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By Sophie Inge

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Concordat vital to meeting R&D target, says UUK president

A revised agreement between funders and institutions on supporting the career development of researchers will help provide the skills that will be needed as the UK increases its R&D investment, the president of the vice-chancellors' group Universities UK has said.

Speaking at the Vitae Researcher Development International Conference on 16 September, Julia Buckingham said the government's recent recommitment to increase R&D investment to 2.4 per cent of GDP by 2027 would bring both opportunities and challenges for academia.

"Whether that money goes to academia or whether it goes to industry, the expansion of the workforce that this investment is going to bring is absolutely enormous," she said.

As the UK gears up to meet this commitment, Buckingham described the newly revised Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers as a "hugely important development".

Unveiled on 12 September, the concordat contains a range of principles that set out the responsibilities of researchers, managers, institutions and funders, all with the aim of improving the research environment and professional development. Among the principles is a commitment to recognising "the importance of continuous professional and career development, particularly as researchers pursue a wide range of careers".

"It really aims to take a step-change approach to developing the researchers and supporting them in their career development—whatever direction that career might take," said Buckingham, who chairs the Concordat Strategy Group responsible for overseeing its implementation.

"Of our PhD students, 80 to 90 per cent will not pursue a career in academia. We need to think like that."

Anthony Hollander, pro vice-chancellor for research and impact at the University of Liverpool, which is leading a £4.4-million project to boost the success of postdoctoral researchers outside academia, added that there was a "conspiracy of silence" around the "very bleak" academic career prospects of postdoctoral students.

"That reality doesn't work and none of us do anything about it—that's my personal admission to myself and the sector," he said. "We've lived off our postdocs working hard within their research programmes—benefiting us and the universities without any focus on their careers at all."

Employers outside academia, meanwhile, are too focused on PhD students and undergraduates, with postdoctoral researchers being "invisible", he added.

Addressing this issue "aligns with the government's 2.4 per cent...

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ambition for research, which will require a skills uplift, Holander said.

Image: Brunel University London

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