

Event summary: Concordat thematic session on ‘The employment principle: delivering stable and sustainable academic careers’



Vitae’s Researcher Development Concordat thematic sessions aim at helping all those with a stake in researcher development to embed Concordat principles into institutional practice.

This thematic session considered strategies to address the Concordat’s challenging ‘employment’ principle, which works to provide fair and stable employment conditions to sustain academic careers (as one career destination for researchers). It brought together a range of perspectives – university, trade union, and funder – to share learning and ideas to enhance researcher job security.

The speakers discussed a wide range of strategies intended to address the complex issue of precarity, including redeployment, skills audits, and long-term workforce planning. Moving beyond tendencies to blame external funding requirements, the discussion suggested a need to fundamentally shift the conversation on how researchers are valued and assessed in order to break the link between individual jobs and specific funding, and to allow researchers to move more easily between jobs within higher education and beyond.

The event started with an introduction by Rachel Cox, Head of Membership and Engagement, Vitae in which she reflected on what the sector wanted to achieve with the Concordat in the 2019 10-year Concordat review and consultation. The responses to the consultation (almost 300 across key stakeholder groups) demonstrated strong commitment to improving employment conditions and underscored precarity as one of the most important and challenging problems to solve. A quick look at what institutions are doing to address job insecurity in HR Excellence in Research Action Plans revealed no easy answers to these problems, but rather suggested small steps that institutions could take as ‘first steps’. This included establishing baselines around employment data, reviewing fixed-term contracts, exploring redeployment options, offering bridging funds, and developing new career pathways that recognise the value and skills researchers bring beyond individual research projects. It remained clear that sector-wide action is still urgently needed to drive change, and that this will involve carefully thinking about who is included in these discussions, and what might count as ‘success’.

The first presentation of the session showcased HR-led initiatives at the University of Edinburgh to address job insecurity. Speakers Susan McNeill, Director HR Partnering Colleges, University of

Edinburgh and Fiona Philippi, Deputy Head of Researcher Development and Head of Doctoral Education, University of Edinburgh, noted that their initiatives focused on two key populations who experienced precarity – those on fixed-term contracts and those on open-ended but limited by funding contracts, meaning they were regularly put at risk of redundancy. They described their Redeployment Register, which aimed to ensure that those at risk of redundancy were prioritised in recruitment at the university, and how an internal review revealed a number of challenges that still need to be addressed. These included misconceptions among researchers about the purpose of the register and the people who are on it, and whether the register should be open to all staff interested in other opportunities.

We then heard from Jane Thompson, Bargaining and Negotiations Official, Universities and Colleges Union, who leads on anti-casualisation for the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU). Jane highlighted how the percentage of staff on researchers on fixed-term contracts has been fairly stable over the last 10 years (around 66-68%) but that there is huge variance in the use of these contracts across the sector, and that this does not correlate with institution type (e.g. Russell Group, post-92). Proper workforce planning was needed to deal with this endemic problem. This would recognise that although funding for research projects is short term, the overall picture of research funding is not – it's relatively steady and generally set to increase in research-intensive universities. Workforce planning could look ahead to the future and identify what the staffing needs would be. Jane ended by outlining a landmark deal negotiated between the University of Bath and UCU at the beginning of March, in which both parties agreed that there was scope to test breaking the connection between an individual job and a specific piece of grant funding. [More information](#) can be read of the University of Bath website.

The final speaker was Dr Nik Ogryzko, Senior Talent Manager, UKRI, who brought both a personal perspective (as a former postdoc) and a funder's lens onto the issue of precarity. Nik highlighted how precarity has an impact beyond that of an individual, fuelling questionable research practices (i.e. through the pressure to publish), resulting in productivity and recruitment costs for employers, and keeping talent in a 'holding pattern' away from the rest of the economy. Despite numerous parliamentary select committees having looked at the issue,¹ however, there has still been little progress. UKRI's [People and Teams Action Plan](#), published March 2023, aims to make real headway on precarity, and outlines a number of ways that UKRI will take forward its strategy to make the UK more attractive to world-class people and careers. This includes encouraging a more diverse range of staffing models, incentivising leadership development, recognising the broad range of contributions to research beyond publications, and setting stronger expectations for institutions on redeployment processes.

The final discussion picked up on some of the practicalities of the management of financial risk within institutions, as well as how researcher skills audits might help researchers and employers to plan for career development and redeployment. Beyond these, were larger questions around the need for a fundamental shift in the ways that researchers and people are assessed within the research and innovation system. As such, efforts around narrative CVs and research assessment reform might represent key levers for change around precarity.

¹ E.g. Science and Technology Committee, *Short-Term Research Contracts in Science and Engineering* (HC 2003-442).