Introduction
The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers was launched, with Vitae, in June 2008. It was signed by all major UK funders of research and Universities UK to provide an unambiguous statement of the expectations and responsibilities of researchers and their managers, employers and funders. The aim of the Concordat is to increase the attractiveness and sustainability of higher education research careers in the UK.

The adoption and implementation of the Concordat principles by the UK higher education sector has proved to be an important driver in the desire to improve the careers and working conditions of research staff.

Progress to date
The provisions of the Concordat encompass recruitment and selection, recognition and value, career development, researcher responsibilities, equality and diversity, and monitoring and review requiring institutions to respond across a broad agenda.

This paper reviews evidence of the progress that has been made to date against each of the principles and what further challenges remain to achieve the Concordat principles. The majority of this evidence is gathered from:

- the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS)\(^1\), a biennial survey that explores the views of research staff on their experiences, career aspirations and professional development opportunities against the Concordat principles (CROS 2009, 2011, 2013)
- the Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS)\(^2\), which explores their views on the leadership and management of researchers (PIRLS 2011, 2013)
- HR Strategies for Researchers: A review of the HR Excellence in Research Award implementation activities across Europe (2013)\(^3\)
- Analysis of the HESA Staff Record (2012/13)\(^4\)
- Three-year review of the implementation of the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and associated measures of progress (2012)\(^5\).

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…despite being a voluntary instrument, the Concordat is having a significant impact across the higher education sector. The intention to implement the principles of the Concordat is now widespread in institutions, and the corresponding infrastructure is increasingly in place.‘

Three-year review of the implementation of the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, March 2012
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1. [www.vitae.ac.uk/cros](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/cros)
2. [www.vitae.ac.uk/pirls](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pirls)
4. [www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk)
Who are research staff?

Researchers are defined in the Concordat as individuals whose primary responsibility is to conduct research and who are employed for this purpose. This covers a wide range of staff across all disciplines, experience and responsibility, employed on different types of contract (fixed term or open ended, full or part time) and with different career expectations and intentions.

As research staff are not specifically identified in the HESA staff record, staff categorised as ‘research only’ are used as the best proxy. In the most recent HESA data this amounts to 42,350 staff [HESA 2012/13]. However, this includes senior managers and principal research fellows (6%), who probably have well-established careers, and administrative research staff (3%). It also excludes early career researchers who may have been employed on research and teaching contracts, or are sustaining their postdoctoral research through a series of teaching contracts.

Broadly, the majority of research only staff are in the sciences, with only a small proportion employed in the social sciences, arts and humanities. 59% of research staff are UK-domiciled and 69% are employed in Russell Group institutions. 67% are on fixed term contracts (FTC), with 18% on part-time contracts. 39% of research staff have been at their institution for more than four years, with 11% having ten or more years’ service.

45% of research staff are between 30-39 years old, with 68% on fixed term contracts. 26% of research staff are over 40 with approximately half on fixed term contracts. Research staff under 30 years old (29%) are most likely to be employed on fixed term contracts, at 84% in the current HESA data.

The gender balance for research only staff is 53% male and 47% female, with little difference in the percentage of staff on fixed term contracts. However, looking across the range of job levels, the data displays the infamous ‘scissors graph’, revealing a decline in the proportion of women in senior research positions. Women research staff are also twice as likely to be employed part-time as men.
The openness of UK higher education recruitment of researchers is confirmed in the recent European Commission MORE2 report of a survey of more than 10,000 individual researchers currently working in the European Union. The UK had the highest proportion (80%) of satisfied respondents with respect to open, transparent and merit-based recruitment compared with a 60% EU average.

Principal investigator respondents to PIRLS 2013 report high levels of confidence in recruitment and selection (79%), however, the 2010 report on the use of fixed-term contracts revealed evidence that principal investigators and research leaders were not always fully familiar with institutional employment policies and hence they may not be consistently applied across the institution.

The legislative changes have meant that the rights of fixed-term and open-ended employees are increasingly similar. However, the nature of research funding continues to be linked with a risk of redundancy. There is increasing diversity in the use of fixed-term and open-ended employment and in the nature and quality of these positions. The type of contract used is not, of itself, a useful indicator of the quality or security of the post. More nuanced understandings based on a range of factors, including the risk of redundancy, should be sought.

From the HESA staff record data, there appears to have been a small but steady decrease in the overall proportion of research staff employed on fixed term contracts from 88% in 2004 to 69% in 2011, no doubt influenced by the Fixed Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2002. However, higher percentages of early career research staff are likely to be on fixed term contracts. The UK fixed term contract data is also higher than the European Union average of 58% for research staff respondents to MORE2. Furthermore, CROS 2011 revealed a shortening of the length of fixed term contracts, which was still apparent in the CROS 2013 results, with 22% of respondents on contracts of one year or less. This compares to a European Union average of 8% for respondents to MORE2.

Although there is an overall trend towards open contracts in the UK, there is currently no evidence of whether the increased use of open contracts for research staff is providing increased security of employment.

Principle 1: Recruitment and selection

There is evidence from successive CROS results that institutions are increasingly operating open and transparent recruitment processes for research staff, particularly providing good information on job descriptions and employment conditions. Panel interviews are normal practice with only 20% of respondents reporting an interview only with the principal investigator.

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6 Researchers, fixed-term contracts and universities: understanding law in context, Vitae, 2010

Principle 2: Recognition and value

A Vitae survey of the visibility of researcher development in institutional strategies (2011)8 identified that three quarters of institutions made a direct statement of commitment to valuing researchers.

Over the last ten years there has been a steady increase in the proportion of research staff respondents to CROS reporting participation in annual appraisal or staff review processes from 32% in 2002 to 60% in 2013. However, this still remains lower than principal investigators’ reported participation in appraisal at 83% (PIRLS 2013).

For both respondent groups, around half report the overall usefulness of appraisals.

The majority of principal investigators responding to PIRLS 2013 express high confidence in motivating individuals (86%) and leading their research group (85%). They are less likely to express high confidence in conducting appraisals (65%) and managing staff performance (65%). Between a third and a half of PIRLS respondents agreed they would benefit from further development in these activities.

Generally in CROS 2013, research staff respondents report high perceptions of fair treatment in their terms and conditions of employment (60%), requests for flexible working (70%) and access to training and development opportunities (85%). However, significantly fewer report fair treatment compared with other staff in opportunities for promotion and progress (37%).

Successive CROS results reveal small but consistent increases in the proportion of research staff respondents (CROS 2013) who perceive they are recognised and valued for their contributions to publications (77%), grant/funding applications (51%), public engagement with research (53%), knowledge transfer and commercialisation activities (44%) and supervising/managing staff (38%). There are similar increases in the proportion of respondents perceiving that they are integrated in their departmental (78%) and institutional (62%) research communities.

However, CROS 2009 identified small sub-populations of research staff respondents, mainly on multiple short-term contracts and/or long service, who reported less integration and satisfaction. This continues to be the case in subsequent surveys.

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Principles 3 and 4: Support and career development

The £120M government investment between 2003 and 2011 of ring-fenced ‘Roberts’ funding for researcher development provision enabled institutions to focus on the professional and career development of researchers. Institutions have made significant progress in increasing and enhancing provision over the previous ten years. However, progress differs between institutions with research staff provision generally less embedded than that for doctoral researchers.

Institutions are clearly communicating the importance of professional development to research staff with three-quarters of research staff respondents to CROS reporting that they are being encouraged to engage in career and skills development (CROS 2011, 2013).

Despite this, participation by research staff in professional development activities is uneven and generally low. Successive CROS surveys provides little evidence of increases in the overall proportion of research staff participating in continuing professional development activities, with only 48% of CROS 2013 respondents reporting participation in three or more days of training and other professional development activities per year.

Participation rates range from 14% to 25% across a range of professional development activities on topics such as knowledge exchange (14%) and research integrity (25%). No doubt engagement is not helped by a substantial proportion of principal investigator respondents to PIRLS perceiving participation in continuing professional development to be relatively unimportant in the development of research leaders (41% not important).

Institutions recognise that principal investigators and research leaders have a pivotal role as managers of researchers in achieving the Concordat principles. This is also highlighted in almost every institution’s HR Excellence action plan, with a variety of approaches to encouraging principal investigators to engage in training and development, to ensure that they are informed, confident and actively engaging in human resources management and career development of their research staff.
In CROS 2011 significant numbers of research staff respondents report engagement in wide-ranging activities and responsibilities, with many more expressing interest in doing so, in relation to their immediate training and development needs (72%) and long term career planning (64%) (CROS 2011). However, only around 30% of respondents have sought out professional advice/guidance from a careers adviser about long term career planning. 68% of principal investigators responding to PIRLS are confident about giving career development advice to research staff, although this is likely to be within the environment of academic careers.

In CROS 2011 significant numbers of research staff respondents report engagement in wide-ranging activities and responsibilities, with many more expressing interest in doing so. A majority (57%) are undertaking teaching, demonstrating and supervising of students, with 35% managing budgets and 54% planning and managing projects. A third has been involved in knowledge transfer. Consistently since CROS 2009, 40% of research staff respondents have participated in public engagement activities. Up to half of principal investigators responding to PIRLS feel that it is very important for research staff to have such experiences, and very few think that they are unimportant, in helping research staff to become future research leaders (PIRLS 2011).

Approximately a third of respondents to CROS 2011 report that they collaborate with industry. However, very few have undertaken secondments/exchanges outside higher education (9% CROS 2013), while a substantial proportion suggest that they would like to do so.

In terms of wider engagement within the institution, the number of research staff associations at institutional or departmental level is increasing with 57 identified in 33 different institutions in 2011, the majority in Russell Group institutions. Vitae continues to support the activities of the UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA) and runs an annual conference for researchers leading or interested in forming research staff organisations.

Almost a quarter of research staff respondents to CROS 2011 report participation in departmental decision-making processes and committees. However, awareness of researcher-related policy initiatives is poor, with the proportion of research staff respondents reporting knowledge of the Concordat falling from 57% in CROS 2011 to 37% in CROS 2013. There were similarly low levels of awareness in CROS 2013 of the Concordats for public engagement (33%) and (more recent) research integrity (23%). In CROS 2013 45% report knowledge of Vitae, up from 27% in 2009, with 55% reporting knowledge of Athena Swan.

A key challenge for institutions is to continue the cultural change towards widespread understanding that researchers need to take responsibility for their own career and professional development. This includes the acknowledgement by principal investigators of the importance and value of providing the time for research staff to do so.
Principle 6: Equality and diversity

The vast majority of research staff respondents (86% CROS 2013) and principal investigator respondents (87% PIRLS 2013) believe their institution is committed to equality and diversity. Similar proportions of research staff respondents believe it treats all staff fairly with regard to a range of characteristics, for example age (79%), gender (77%) and ethnicity (83%).

There is still evidence of gender differences. Around 18% of female respondents to CROS 2013 disagreed that their institution treated staff fairly irrespective of gender, slightly higher than the 15% recorded in CROS 2011, and considerably higher than the 8% of males who disagreed. However, this is a more positive perception of fair treatment than amongst female principal investigator respondents to PIRLS, where 31% perceive less than fair treatment with respect to gender (PIRLS 2011).

Perceptions of unfairness regarding different aspects of employment were expressed by between 20% and 25% of female respondents to CROS 2013 in relation to career progression/promotion, reward and participation in decision-making, slightly higher than in CROS 2011. Broadly similar proportions of female respondents to PIRLS 2011 and 2013 also reported perceptions of unfairness in relation to the same three areas.

Significant proportions of the sub-group of research staff respondents who had had five or more contracts with their current institution research staff continue to report perceptions of unfair treatment, with 33% of this group disagreeing that they were treated fairly in relation to promotion and progression, 29% in relation to participation in decision-making and 27% in relation to reward (CROS 2013), all slightly higher than recorded in CROS 2011.

Institutions are currently embracing equality and diversity issues, in part prompted by the Equality Act 2010, the Vitae Every Researcher Counts project9 and Athena SWAN10, particularly its link to NIHR funding conditions11. In total 114 institutions are signatories to the Athena SWAN Charter principles and at the end of 2013 collectively held 325 institutional or departmental awards. However, despite the relatively positive view, statistical evidence from HESA and ECU12 suggests that there is scope for improvement in terms of equality of opportunity in research careers. Particularly, organisational cultures in major research disciplines can discriminate against women, who are typically under-represented in more senior research positions, and against minority ethnic groups, who are under-represented generally amongst researchers.

9 www.vitae.ac.uk/everyresearchercounts
10 www.athenaswan.org.uk
11 www.nihr.ac.uk/infrastructure/Pages/infrastructure_biomedical_research_units.aspx
Implementation of the Concordat

Principle 7: Implementation and review

Despite the Concordat being a voluntary instrument, institutions and funders have responded extremely positively in acknowledging the importance of implementing the principles. Much of the impact of the Concordat is due to the sector-wide initiatives and structures, principally the Concordat Strategy Group, consisting of representatives of funders, institutions and other stakeholders and Vitae, which have catalysed and embedded progress.

The two benchmarking surveys, CROS and PIRLS, run by Vitae have become well established within institutions. Institutions value the opportunity to explore the views and experiences of their research staff, to benchmark and enhance their institutional provision through CROS. Overall 84 institutions have participated in CROS. PIRLS was developed in 2013 to understand the views and experiences of principal investigators and research leaders. 49 institutions have participated in PIRLS. Collectively these two surveys are being used by institutions to identify and drive improvements in the research culture and environment.

The development of the ECU Gender equality charter mark for the social sciences, arts and humanities, and proposed merger with Athena Swan, will drive further change in the research environment.

Vitae’s role in aligning the UK process for the HR Excellence in Research Award with the Concordat has been very effective in sustaining implementation efforts, with 91 UK institutions now holding the Award, more than all other European member states combined.

The two-year internal review and four-year external review of institutional action plans provides an ongoing incentive for institutions to continue to implement the Concordat principles. The European Commission’s proposal to strengthen the HR Excellence in Research Award may provide additional impetus for institutions.

“The existence and activities of the Concordat Strategy Group and Vitae have undoubtedly sustained institutional momentum and commitment for the implementation of the Concordat principles. Vitae’s leadership and central support for CROS and PIRLS have proved pivotal in providing institutions with instruments and data to understand researchers’ and principal investigators’ views and experiences to benchmark and review institutional progress.”

Three-year review of the implementation of the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, 2012
Remaining challenges

Although significant transformation has been achieved, further challenges remain. While many of the requisite institutional strategies and policies are in place, translation of these into universal practice still requires significant implementation and critically the involvement and commitment of senior academics, principal investigators and research staff themselves.

The active engagement of principal investigators in human resources management and the career development of their researchers is well recognised as an ongoing challenge. Particularly:

- researchers need to take more responsibility for their own professional and career development, are fully informed of and understand employment terms and conditions, reward and recognition processes, and the range of career opportunities
- principal investigators need to engage more actively in the talent management and career development of their researchers
- institutions need to ensure that researchers are recognised as full colleagues within their institutions, valued for their contributions and have equality of opportunity.

Fixed term contracts dependent on research grant funding are the norm for early career research staff, with structured career paths still the exception. Much of the continued engagement of the sector will depend on Vitae providing strong leadership as institutions respond to current and future challenges to ensure that implementation of the Concordat remains at the forefront of institutional strategies.

There still appears to be sub-populations of researchers who perceive personal discrimination and unfairness, including research staff with multiple contracts and long-term employment, female researchers, and particularly more experienced female researchers. More specific attention to these populations is needed to explore causes and potential actions.

Vitae’s continued leadership, practice sharing and evidence building activities are critical to sustaining implementation efforts. Linking together and aligning differing initiatives, such as the HR Excellence in Research Award and the REF Research Environment, and engaging stakeholders across the sector maintains the profile of the Concordat in institutional strategies and adds much momentum to progress.

Funders need to continue to reinforce the importance of the Concordat aims through consistent coherent messaging to the sector through policy developments and embedding it in terms and conditions for funding and associated evaluation and peer review processes.
The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers sets out the expectations and responsibilities of researchers, their managers, employers and funders. It aims to increase the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers and to improve the quantity, quality and impact of research for the benefit of society and the economy.

Since 2011 Vitae has been responsible for leading the implementation of the following aspects of the Concordat principles:

- Supporting the Concordat Strategy and Executive Groups
- Leading the work programme, including managing the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) and the Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS), and producing a review of the impact of the Concordat three years after its launch
- Managing the process for the European Commission HR Excellence in Research recognition awards.

Vitae provides leadership and a single point of contact for both research staff career development and the wider Concordat agenda. Vitae also works at the strategic level, to enhance the benefits of good management and career development of research staff to the research base, society and the economy.

www.researchconcordat.ac.uk