

Plan to ring-fence junior scholars' research time scrapped

Early career academics dismayed to see 20 per cent threshold for independent projects and personal development dropped from UK guidelines

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Source: Alamy

Early career researchers have expressed disappointment after plans to recommend that universities allow them to spend a fifth of their time on independent projects and personal development were scrapped.

A panel that reviewed the UK's main sector guidelines for researcher development said that setting aside the time – which could be used for independent research, training, attending events and completing placements – [would help junior scholars](#) to build their skills and careers.

The revised version of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers is due to be published next month. However, in a [progress update](#), Julia Buckingham, chair of the Concordat Strategy Group, said the updated

document “would not include a specific amount of time” for these activities beyond the current training allowance of 10 days a year.

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Although 84 per cent of individual respondents to a consultation backed the 20 per cent proposal, responses from universities and other organisations were rather more mixed. While 47 per cent of institutions supported it, 29 per cent were undecided and 24 per cent were opposed. Post-92 universities, as well as some pre-92 institutions outside the Russell Group, were particularly likely to be sceptical.

Emily Yarrow, a teaching fellow in the [University of Edinburgh](#)’s business school, described the dropping of the recommendation as “not only disappointing” but “potentially quite dangerous in terms of the longer-term research goals of the UK, in what is a global marketplace”.

Having time “ring-fenced” for developing “one’s own research identity and voice” was “really important”, Dr Yarrow added.

Sarah Burton, a Leverhulme Trust early career fellow in the department of sociology at [City, University of London](#), agreed that the retreat was “disappointing”.

“Yet again, the specific needs of early career researchers seem to be being erased from university policy,” Dr Burton said.

It was far too easy for institutions to “slink their way out of commitments to research time”, she added.

An [analysis of the consultation responses](#) said that universities’ concerns focused on the cost of supporting independent research projects and on the loss of researcher time from funded projects. Other respondents said that a 20 per cent limit was overly prescriptive and questioned whether it was appropriate for staff whose responsibilities were teaching-focused.

Professor Buckingham, vice-chancellor of [Brunel University London](#), told *Times Higher Education* that there were “quite a lot of complications in being over-prescriptive, because obviously one has to meet the needs of a very diverse collection of universities and a very diverse collection of funders”.

“While we haven’t said 20 per cent as such...the ethos of developing independent researcher skills and leadership skills is very definitely there,” she said.

There have been calls – including from Professor Buckingham herself – to give the concordat “more teeth” by making compliance [a condition of funding by grant agencies](#).

The strategy group would soon be looking at “the way in which we monitor progress against the concordat”, but the priority was to “get the concordat out there” as soon as possible, Professor Buckingham said.

“If we are going to do what we want to do to help researchers develop their talents and, indeed, help the UK’s research effort, which is what this is about, it can’t be a document that sits on the shelf,” she said.

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