledge exchange pathway was added to the routes for academic promotion, with a view to recognising and rewarding work done in the knowledge exchange sphere. Professor Katie Laird, based in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, was the first academic to succeed through this pathway in October 2021.

Alongside this new pathway, greater clarity on the processes behind academic progression was also introduced, including new guidelines and a recording of a recently promoted academic to Associate Professor responding to commonly asked questions around promotions. These developments align to our actions associated with EI3 and EI5 but also touch upon our work in PCDI4, PCDI3.

2. Principal Investigator training

As part of our action linked to Principle EI4, principal investigator support sessions were managed by the Researcher Development Team, in collaboration with members from the compliance and post-award support areas, and led by professors with PI experience. Two sessions (Managing Research Teams as a PI and Keeping your Research on Track) focused on good practice around project management and line management and raised awareness of responsibilities linked to the Researcher Development Concordat, as the PIs were likely to be managing research staff. Both were well attended, and positive feedback was collected. These sessions are now part of the regular offering of support for researchers at DMU. The formation of a community of practice group for existing PIs, with meetings each term, was also an output of these training sessions.

3. Research inductions

EI2 outlined our commitment to run two research inductions per academic year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Research Services launched its first online Research Induction for new researchers at DMU in June 2021, with feedback suggesting there was an overloading of information. No induction ran in October 2021 as there were few new academic staff joining the university in that period. To ensure new academic staff continued to be adequately supported, a welcome email and information pack was designed, covering research systems, policies and processes, as well as key contacts for research. This is sent to new staff soon after they begin.

Work on research inductions and how new staff are introduced into the research culture and environment at DMU continues. Plans for 2023-2026 will be to embed a research induction within faculties. In the spirit of the Empowering University strategy, this shift to faculty ownership aims to empower the Associate Deans of Research and Innovation to lead faculty-level events encouraging internal networking and community-building. Research Services will work with POD and the ADRs to ensure key information continues to be conveyed at these meetings.



Principle: Professional and Career Development

1. Launch of ResJourney for academic staff

Linked to **PCDI6** was the launch of a new training booking management system. While this system was in design linked to research degree students and supervisors, alongside other key academics involved in research degree programmes, a major step was to expand its use to include all academic staff to, in effect, become a single-stop shop for all researcher development activities.

Equally useful is the reporting functionality. This allows us to produce monthly reports on engagement with development activities and thus align with our commitment to be able to evidence academics are engaging with professional development opportunities. Reporting on engagement statistics ensures progress updates (as seen in **PCDI1**) are better maintained and monitored.

2. Supporting staff new to research: Next Generation Researcher Programme

At DMU, many staff members are 'new' to research – meaning that they either have had a long career break from research activity or have never pursued research as part of their academic career. To encourage research development within this group of staff members, the Next Generation Research Programme was launched in 2019-2020. This programme included workload-allocated time to focus on developing research skills via a researcher development programme, seed funding to pursue a small research project, and access to a mentor.

While the programme initially had low engagement figures (25% for Cohort 1 – 2019-2020), the second cohort (2020-2021) saw this engagement increase to 73%. This increase has been linked to move to online training as a consequence of the pandemic and the ease of access to attend these sessions. However, the last cohort (2021-2022) again saw a decrease in engagement (down to 41%), attributed to teaching pressures with the University's strategic focus on developing a block-teaching programme for October 2022.

However, recognising the need for programmes to support early and mid-career researchers, a new initiative is being developed that will provide scaffolding and support to both early and mid-career researchers. Called 'Advancing Research Careers' (ARC), this programme will see ECRs and MCRs supported through a three-year period, with tracking of impact over the next 2 years. With cohort sizes of at least 20, it is expected to be rolled out in 2023-24, with a route through for the very best to join the University's flagship Future Research Leaders programme.

3. Increase in attendance on researcher development events

From October 2021, all researcher-related professional development is managed by Research Services and the Researcher Development Team. In 2020-21, 270 research-active staff participated in professional development opportunities. This equates to 43% of the research-active academics (617 in 2020-2021).

In 2021-2022, 310 academics engaged with the support available. This equates to 51%. This has met the objective outlined in **PCDI6**.

5. Next steps and strategy for 2023-2026 onwards

In October 2022, De Montfort University ran an internal survey on research environment and culture which demonstrated considerable gaps in relation to actions linked to our 2021-2023 action plan. The feedback from that survey, coupled with our new Knowledge Creation strategy, informs our 2023-2026 strategy which focuses



on augmenting and buttressing our research environment and culture, and empowering our researchers, supporting them with mentoring, fit-for-purpose appraisals, and recognising and rewarding researchers through our promotion and progression pathways.

Through our gap analysis of the 2021-2023 action plan and discussions with the Researcher Development Concordat Task and Finish Group, some next steps and focal points include:

Increasing awareness of Concordat and its Principles (ECI1, EI2): Awareness of the spirit and content of the Researcher Development Concordat is extremely low across all career stages. Increased communications, both focusing specifically on Concordat principles, but also ensuring it is well-embedded in all research-related communications, is a key objective, to be delivered both centrally and via faculties, and other research ‘homes’ – themes and institutes.

Research Environment and Culture (ECI6, ECR1, ECI3, ECI4, EM5, ER4): Feelings of value and access to opportunities scored low in our internal survey demonstrating further work is needed. Actions planned include ensuring researchers at all stages are included on relevant research-related committees and allowed to feedback on key policy documents. Actions that align to promoting healthy work environments and wellbeing will be done through training and development sessions on workloads, supplementing existing support via People and Organisational Development. Resources will also be created and circulated on how to identify micro-aggression and bullying with clarity on how any reporting or whistleblowing processes work.

Appraisals (EI4, EI5, PCDI): The current appraisal system is being reviewed. Rather than the annual checkpoints, the move is towards a more continuous dialogue between line manager and employee throughout the year. Guidance is also being created to support line managers of research staff to ensure research endeavours and career plans are included in these conversations.

Mentoring (ECR1, EI4): A review of existing systems of mentoring at DMU is needed in order to better integrate mentoring as a valued activity and as a means to ensure research-active staff have equitable access to mentoring. In line with this review are plans to develop resources on good practice for mentors as well as mentees, and the linking of mentorship with desired outcomes.

Promotion and Progression (EI1, EI5): There appears to be lack of clarity around promotions processes and criteria. As such, plans include a relaunch of promotions criteria and a focus on examples of how staff can successfully progress, with particular focus on what is required by way of research successes at each level (e.g. from Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor, or Associate Professor to Professor). Reward and recognition overall are a key focus, with plans to develop a system that showcases successes.

