

Concordat Strategy Group response to the ‘Careering out of control’ report

The recent Science is Vital report ‘Careering out of control’ (October 2011) highlights some of the well-recognised challenges to research careers within higher education. These are the very concerns that led to the development of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers¹, launched in 2008 by the then Minister of State for Science and Innovation.

As chair of the Concordat Strategy Group I felt that you would welcome the following commentary and evidence on the implementation of the Concordat.

As part of a coordinated effort by funders and institutions, the Concordat sets out the working practices, roles and responsibilities required to strengthen the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers and contribute to research excellence and our economic prosperity. It is underpinned by a set of key principles and has been signed by 14 funders, Universities UK and Guild HE. These principles include ‘that researchers are recognised and valued’ and ‘that researchers share the responsibility for their own career development’. A Concordat Strategy Group, consisting of the signatories and other key organisations, was set up to promote the Concordat and monitor the progress of its implementation across the UK. Vitae², launched alongside the Concordat in 2008, is responsible for leading the Concordat implementation strategy.

The Concordat Strategy Group recognises that a wide a variety of career paths are open to researchers and that university contract research posts are more than ‘potential stepping stones to a permanent academic position’, offering a wide range of career opportunities. Similarly, the doctorate is no longer limited to a vocational qualification leading to an academic career. The majority of postgraduate researchers entering doctoral programmes are driven by an interest in research (85%) or the subject (89%) and constitute a much larger group than those who say they are motivated by academic (44%) or broader (59%) career aims³. Only 40% of postgraduate researchers in doctoral programmes have a definite career in mind. Less than half of these (46%) were planning a career in higher education; a third (33%) a research-only career in higher education⁴.

The doctorate as a generic qualification leads to, and is valued in, a wide variety of occupations across a range of employment sectors, all of which should be valued equally with employment in higher education. Three years after graduation, 86% of doctoral graduates are employed in specific doctoral ‘occupational clusters’, applying their knowledge, research and generic skills in a multiplicity of research and non-research roles⁵.

While the Concordat Strategy Group recognises and understands the frustrations of individual researchers and acknowledges that more needs to be done, it would also highlight recent achievements in meeting challenges that require systemic and cultural change so as to better support the career development of researchers. The Concordat

¹ Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers www.researchconcordat.ac.uk

² Vitae champions the personal, professional and career development of researchers and is responsible for leading the implementation of the Concordat. Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK (RCUK), managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation and delivered in partnership with regional Hub host universities www.vitae.ac.uk.

³ What do researchers want to do? The career intentions of doctoral graduates, Vitae, 2011 (in press) orders@vitae.ac.uk.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ What do researchers do? Doctoral destinations and impact three years on, Vitae 2011 www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd

Strategy Group has commissioned a number of surveys to map the position of contract researchers in the UK, including:

- a 2010 survey of HEIs' strategic responses to the Concordat⁶, covering 103 HEIs;
- a 2011 survey of the views and experiences of research staff through the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS)⁷ (over 5,500 responses from 75 HEIs);
- the new 2011 Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS)⁸, which explores principal investigators' experiences and views on developing future research leaders (over 2500 responses from 33 HEIs).

These surveys, among others, reveal that the landscape for researcher development and research careers has improved significantly since the publication of the Concordat, and there has been substantial progress in implementing its principles:

- in 2009 28% of HEIs had an implementation strategy in place and a further 54% were drawing one up;
- 38 UK institutions have gained the European HR Excellence in Research⁹ award since 2009, more than the rest of Europe combined;
- research staff participation in appraisal or staff review processes has increased from 32% in 2002 to 55% in 2011¹⁰;
- 73% of research staff agree or strongly agree that they are treated fairly in comparison with other staff in relation to terms and conditions of employment, while 16% disagree or strongly disagree¹⁰;
- 40% of research staff agree or strongly agree that they are treated fairly in comparison with other staff in relation to opportunities for promotion and progression, while a similar proportion disagree or strongly disagree¹⁰;
- between 2004 and 2009, extensive structured researcher development provision for research staff increased from 7% to 33% of institutions¹¹;
- the percentage of researchers on fixed term contracts has fallen from 88% in 2004 to 79% in 2008¹² and continues to decline: over this period the number of research staff starting a permanent contract at a new institution more than trebled;
- the Vitae report 'Researchers, fixed-term contracts and universities: understanding law in context'¹³, describes how institutions are changing policies and practice in response to legislation and how many are now providing access to bridging funding to facilitate movement between contracts;

⁶ Higher education institutions' strategic responses to the Concordat, Universities UK, 2010
www.researchconcordat.ac.uk/documents/HEIstrategicresponses.pdf

⁷ Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2011 analysis of UK aggregate results, Vitae, 2011
www.vitae.ac.uk/cros

⁸ Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS) 2011 UK aggregate results, Vitae, 2011
www.vitae.ac.uk/pirls

⁹ European Commission HE Excellence in Research award www.vitae.ac.uk/hrexcellence

¹⁰ Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2011 analysis of UK aggregate results, Vitae, 2011
www.vitae.ac.uk/cros

¹¹ Analysis of university reports on career development and transferable skills training (Roberts) payments, The Professional and Higher Partnership Ltd, 2010
www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/researchcareers/Analysis20042009RobertsReports.pdf

¹² Second annual report on research staff to the Research Base Funders Forum, HEFCW, December 2009
www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/science-funding/funders-forum/reports

¹³ Researchers, fixed-term contracts and universities: understanding law in context, Vitae, 2010
www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Fixed-term%20contract_July_2010.pdf

- while progression to an academic position is still the most common pathway in institutions, some research-intensive institutions are developing research-only pathways¹⁴;
- the new Vitae Researcher Development Framework¹⁵ describes the knowledge, attributes and behaviours of researchers and provides a unique professional development framework for researchers in higher education: it is currently being trialled in six European countries and in the US;
- the Every Researcher Counts project provides development materials for principal investigators to ensure equality of opportunity for all researchers¹⁶;
- the Vitae 'What do researchers do?' series of publications, labour market information and web resources¹⁷ provide comprehensive information on the employability and career pathways of doctoral graduates both within higher education and beyond: consistently, around 50% of UK-domiciled doctoral graduates leave higher education on graduation¹⁸.

One of the principles of the Concordat states that individual researchers 'share responsibility for and need to proactively engage in their own personal and career development, and lifelong learning'. Despite the increasingly widespread availability of support for career development opportunities for research staff, the extent of participation is low. In CROS 2011¹⁹:

- only 20% of research staff respondents reported participating in career management, despite 53% expressing an interest in doing so
- 40% or fewer respondents reported participating in a range of training and development opportunities
- 47% report spending two or fewer days on professional development in the last year, despite 77% of respondents being encouraged to engage in personal and career development.

Higher education institutions highlight the pivotal role of supervisors, principal investigators and research leaders in encouraging researchers to engage in professional and career development²⁰. However, only 14% of respondents to PIRLS²¹ believed that continued professional development was very important in helping research staff become effective research leaders.

While many policies are now in place, the Concordat Strategy Group recognises that translation of its objectives into universal practice that reaches every researcher and is supported by all principal investigators requires cultural change and inevitably takes time. More widespread application of policies and practices and greater depth of implementation

¹⁴ Independent Research Fellowships, University of Bristol

www.bristol.ac.uk/biology/research/opportunities/fellowships.html

¹⁵ Vitae Researcher Development Framework www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf

¹⁶ Every Researcher Counts is funded by HEFCE, supported by the other UK Funding Bodies and managed by Vitae to promote equality and diversity in research careers www.vitae.ac.uk/everyresearchercounts

¹⁷ What do researchers do? www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd and Vitae labour market information www.vitae.ac.uk/lmi

¹⁸ What do researchers do? First destinations of doctoral graduates by subject, Vitae, 2010

www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd

¹⁹ Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2011 Analysis of UK aggregate results, Vitae, 2011

www.vitae.ac.uk/cros

²⁰ Higher education institutions' strategic responses to the Concordat, Universities UK, 2010

www.researchconcordat.ac.uk/documents/HEIstrategicresponses.pdf

²¹ Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS) 2011 UK aggregate results, Vitae, 2011

www.vitae.ac.uk/pirls

are required in order to reach and engage all researchers. To achieve this change requires both continued effort on the part of the Concordat Strategy Group, Vitae, institutions and funders, and also a greater engagement and commitment by principal investigators, research leaders and managers, and research staff themselves.

The Concordat Strategy Group welcomes your continued support for the implementation of the Concordat and I hope that this information assists you in further dialogue on researcher careers.

Sir Ivor Crewe, Master of University College, University of Oxford
Chair, Concordat Strategy Group
October 2011

The seven principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

1. Recognition of the importance of recruiting, selecting and retaining researchers with the highest potential to achieve excellence in research
2. Researchers are recognised and valued by their employing organisation as an essential part of their organisation's human resources and a key component of their overall strategy to develop and deliver world-class research
3. Researchers are equipped and supported to be adaptable and flexible in an increasingly diverse, mobile, global research environment
4. The importance of researchers' personal and career development, and lifelong learning, is clearly recognised and promoted at all stages of their career
5. Individual researchers share the responsibility for and need to pro-actively engage in their own personal and career development, and lifelong learning
6. Diversity and equality must be promoted in all aspects of the recruitment and career management of researchers
7. The sector and all stakeholders will undertake regular and collective review of their progress in strengthening the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK.