

Call to give early career researchers more independence

Review of UK guidelines says junior scholars should spend 20 per cent of time on their own projects and personal development

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Early career researchers should be supported to spend a fifth of their time on independent projects and personal development, a major report has said.

A [review](#) of the UK's main sector guidelines for researcher development says that the influence of principal investigators and the tight scope of funding grants means that junior scholars lack the independence to develop their own skills and careers.

The expert panel which has considered the future of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers argues that “production of trained people is as important [for the future of academia] as the production of data, papers and patents”.

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It recommends that the document – an agreement between research funders and employers – should advocate allowing early career academics to spend 20 per cent of their time on personal development, including independent research, teaching, organising seminars or undertaking placements in industry or policy organisations.

The panel also says that researchers should be encouraged to make use of their annual training allowance, currently set at 10 days per year.

Presenting the panel's findings at the annual research development conference hosted by careers organisation Vitae, chair David Bogle, pro vice-provost of the UCL Doctoral School, said that universities must "train independent minds".

"If we want [researchers] to be really good innovators, in academia and in the private sector, we need to give them space to grow that independence," he said.

The panel also recommended that references in the concordat that describe leaving academia in negative terms – such as "attrition from the research path" – are deleted.

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In addition, the review says that funders and employers must be encouraged to find solutions to the problems of time-limited contracts and limited promotion opportunities that many early career scholars face, especially when their roles are linked to particular research grants.

"The world is hungry for trained researchers so it is important for the UK to maintain a strong training environment, particularly in the wake of Brexit and in the global war for talent," Professor Bogle said.

The panel's recommendations will now be subject to consultation.

The concordat has been internationally influential since it was first published in 1992, with several other sectors having launched similar documents since.

However, a survey of 347 research staff and policy groups that was conducted for the review presented a mixed picture of the concordat's impact on the ground. Although many respondents said that it had led to the creation of researcher-led groups or committees, and improved provision of career development activities, they were much less likely to agree that it had led to major changes to recruitment or employment practices.

Some respondents raised concerns about lack of awareness of the concordat and others warned that institutions were only "paying lip service" to its recommendations.

Speaking to *Times Higher Education* previously, Julia Buckingham, vice-chancellor of [Brunel University London](#) and chair of the concordat strategy group, argued that institutions would take it more seriously if funders [made compliance a condition of funding](#).

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