Vitae’s response to the community consultation on the Independent review of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

This paper provides an overview of Vitae’s views informed by our membership on the impact of the Concordat and how it should evolve to improve further the working conditions and career development of research staff. We highlight the changing research context, consider the continuing relevance of the current principles and propose new principles. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our views with the Review Panel.

Overview

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers was developed to ensure the supply of ‘high quality, well-motivated research staff’ to maintain and develop the UK’s world-class research base. Given the challenges facing the UK research base, it is important that the Concordat continues as an effective instrument to ensure the supply of talent for the UK within this changing context.

This review of the Concordat provides the opportunity to reflect on how the Concordat can be used to facilitate the strategic objectives of the UK Government and UKRI. The implementation of the Government’s Industrial Strategy requires the supply of highly talented researchers with broader understanding of innovation. Sir Mark Walport, Chief Executive Designate of UKRI, has announced that the supply of talent for the research base, industry and innovation is a key first objective for the new organisation. Brexit potentially will impact on the UK’s ability to attract and retain research talent. The commitment of the UK research base to achieving the Concordat principles is a powerful and attractive message to researchers.

Any changes to the Concordat need to reflect the changing nature of research, such as the increasing:

- international collaborations and global competition
- proportion of interdisciplinary research and more focus on grand challenges and OECD sustainable development goals
- focus on research integrity, the reproducibility of research and gendered research
- expectations that researchers will be more open in their research, their data and publications
- extent of intersectoral research collaborations, engaging with research users and the general public
- drive to translate research into innovation, economic and societal prosperity.

Since its launch in 2008 (with Vitae), the Concordat has been adopted by institutions as a policy reference document which helps them achieve their strategic ambitions relating to the supply of highly talented researchers. Critical to the use and implementation of the Concordat principles has been the associated European HR Excellence in Research Award, with 100 UK institutions now holding the Award. The Concordat principles, together with the flexibility for how institutions develop their implementation action plans have been influential in the progress that has been made across the UK. The ability of each institution to translate
the Concordat principles into their specific institutional context has been, and will continue to be, important to their adoption by institutions.

The journey that the HE sector and individual institutions have made in the ten years since the launch of the Concordat has transformed the way research staff are considered and supported by institutions. Five Steps Forward\(^1\) summarises this progress from the perspective of research staff and principal investigators. This report, together with institutional HR Excellence Award action plans, illustrates that all institutions have developed strategies and policies relating to the employment conditions and career development of researchers. In some areas of the Concordat considerable progress has been made in implementing these policies into common practice within individual institutions. However, there remains much to be done to fully implement the Concordat principles, particularly with respect to changing the culture within the HE research environment and embedding positive people management into normal practice.

**Current principles**

**Recruitment and Selection**
The UK higher education sector is acknowledged across Europe for having open, transparent and merit-based recruitment (OTM-R). The use of fixed-term contracts, however, is still prevalent for research staff, with only a small overall decrease in their use over the last ten years\(^1\). Some institutions have demonstrated that it is possible to offer open contracts to the majority of research staff and the Concordat should encourage institutions to be more pro-active in bringing research staff contracts in line with other academic staff.

**Recognition and Value**
Research staff are known as the ‘engines of research’. However, the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS)\(^2\) results demonstrate that they contribute widely to their institution through teaching, supervising undergraduate, masters and doctoral researchers, public engagement and knowledge exchange activities. The Concordat should emphasise more the importance of recognising and valuing this wide range of contributions of research staff in institutional workload models, performance reviews, promotion and progression. More active talent management strategies should be encouraged that support the continuity of employment where possible.

**Support and Career Development**
Although the Concordat currently recognises that the availability of academic careers is limited, more could be done to improve the acceptance by research staff that only a minority will achieve long term academic careers. Institutions, and particularly principal investigators, should be encouraged to provide open and honest conversations about the career prospects of their researchers. CROS consistently records 60% of research staff respondents expecting to achieve an academic career in the long term, whereas in reality only a small percentage will achieve this.


\(^2\) Careers in Research Online Survey [www.vitae.ac.uk/cros](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/cros)
Researchers' Responsibilities
This principle needs to reflect more strongly the changing nature of research and particularly the importance of personal responsibility for research integrity, linking into the Concordat to support research integrity\(^3\).

Although research staff claim to take ownership of their own professional development\(^1\), a significant proportion have unrealistic career aspirations and few engage in career management activities. Significant proportions of research staff express a desire undertake more professional development. We believe the Concordat should encourage institutions to build a culture where research staff feel they are actively encouraged and valued by their principal investigators when they invest in continuing professional development and career development activities.

Diversity and Equality
This principle needs to recognise that since the 2010 Equality Act, the dialogue on equality and diversity has moved from being predominantly around gender to that of creating a more inclusive research environment, providing equal opportunity to all researchers irrespective of their personal circumstances. It also needs to recognise the particular challenges of intersectionality and reference how more general equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives, such as ECU's expanded Athena SWAN Charter and Race Equality Charter, and Stonewall’s Diversity Champions programme, can support the promotion of inclusivity for researchers. Similarly, the Concordat should refer to how Universities UK’s new framework for ‘Mental Health in Higher Education’\(^4\) can be implemented for research staff.

Implementation and Review
This principle is an invaluable aspect of the Concordat. Vitae’s management of the UK process for the European HR Excellence in Research Award has been very effective in providing a framework for institutions to review and acknowledge their progress against the Concordat principles. Brexit provides both opportunities and challenges in how this process evolves in the future. Vitae has consistently presented the implementation of the Concordat principles for achieving and maintaining the HR Excellence Award as an enhancement process, encouraging institutions to aspire to excellence. We believe that this approach accounts for the significant proportion of UK institutions with the Award (100) compared with 290 institutions in the rest of Europe. The confidentiality of institutional CROS and PIRLS results (funded through Vitae membership) have been instrumental in reinforcing this approach and providing a biennial and robust feedback loop for participating institutions and the sector overall.

This principle acknowledges that the implementation and review of the Concordat requires investment. Initially, Vitae’s Concordat-related activities were funded through the overarching contract with RCUK for researcher development. Since 2015, the Concordat Strategy Group, and particularly the funders on the CSG, has provided specific funding for the secretariat to the Group and various UK level activities, including analysis and publication of the UK

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\(^3\) Concordat to support research integrity. Universities UK [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2012/the-concordat-to-support-research-integrity.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2012/the-concordat-to-support-research-integrity.pdf)

\(^4\) Mental Health in Higher Education [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/stepchange/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/stepchange/Pages/default.aspx)

www.vitae.ac.uk
aggregate results for CROS and PIRLS. These surveys provide a UK benchmark and evidence of progress, critical in encouraging institutions to improve their provision for research staff. We recommend that the CSG continues to provide funding to support UK level activities to ensure that the UK sustains and develops the supply of highly talented researchers.

To know whether the Concordat is making a significant difference to the supply of talented researchers requires systematic data collection on the career paths of researchers and their impact, particularly of research staff. The replacement of the HESA’s Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) surveys by its Graduate Outcomes Survey\(^5\) will reduce the availability of data on researchers’ careers. A commitment in the Concordat to collect this data will provide invaluable evidence for BEIS, UKRI and other stakeholders to make effective policy decisions relating to the supply of talent, and provide researchers with good information on career opportunities so that they can make well-informed career decisions.

**New principles**

**Principal Investigators and Research Leaders**

Although the role of principal investigators in supporting the career development of researchers is referenced throughout the current Concordat text, this needs to be more clearly articulated in the future to place more emphasis on their important role. To change the research culture, institutions need proactively to work with principal investigators and research leaders to enhance their ability to support their research staff and to acknowledge the time involved in these activities in workload models, promotion and progression, and performance review. Their engagement is so critical to research staff’s experiences that we recommend the addition of a specific principle for principal investigators and research leaders. PIRLS results demonstrate that principal investigators understand the importance of nurturing the careers of research staff, but do not feel recognised and valued for these activities and may not be confident in their people management and leadership abilities, particularly around performance management and providing advice on career opportunities.

**Funders and other stakeholders**

The role of funders and other stakeholders in reviewing progress in implementing the Concordat principles is acknowledged in the Implementation and Review principle. However, the Concordat currently does not acknowledge the ability of the funders and other stakeholders, such as government departments and professional bodies, to influence the behaviours of researchers and change the research environment. We recommend the inclusion of a specific principle for these organisations that encourages them proactively to use the instruments available to them to create positive drivers for researchers and institutions. For example, the research funders could be stronger in their reference to the Concordat principles in their terms and conditions for funding, their evaluation of research proposals and assessing the impact of their funding. The reference to the Concordat within the guidance on the REF Research Environment template is an important signal to researchers that the funders view the Concordat as an important initiative.

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\(^5\) Graduate Outcomes [www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/records/reviews/newdlhe/model](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/records/reviews/newdlhe/model)
Who should be covered by the Concordat?

Institutions differ in which communities they want to impact in their Concordat implementation. When it was launched the Concordat was specifically targeted at ‘researchers primarily employed to do research’. In 2015 the Concordat Strategy Group recognised that the potential audience is broader than this and extended the definition to be more inclusive and cover ‘those who are engaged in research’. Research-intensive institutions are most likely to target their research staff population, although some also include PGRs within their HR Excellence Award action plans. Less research-intensive institutions are more likely to extend their Concordat activities to include existing academic staff who are striving to become more research active. The recent Concordat discussion paper6 highlighted other populations who may benefit from the Concordat’s aims: early career teaching staff who want to sustain their research activity, particularly in the arts and humanities and social sciences; technicians; software specialists; other professional staff. We believe that it is still important to focus on the career development of research staff and recommend that the Concordat remains primarily focused on this important cohort, but that institutions should have the flexibility to extend their Concordat activities to the benefit of other groups.

Revision of the Concordat text

Since the launch of the Concordat there have been, and will continue to be, considerable changes in the research environment and our knowledge and understanding of good talent management. The Concordat has also led to a series of other concordats, including research integrity7, public engagement8, open research data9 and animal research10. Ideally, we want to see the Concordat as a living document where these changes are reflected in the supporting text so that it remains current and continues to reflect the changing nature of research, the research environment and wider employment market for researchers.

A major factor in the adoption of the Concordat was the involvement of all stakeholders in its initial development. It is essential that institutions, funders and other stakeholders are fully involved in future amendments. UK universities are autonomous institutions and therefore it is important that the Concordat retains the flexibility for institutions so that they continue to remain committed to implement the principles in ways that best reflect their values, strategies and institutional context.

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7 The concordat to support research integrity www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/research-concordat.aspx
8 Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/scisoc/concordatforengagingthepublicwithresearch-pdf/
9 Concordat on Open Research Data www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/documents/concordatonopenresearchdata-pdf/
10 Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the UK http://concordatopenness.org.uk/