

## **Consultation on the review of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers – Report from the UCEA consultation events**

9 January 2019

### **Summary**

- The Concordat has been a positive development in the sector and plays a vital role in ensuring relevant training and development opportunities, focusing attention on the contractual aspects of researcher employment, and improving the visibility and representation of researchers within institutions.
- A revised Concordat should align with other employment frameworks and the Research Excellence Framework. The Research Excellence Framework environment statements should include information on alignment to the Concordat's principles.
- In order to reflect the diversity of research in the sector, the Concordat should enable employer signatories to define the group of staff engaged in research for which the Concordat applies.
- The Concordat should include a strong commitment to researcher independence but there are concerns about the interpretation and practicalities of the explicit time recommendation in the independent review report.
- Employers should focus on reducing the use of short fixed-term contracts and the use of successive fixed-term contracts. Alternative approaches to the employment of research staff should be explored, evaluated and shared with the sector.
- A revised Concordat should include obligations for Principal Investigators but there should also be a parallel commitment to ensure that these staff are provided with appropriate training, development and time to undertake these obligations.

### **1 Introduction**

To support the consultation on the review of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers ('The Concordat'), UCEA hosted a roundtable event and a teleconference to engage with the HE HR community. The roundtable was held on 3 December and attracted 18 participants from a range of HEIs while 19 registered for the teleconference. The roundtable featured a presentation from Janet Metcalfe, Head of Vitae, and both events were facilitated by UCEA.

Both consultation events focused primarily on recommendations 2,4,5 and 6 but delegates were asked to consider all 15 recommendations and the proposed draft revised Concordat.

This report reflects this focus, although comments on other aspects of the review and recommendations are mentioned. The feedback from the events was entirely qualitative and in this report we have sought to balance competing views and the strength of views. While attendance at the events provided a broadly representative sample of the different types of institutions in the sector and there was representation from all four nations, it will be important that the commentary from this report is put in the context of the online consultation survey which should provide some quantitative analysis of such views.

The report sets out several sections, the first (2) covering overall commentary on the shape and content of a new draft Concordat and the following sections (3 to 6) consider specific elements.

## 2 Views on a revised Concordat

There was agreement among participants in both events that the Concordat was a positive development in the sector and that it continues to play a role in ensuring relevant training and development opportunities, focusing attention on the contractual aspects of researcher employment, and improving the visibility and representation of researchers within institutions.

There was general agreement with the analysis of the changes of the research environment set out in the review report. Both groups felt that mental health was underemphasised in the review report in terms of both the research environment and the recommendations. It was felt that this is distinct from 'well-being' and that the Concordat should address this directly in the new principles. General comments on the research environment and the broad changes sought in the Concordat can be summarised in four main areas:

- **Alignment with other employment frameworks or commitments** – There are several other commitments that have areas of overlap with the Concordat and it is important that these are considered and acknowledged to avoid duplication or complication. The two frameworks or commitments that were commonly mentioned were Athena SWAN and the Technician commitment run by the Science Council<sup>1</sup>. The Race Equality Charter and the National Teaching Fellowship were also mentioned.
- **Addressing alignment with the Research Excellence Framework** – There were concerns that the Concordat was not well acknowledged within the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and that the REF could also encourage behaviours that were not consistent with the Concordat principles. Some explicit integration with the REF would also mean that the Concordat would be more likely to be given priority by institutions and principal investigators (PIs). It was recommended that the 'research environment' description in REF applications should require HEIs to describe what they are doing to support research staff and their careers.
- **Engaging senior leaders** – There were comments in both events about the role of senior leaders in driving the Concordat and that this should be a focus of engagement in the process of gaining buy-in to the new Concordat. While the HR community and researcher developers are aware and supportive of the principles, improvement and change cannot take hold without leadership and resources.
- **Improving awareness of the Concordat** – The visibility of the Concordat was discussed in both events with participants generally agreeing that the Concordat

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sciencecouncil.org/employers/technician-commitment/>

should be more visible, rather than a commitment which drives activity 'behind the scenes'. One participant in the roundtable commented that many research staff, including lecturers and professors, do not know what the Concordat is, even though most would acknowledge that there has been an improvement in development opportunities at their institution. The group agreed that highlighting the commitments and making it more visible as a 'brand' was important and that this would also help underpin sector employers' positioning as employers that make tangible commitments to their staff development.

Other considerations:

- A revised Concordat should be used to support researcher recruitment activities and would have value in demonstrating the sector's commitment to career development. Employee research regularly shows that career development is the single most desirable attribute of the employment deal, typically ranking higher than remuneration.
- Although mental health is referred to under Recommendation 7, some participants felt that, particularly in light of the Stephenson-Farmer report<sup>2</sup>, this was an area which could feature more strongly in the revised Concordat.
- There was a high level of agreement with the review's conclusions regarding data on research careers and better tracking of what researchers do once they leave the higher education sector. Participants recommended a stronger role for HESA in this area in collaboration with UKRI. It was also proposed that a national database for researchers and their expertise could be constructed alongside such tracking.
- There was support for monitoring researcher engagement with the Concordat but some felt that annual surveys would be too frequent.
- There were generally positive views on the value of the HR Excellence in Research award and smaller institutions noted that it helped strengthen their research profile with both funders and researchers. Most participants felt that maintaining alignment with the award was important as was the current approach to accreditation through Vitae. In contrast, one larger research-intensive HEI felt that the Award was more limited in its effect and that change was more to do with putting the Concordat principles at on the agenda with committed and visible senior leadership. There was also a concern that, as with other charter marks, there are decreasing marginal returns on the scheme over time and therefore there needs to be periodic reinvigoration.
- Participants were pleased to see examples of good practice in the review report and would welcome further succinct examples of practice as well as other vehicles for sharing good practice such as events.

### **3 Defining the target population for the Concordat (recommendation 2)**

It is acknowledged that there are different groups of staff that are undertaking research and there was support for the existing definition as it provides flexibility for HEIs to identify the target group. For some smaller institutions without large numbers of postdoctoral researchers or research-focused staff, this group tends to be lecturers and other staff with a

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thriving-at-work-a-review-of-mental-health-and-employers>

portfolio that includes research as one part of the job. Some institutions also take the approach that development and training activities are targeted towards researchers but are open to any staff member to access. It is also recognised that there are differences between disciplines, with those in arts and humanities undertaking research in ways that do not conform to the typical SET research format.

While there is recognition of 'hidden researchers' in HEIs, participants generally felt that to include this group could be problematic and would lead to a more nebulous and difficult definition than currently exists. The following points were also made:

- Budgets for learning and development are finite and therefore widening the population that can access this will reduce the amount available per researcher for development.
- There are other staff development commitments covering 'hidden researchers' such as the Technician Commitment and National Teaching Fellowship, although this is focused on teaching and learning.
- It could appear to legitimise unpaid research which has not necessarily gone through institutional processes (e.g. ethics approval).
- The widening of the definition to include academic staff who are employed for teaching and scholarship activities may devalue teaching duties and send a contradictory message to one that the sector has been making in recent years. It could be read as implying that even if you are contracted to undertake such duties, you are likely to want to continue with unpaid research because this is what is valued. Or that the sector implicitly supports staff undertaking unpaid research projects.

Based on the feedback received, the review report recommendation is seen as shifting the definition too far towards individual self-definition and away from sector or employer definition of who is regarded as a researcher. While there should be flexibility and recognition of research diversity across disciplines and institutions, there are concerns that broadening the definition too far will dilute the intended focus of the Concordat. One approach recommended in the Roundtable discussions was for the Concordat to set the expectation of each HEI to clearly define its target groups for the purposes of the Concordat.

#### **4 Increasing support for researcher independence (recommendation 4)**

There is widespread support for encouraging and maintaining researcher independence through the Concordat. It is recognised that this independence needs to be safeguarded and this can only be achieved by an agreed understanding between funders, principal and/or co-investigators, the employer and the researcher. The Concordat plays an important role in this regard by providing a public declaration which sets out a common understanding of what researcher independence means in practice.

There was not universal awareness of the 10 days training recommendation from the Roberts review, although some HEIs have built this explicitly into contracts for research staff. For HEIs without a large cohort of research-focused staff this approach appears to be less likely to be the case. This recommendation was aimed at postdoctoral researchers and it should be clear within the Concordat that the 10 days is for those 100% engaged in research and that this should be proportional where the individual is undertaking research as part of their portfolio of duties. Support from funders in achieving this uptake is essential.

The main issue that emerged from the discussions was the degree to which such independence can be specified and the relationship between terms of research funding and researcher independence. The 20% figure cited in the recommendations of the review report was concerning for some of those involved in the roundtable and telephone discussions. This was both because the figure was felt to be high, and because it was not clear what was included in the 20%. It was questioned when this time was to be allocated and the degree to which funders, particularly charitable bodies or those outside the UK, would accommodate the funding required for such independent time.

The 20% has been interpreted by some as 'a day per week' and that this day would need to be accounted for within research costings as it would mean that for each five days of researcher time the funder was investing one day in researcher development leaving four days devoted to the research project. Even if this understanding was agreed with UK research councils, it is not guaranteed that other funders will accommodate the development needs of researchers to this extent. There are also researchers, under both the current and proposed definition of researcher, that are not in receipt of research funding and in each of these cases the employer will be required to cover these additional costs from other income. TRAC data shows that research is already underfunded from a full cost recovery perspective, so it is not clear how this would be achieved.

There were also concerns regarding how the time would be allocated if it were not simply a day a week. In the absence of a workload allocation model, how would the time be safeguarded and recorded?

While many participants raised points about about how the 20% would be achieved in practice, there were some respondents who felt that without a specified value of time, then the independence required for researchers to develop would not be realised in practice.

The roundtable group also discussed how to ensure that the outputs of independent research were protected and attributed, particularly if that research was based on an existing funded project. It was suggested that this distinction should be agreed with the PI when researchers are attached to funded projects.

## **5 Promoting solutions to address mobility and contract issues**

While there has been a reduction in the proportion of 'research only' staff employed on fixed-term contracts since the Concordat was introduced, both groups acknowledged that fixed-term contracts remain the dominant contractual arrangement for research staff. The fixed-term nature of research funding was identified as the main obstacle to change, but there were also comments related to the developmental nature of postdoctoral research positions, which are not intended to be ongoing positions within a university. The fixed-term arrangements enable throughput from successive cohorts of PhD graduates whereas an open-ended model would reduce opportunities for recent graduates while providing better job security for existing researchers. These competing approaches also relate to the Concordat focus on researcher expectations regarding career progression within the HE sector.

Smaller institutions attending the feedback sessions noted that where research funding is less regular, it can more difficult to provide open-ended opportunities for those employed delivering research. These institutions are also more likely to rely on funding opportunities that may only provide guaranteed income for two or three years.

In terms of the focus of a revised Concordat, the groups proposed four areas to improve upon the current approaches in the sector:

- Employers to enable and encourage the promotion of fixed-term staff to higher levels of seniority if they meet criteria.
- Focus on examining and reducing use of short-term (less than 12 months) contracts
- Focus on the use of successive fixed-term contracts (as this may indicate an ongoing requirement).
- Evaluate and promote examples of alternative approaches used by some HE employers, e.g. a policy such as that at UCL, which puts research staff on open-ended contracts unless the requirement is for less than 12 months.

## **6 Incorporating responsibilities for principal investigators**

There is general support for a Concordat that explicitly outlines the responsibilities of Principal Investigators, but this needs to be accompanied by the commitments to supporting PIs in undertaking these responsibilities. Both groups recognised the significant responsibilities of PIs which include project management, budget management and line management and that these require a range of skills which may be in development. Training for PIs is partially addressed in the draft revised Concordat but applies only to undertaking performance reviews – it was considered that this should be extended to all relevant areas of responsibility. There was also concern that PIs are not always best placed to offer advice on careers outside academia if their own career has been confined to academia. Careers advice from PIs should therefore be supported by other resources and access to the institutional careers advice service.

Both groups also noted that some researchers in the sector, particularly if a broader definition of researcher is used, do not have a PI. Indeed for ‘hidden researchers’ the line manager may not be aware of the research that the individual is undertaking or consider that they should be supportive of it if it is not part of the individual’s contract.

The groups felt that the Concordat needs to be realistic about what obligations it places on PIs and that appropriate support needs to be provided. One participant recommended that PIs could be allocated a specified amount of line management time to ensure that these duties are undertaken and to ensure that the PI is recognised for these duties.

The roundtable group believed that support for PIs in achieving the Concordat’s principles would be strengthened through incentives for focusing on researcher development. This could include a closer link between the REF and the Concordat, in particular the research environment statement included in REF submissions. The environment statement should require HEIs to detail their alignment with the Concordat. It was noted that one charitable research funder already requires information on the support on offer for researchers. One participant also provided an example of how researcher development was included in its promotion criteria for academic staff up to professor level.

### **Contact**

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## **Participating HEIs**

University of Aberdeen  
Anglia Ruskin University  
Bath Spa University  
University of Cambridge  
Cardiff University  
Central School of Speech and Drama  
University of Chester  
Edge Hill University  
University of Edinburgh  
GuildHE  
Lancaster University  
Leeds Arts University  
University of Lincoln  
Liverpool John Moores University  
London School of Economics & Political  
Science  
Newcastle University  
Oxford Brookes University  
University of Reading  
University of Roehampton  
Royal Veterinary College  
St George's University of London  
University of Strathclyde  
University of Sunderland  
University of Surrey  
University College London  
Ulster University  
University of the West of England, Bristol