

# Birmingham UCU Fact Sheet: Targets, PDRs and Probations



## Introduction

This fact sheet is aimed at both new and experienced staff to help us support each other, know our rights, and make sure we are not signing up to unfair performance targets or bad performance practice.

This fact sheet should not be considered formal legal advice – for which you should contact the [UCU legal help scheme](#) – but it does provide some relevant information gained by UCU caseworkers at the University of Birmingham.

You can also download and print a pdf version of this briefing here: [Targets, PDRs, and Probations Fact Sheet \(pdf\)](#): Please feel free to share!

[Issue at work? Get support from BUCU](#)

## Know your contract and job description!

At the University of Birmingham many academic contracts do not clearly define performance measures and many aspects are defined by custom and practice and therefore depend on supplementary agreements such as workload allocations, PDRs, and Probations. If you are on an ‘academic-related’ contract, or if you are employed for a specific role, then your tasks may be more clearly defined.

## Exercise care over the wording of targets

For output based targets, we would consider it most reasonable to aim for work to be ‘submitted’ or ‘completed’, rather than ‘accepted’, or ‘published’. This is especially important as your managers are likely to be under pressure to deliver REF targets. Remember, according to ACAS guidance performance management should be ‘fair’ and targets should not be based on factors outside of your control. Performance measurement should therefore be based on an employee’s activities.

## Have it in writing!

Where you feel like a target is unfair, say so; especially if you are being forced to accept unfair performance targets. You should feel able to challenge unreasonable targets, and to object to any reasons given in their defence.



## **Avoid signing up to additional job roles and targets (unless you are happy to do so)**

Try to avoid signing up to additional job roles or targets that are not defined in your contract or job description unless you are happy that you are going to deliver on them.

## **Make sure your targets are realistic and achievable**

Make sure your targets are achievable, and most importantly, that your performance is being measured by targets that are under your control. Where you exceed expectations, this should be rewarded, not taken for granted.

## **REF targets**

BUCU has objected to the use of specifically REF-related targets. Standard academic employment contracts state that we are “responsible to the University for contributing to the advancement and diffusion of knowledge through teaching and examining and through advanced study and original research”. There are many ways to contribute to knowledge that may not be immediately ‘REF-able’.

## **Take charge of your PDR/Probation process**

You should be given a choice as to who does your PDR / Probation and your Head of Department should try to find you an alternative if you do not like the reviewer you have been allocated. You can ask whether your reviewer has done the relevant training.

In general, academic contracts are flexible and ‘task-based’, with a focus on delivery rather than a standard 9-5 working day. The PDR and probationary processes are not designed to be punitive and many reviewers will try to help you through this process, but may, nonetheless, not be aware of best practice.

## **MEQ data?!**

This is a common question and many of our members have informed us that Module Evaluation Questionnaire (MEQ) scores are now being written into probation documents as standard, and that in some cases Heads of Schools or HR are insisting on scores of 3.6 or above.

We strongly recommend that staff do not include specific MEQ targets in either their PDRs or probations.

MEQ data is not entirely within your control and they are not comparable. The NSS (National Student Survey) and HEFCE have stated that feedback scores should not be used generically across subject areas and the University



of Birmingham have themselves identified that MEQ type metrics are biased and potentially discriminatory. As such, any attempt to enforce target MEQ scores as a requirement of continued employment could fall foul of the Equalities Act 2010, which prohibits indirect discrimination – i.e. a policy that systematically disfavours certain categories of employees.

A range of academic studies have found that this kind of data gives systematically lower scores to women and people of colour, so that it could well be considered a discriminatory performance measure in an employment tribunal.

### **What about 5 year plans?**

BUCU are concerned that 5-year plans are being implemented as a parallel performance process to the agreed PDR system. We advise our members to give the following standard response. To our knowledge, no staff members have been forced to complete a 5-year plan after they have sent this response:

“I have been advised by the recognised trade union representing academic staff at the University of Birmingham, UCU, that I am under no obligation to engage with the “5-year plan” process, as its introduction represents a change in contract that has not been negotiated with, or agreed to by, the relevant representative of academic staff. If you have any further questions, please direct them to the University of Birmingham branch of UCU. The University have been informed of this position.”

### **I failed my probation, what do I do?**

If you have been informed that you have failed part of your probation, or informed that your probation has been extended, you normally have 28 days to appeal in writing. Note that your grounds for appeal will likely depend on the targets that you have signed up to and whether you think all the relevant evidence has been taken into account. If you are a union member you should also contact us immediately for advice.

### **Advice for new members of staff**

And finally... If you are a newer member of staff, you should have your probationary review in the first two months. The usual length of probation is 3 years. If your probationary reviews have not been set up, you do not have an appropriate reviewer, or you are not being annually reviewed, make sure you state this in writing to your line manager/mentor. And remember, your Probation forms part of your contractual agreement with the University – once agreed it should not be unilaterally changed by the University management.