

## Brunel University London 12-year Report – EU HR Excellence in Research 2024

### Institutional Context

Brunel University London is a multi-faculty institution organised around 3 Colleges<sup>1</sup> and [5 interdisciplinary Research Institutes](#), with 28 aligned Research Centres and 83 Research Groups. We are situated in an environment which is simultaneously home to the UK's second biggest regional economy and a significantly socio-economically deprived area. We have Heathrow Airport on our doorstep, yet there are low levels of both business start-ups and economic growth in much of West London. We take our place in the local region seriously: we lead West London Universities Partnerships (a group comprised of Buckinghamshire New University, Imperial College London, Middlesex University London, Richmond American University London, Royal College of Art, University of Westminster, University of West London, and civic partners committed to drive growth and innovation and contribute to a thriving economy and society); we are founding members of the London West Innovation Network and have a Civic Partnership Agreement with the London Borough of Hillingdon.

The University combines a **technical focus with research excellence**, building on a history of strong collaborative partnerships with industry, local authorities and business groups / organisations, which successfully drive increased business start-ups, research internships, industry-based PhDs, researcher mobility awards, fellowships, and the transition of researchers into industry-based careers. We embody an **entrepreneurial staff culture** to '*commercialise University IP for impact*' ([HEIF Statement 2021/22 – 2024/25](#)) and research staff are actively encouraged to participate, facilitating transdisciplinary networks and opportunities to collaborate. We are particularly strong in the following key sectors: Automotive and advanced manufacturing; Energy, water and food; Digital and ICT; Healthcare; Creative and Cultural Industries.

In line with combining a technical focus with research excellence, Brunel has a strong track record for successfully developing and delivering innovative multi-partner industry-university projects. This includes The National Structural Integrity Research Centre (NSIRC), operated in collaboration with The Welding Institute (TWI) in Cambridge, where 17 research staff and 18 doctoral researchers are based. This is also manifest in our [EPSRC Mobility Pilot PhD Studentships](#) (one of only four institutions funded), designed to enable experienced industry-based engineers to engage in doctoral education.

In the last two years (January 2022 – January 2024), Brunel has experienced significant changes across the University: a new Vice-Chancellor, a new Executive, and a new [University Strategy](#). Our new Strategy makes clear our commitment to '*provide a free-thinking, creative, accessible and attractive environment for all our staff [including research staff and early career researchers] to develop strength and depth in their research, education and enterprise...*' (p.5) in alignment with the core principles of the Concordat. Diversity is at the heart of this and is manifest in our research, education and knowledge exchange activities (p.6). This informed the decision to create several new posts in the last year, including an Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research Culture and Governance and an Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), to provide leadership on the implementation of a supportive and inclusive research culture and the development and implementation of an EDI strategic plan, with explicit linkage to Concordat planning.

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<sup>1</sup> The College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences (CBASS); College of Engineering, Design and Physical Sciences (CEDPS); College of Health, Medicine and Life Science (CHMLS).

Our research community and researchers are involved in shaping the University’s new strategy through a variety of pathways. These include:

- Continued representation of research staff on Senate
- A repositioned Research Staff Association
- Research staff-focused personal and professional development opportunities in a variety of domains

The Graduate School acts as a focal hub for Concordat-related activity offering researchers a point of contact, sign-posting, careers, development and wellbeing support. The priority for the Graduate School has been to support research staff and staff supporting and managing researchers (e.g., MoRs) in understanding strategic changes and new priorities. With our new live Action Plan (2024-2027), we continue focusing on the effects of those changes and support our research staff as they work on their research plans and careers, encouraging their input to evolving policies and procedures. Our development of policies around research and knowledge exchange are overseen by the Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee of Senate (RKT). It includes broad representation from across the University and has a standing item on the Concordat. Annual reports on Concordat achievements and plans are delivered to the University’s Senate and Council.

We identify the following groups as our target audience for the Researcher Development Concordat: Research staff (defined as postdoctoral researchers primarily on fixed term / open ended research contracts), postgraduate researchers / doctoral researchers (DRs), Managers of Researchers (MoRs), Technicians and those supporting research and researchers whom we aim to include more actively in this review period (2024-2027) and explore their development needs. We currently have 148 research staff, 906 postgraduate researchers / DRs, 90 technicians and 57 MoRs (as of January 2024).

Category	Research Staff (number)	%
M	100	67.57%
F	48	32.43%
Asian	32	21.62%
Mixed	4	2.70%
White	52	35.14%
Other	14	9.46%
Black	8	5.41%
Not known	38	25.68%
Non-disabled	136	91.89%
Disabled	2	1.35%
Withheld	10	6.76%
FT	124	83.78%
PT	24	16.22%

There are 148 dedicated research staff at the university, comprising 13.06 % of the overall academic faculty (n = 1,133 - 'teaching and research' 64.61%, 'teaching only' 17.92%, 'professional practice' 4.41% and research staff combined).

**Internal Evaluation and Analysis**  
**Surveys:**

In 2022, the University ran a Brunel Research Staff Survey (for those on research-only contracts and Technicians; groups ranged from Research Assistant and Technician Assistant to Research Fellow and Technical Manager to Research Professor) to identify needs, opportunities, and activities amongst those groups. The survey had a 21% response rate which resembles our response rates for surveys run previously for these groups (e.g. CROS 2011 – 2019). The following recurrent responses helped us identify priorities:

- Improved internal review processes for grant proposals and funding applications (from research staff)
- Increased involvement in research-related activities in the University
- Mentoring initiatives for research staff (as both mentor and mentee)
- Improved support for researchers in one College (more networking opportunities with academics; more fruitful communication between research groups)

These have directly influenced both short-term (e.g., focus groups; workshops on funding applications) and long-term actions (e.g., regular election of research staff to Senate).

In 2023, the University ran the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) which had a 54% response rate (28% doctoral researchers; 72% members of staff out of which 28% aligned themselves with the 'research-only contract job family'). The survey generated several responses which directly influenced current and future action plans, with one respondent declaring, *'the survey elicits responses I think are very good at promoting research development and excellence. I am happy to have participated in it.'* A common theme (which had also appeared in the Brunel Research Staff Survey 2022) was that there is a lack of support for research staff in the three Colleges, especially regarding support for their research activities. Issues around inconsistencies in advice on short-term contracts for postdocs were identified which resulted in critical work with **HR to review progression and promotion criteria for staff on research-only contracts** (both fixed-term and open-ended). This review is ongoing and aims to be completed in early 2024. Furthermore, 60% of respondents declared they have some understanding of the Concordat and know it exists, which surpasses our success measure of 50% from our Action Plan 2022-2024; 51% feel they have access to development opportunities; **82% are confident or fully confident that they support staff's development**. These strong results are a direct reflection of our ongoing efforts to raise awareness of the Concordat and embed it effectively across the institution.

### Focus Groups

On the back of the CEDARS 2023 responses, we ran a **focus group for research staff** in November 2023: the attendees were postdoctoral researchers, research fellows, and former research staff who are now academic staff ('teaching and research'). The focus group generated many responses which enabled us to identify further actions and priorities which we incorporated in our Forward Action Plan. We plan on running another focus group for PIs and MoRs in early 2024, which is aligned with other development opportunities centred around that group.

These focus groups are embedded in a series of annual focus groups which we are running for researchers and their managers to monitor evolving needs and progress. Importantly, they provide a touchpoint for researchers and a place where they are collectively represented. In addition, regular Afternoon Teas, Coffee Mornings, and Research Staff Networking Lunches provide research staff with regular scheduled meetings with the Senior Researcher Developer (Research Staff)—who is a constant point of contact for concerns, ideas and feedback—and other members of the Graduate School and University.

### The governance structures

The coordination and delivery of work against the 2019 Researcher Development Concordat is overseen by RKT, chaired by the University's Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research). RKT meets bimonthly and includes a range of internal stakeholders, including representatives from across the University's research leadership. As part of our University Strategy, we have subsumed the previous *Concordat Implementation Group* (see previous Action Plan 2022-2024) into new University structures and it is now part of the Research Culture and Environment Sub-committee, where the Concordat is a standing item.

Strategically, we aim to support the whole researcher journey, from doctoral up to, and beyond, postdoctoral level. With a cohort of only **148 dedicated research staff** (131 which are on fixed-term contracts; 17 open-ended contracts), an integrated approach is critical to this aim, as is an understanding of the overlap in roles within parts of the University, particularly between DR and research assistant and postdoctoral researcher (early career researcher) and early career academic. This approach, which is aligned to internal policies, have successfully transitioned DRs into postdoctoral roles and also from postdoctoral roles into academic or professional positions. The size of our research staff cohort means that we can involve them in a range of decision-making discussions, whether through tailored focus groups (as described above) or University Committee representatives.

Our Concordat work is strongly integrated with other University concordats / accreditations / awards and schemes, e.g., Research Integrity Concordat, Organisational Development / EDI strategies, Athena SWAN (which was [successfully renewed](#) in 2023), and Knowledge Exchange and Civic Engagement award scheme. There is a strategic intention to apply for the Race Equality Charter (REC) in this review period and research staff will be involved in the consultation via focus groups. Our Concordat work is also connected with our HEIF Accountability Statement (cf. Institutional Context), which commits to encouraging all staff and students to think entrepreneurially, support the development of commercial ideas and create additional career pathways into research and innovation, both academic and professional. This is also reflected in our new Action Plan.

### Your past progress and achievements

A highlight of past Concordat progress and achievements, specific to research staff and technicians during the reporting period, is presented below (number denotes related Concordat principle 1. Environment and Culture; 2. Employment and 3 Professional and Career Development). These are also accentuated in the ways in which Concordat work is integrated with other concordats, accreditations, awards and schemes (1) (see above).

- With employment precarity being a main concern for research staff, our activity has focused on **Recruitment and Selection** (see E13 in the previous Action Plan 2022-2024), which involved working with HR to review research roles and contracts, including promotions routes for research staff. This work started in April 2023 and is due to complete in early 2024 (2).
- **Leadership in Action**: June and November/December 2023: 58% of places awarded to research staff (3).
- **Opportunities to develop research staff's experience of policy development** (3): Brunel's partnership with the Open Innovation Team (OIT) has been extended to now include research staff. They have since benefitted from a Policy Masterclass delivered by the OIT on campus (November 2023), and, as of February 2023, the Senior Researcher Developer (Research Staff) is one of six key staff members of the [Brunel Public Policy Unit \(BPP\)](#) and advises research staff on impact, knowledge transfer and how to promote their research to policy makers.
- Inclusion of **Technicians** – these activities are aligned with the Technicians Commitment (of which Brunel is a signatory) and the Research Culture agenda:
  - o An inaugural [TechNet Symposium](#) was held at Brunel on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2023 to celebrate technicians and the spectrum of skills in their community
  - o On 13<sup>th</sup> September 2023, the Institute of Science and Technology (IST) celebrated its 75th anniversary with a one-day conference. Brunel attended, and presented, with a delegation of 15 technicians.
  - o Brunel Technicians also presented at the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of [The British Association of Sports and Exercise Society's Conference](#) in November 2023
- In January 2023, the Brunel Research Administration and Management Network (BRAM-NET) was re-launched to **support networking amongst research administrators and**

**managers and research leaders** in the University. The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research) and other strategic research leaders attend the Network's meetings and share work in progress to contribute to an open and transparent exchange of ideas and information.

However, we have also experienced challenges. A recurring issue at Brunel is that research staff are often excluded from the academic staff sphere, even though they consider themselves to be aligned with that staff group. That includes not being invited to academic staff events, meetings, and networking spaces, or being left out of critical email communications about fellowship announcements and other career advancement opportunities. Therefore, it is an ongoing priority to influence a shift in culture around this institutional behaviour, and to facilitate stronger representation, affiliation and a greater sense of belonging amongst research staff. Turning the Research Staff Association into an official staff network, aligned with all other central university staff networks is an important step in that direction, and will result in their formal and automatic consultation on a wider range of issues. Similarly, a revamped [research-staff@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:research-staff@brunel.ac.uk) mailing list complements our central [academic-staff@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:academic-staff@brunel.ac.uk) mailing list and is actively promoted as a means of including research staff in critical communications.

### **Your strategic objectives and implementation plan**

Brunel continues to value its Concordat work. Prior to the changes described above (cf. Institutional Context), our former Vice-Chancellor Prof Julia Buckingham was Concordat Champion at Brunel, having chaired the 2019 UK Concordat review and the national Athena Swan review. Therefore, the integration of the Concordat into discussion and policy change at the University is fairly well embedded and is reflected in the priorities, actions and success measures planned for 2024-2027:

- **Brunel Research Culture Seed Fund** (£15,000 total value) for Research Staff and Technicians to encourage those groups to lead projects that contribute to fostering an inclusive and collaborative research culture at Brunel (3).
- **Research Staff Association** to be formerly recognised as a Staff Network, aligned with Organisational Development and other institutional staff networks (1).
- **Partnership** between research fellows at TWI in Cambridge and on campus to increase networking and exchange of ideas among peers (3).
- Implement outcomes from the focus group for research staff held in November 2023 to ensure **greater integration in the academic community** in Brunel (1) (2).
- **Postdoc Symposium** in April 2024, with a focus on fellowship and grant application training (which has been identified as a key priority) and presentation skills (3).
- **Early Career Academic and Researcher Development Programme**, a programme piloted with academic staff in 2021 is now also inclusive of research staff (3).
- **CEDARS Pilot 2024**: we are involved in Vitae's review of the existing survey to better capture research staff's experiences, the results of which will be trialled and embedded in 2024 (1).
- Drive up **strategic work with PIs and MoRs** to enhance their leadership capabilities and support for research staff (2) (3).
- Support the Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research Culture and Governance in the development and implementation of a **research culture delivery plan** that will include training on researcher development and culture (1).

Success will be measured through the various means described in our 2024-2027 Action Plan.