

# **Minutes of the First Meeting of the Expert Review Panel for the Review of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers**

**14<sup>th</sup> September 2017, UCL, London**

## **Attendance**

### Expert Review Panel Members:

David Bogle, UCL (Chair)  
Emma Compton-Daw, University of Strathclyde  
David Gavaghan, University of Oxford  
James Henstock, University of Liverpool  
Dave Jones, NIHR  
Katie Normington, Royal Holloway  
Ciara Rooney, Queen's University Belfast  
Rebekah Smith McGloin, Coventry University  
Matt Wenham, Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering

### Secretariat:

Clare Bhunoo (BBSRC, Secretariat lead)  
Joanna Dunster (AHRC)  
Rachel Reynolds (RCUK – for items 3 to 5)

### Apologies:

Liz Elvidge, Imperial College London / Researchers14  
Dave Watson, IBM (retired)

## **Item 1 – Introduction (background to the review, terms of reference, timetable and conflicts of interest)**

1. David Bogle (DB) welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made. DB explained the context for the review including international developments such as Brexit, the industrial strategy and greater academic mobility. It was therefore timely to examine whether the Concordat, published ten years ago, is still fit for purpose.
2. Clare Bhunoo (CB) explained that the review is an independent review, commissioned by the Concordat Strategy Group (CSG). Its purpose is to review the impact of the Concordat, the extent to which it has met its aims, and whether it remains fit for purpose or needs updating, and to provide advice to the CSG on the required policy interventions relating to researcher career development to ensure an effective UK research system. The suggested output from the review is a report. The terms of reference of the Expert Review Panel were accepted.
3. DB described the review timetable, which is planned to comprise three meetings. The first (this meeting) will look at the scope of the review and the evidence base. The second (14 December 2017) will review any further evidence, collate observations and begin to consider the review outcomes. At the third meeting (19 February 2018), the draft report will be discussed and any additional outputs will be initiated.
4. Panel members disclosed potential conflicts of interest.
5. Apologies had been received from Liz Elvidge and Dave Watson. DB and CB agreed to meet with them separately, to ensure that their views were taken into account.

**Action: CB and DB** to meet with Liz Elvidge and Dave Watson.

## **Item 2 – Icebreaker exercise: Positive impacts of the Concordat and areas for improvement**

6. Panel members discussed the positive impact that the Concordat has had since its publication in 2008. Observations included the following:
  - **Inherent:** the existence of the Concordat demonstrates a level of commitment by its signatories to research careers; internationally, it is unique; without the Concordat, smaller institutions may lack specific support for researcher development; it has fuelled the creation of innovative activities to support researchers.
  - **Benefits for researchers:** improvements in the appraisal system including the introduction of separate career development reviews in a number of institutions; guidelines for development needs analysis; researchers' representation on institutional committees; and the proliferation of research staff associations.
  - **Wider benefits:** greater integration of HEIs with their local area, city or region; and a reduction in the use of fixed term contracts.
  
7. The panel also considered areas for further improvement. Observations included the following:
  - **Consistency:** there is variation across the Principles as to the level of success / implementation; the Concordat lacks a clear statement of its purpose; there is relatively little sharing of best practice across institutions.
  - **Buy-in:** efforts towards implementation by researcher developers and others can have limited success where there is insufficient support or communication with Principal Investigators, senior management and human resources.
  - **Equality and diversity:** implementation can be perfunctory or partial, and often lacking evidence for effectiveness; there is very little support for protected characteristics that are not included within the Athena SWAN programme.
  - **Career stages:** any reporting relating to the implementation of the Concordat needs to be clear about the groups of researchers to which it refers, e.g. postgraduates versus early- or late-career researchers; career support is needed at all stages with levels of independence encouraged particularly at the postdoctoral researcher stage; there are differences in the ways that institutions treat students and staff (e.g. formal recognition of mentoring services), with some having a clear distinction and others having a softer divide.
  - **Applicability:** some of the recommendations are limited in the extent to which they apply to researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences, and outside academia; the number of postdoctoral researchers has increased significantly since the Concordat was first published with many leaving academia, but support mechanisms do not necessarily reflect this.

## **Item 3 – Review of the Concordat as a whole**

8. **Purpose:** The Chair proposed that the review can articulate who the Concordat is for and why. In the context of a changing landscape with the government's industrial strategy and Brexit, for example, the role of the Concordat was questioned. The panel discussed the need for change and the benefits of minor changes versus major policy shifts. It was suggested that any future version of the Concordat should have greater detail about practical steps to take forward the Principles; measures of success of the Concordat in the future need to be considered. It was suggested that the main focus of the Concordat is to strengthen the pipeline of skilled researchers to encourage research in the UK.

9. **Evidence:** The review secretariat had compiled a large volume of evidence for the panel to review. The panel needed to consider how best to use this evidence and whether further evidence was needed. The following suggestions were made with regards to possible additional evidence:

- Capita surveys – used by many research organisations use to measure the attitudes and experiences of their staff; permission would need to be sought about the willingness for research organisations to share this information, aggregated and anonymously.
- Information about postgraduates could be sourced from the Higher Education Academy Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), to supplement that already sourced from Vitae’s Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) and Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS). It was questioned whether the CROS and PIRLS surveys are asking the right questions, and also how representative they are, given the uptake relative to the academic research population.
- HESA data – could be used to track international recruitment of researchers (postgraduates and staff).
- The Royal Society’s ‘International Mobility of Researchers’ survey report (2017) may contain useful information.
- Vitae’s ‘What Do Researchers Do’ report and case studies, for qualitative data within and beyond academia
- RCUK’s Impact of Doctoral Careers survey report
- UK Research Staff Association had carried out a pilot exercise surveying PIs on the career destinations of their postdocs
- LinkedIn could be used to look at career destinations of doctoral and post-doctoral alumni, but this would need permission and if done via PIs, risked creating a biased sample as PIs were more likely to keep track of alumni who remain in academia
- University alumni data may also be possible
- Funders, especially UK Research and Innovation (from April 2018) could have a role in commissioning evidence-based research on researcher development and career outcomes from their research bases, especially ESRC in collaboration with the Institute of Education
- US situation – The Postdoctoral Experience Revisited (2014 Report from The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine).

**Action:** Secretariat to add suggested sources of evidence to the Evidence Tracker.

10. **Relevance:** The panel discussed the applicability of the Concordat to researchers outside academia. It was perceived that there is greater flexibility in industry roles compared to the academic sector, and that many businesses have excellent support for career development; HEIs could learn from this sector, where there tends to be an expectation of failure resulting in lack of investment. It was noted that the difference between industry and academia is cultural, and career development needs to become embedded in HEI culture. It is currently unclear what role the Concordat has in driving any culture change. The panel wished to see more evidence about the support for researchers in industry, particularly those working in small to medium enterprises (SMEs). Additionally, researchers in think-tanks, museums and other cultural organisations are not well represented in the evidence.

11. **Drivers:** With regards to drivers for change, it was noted that funders have a key role. Career development outcomes are being included under the ‘Environment’ category of the REF, as discussed at the most recent Vitae Researcher Development International Conference (11th – 12th September 2017).

12. **Researcher Independence:** Promoting / enabling postdoctoral independence was considered important, as many activities are currently led by Principle Investigators (PIs) / research leaders. A number of suggestions were made about how this could be facilitated, including allocating a proportion of each grant to postdoc-led career development activities, and increasing support for internships. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), the BBSRC Flexible Interchange Programme and BBSRC Professional Internships for PhD Students were given as examples of successful mechanisms. However, the lack of information about researchers on grants was seen as an obstacle. It was noted that the Concordat does not currently address the conflict between PIs and postdoctoral independence.

13. **Consultation:** The panel were asked to consider whether a community consultation would be required as part of the review and, if so, who should be surveyed and what they should be asked. The panel agreed that a broad community consultation should be undertaken as part of the review and discussed the nature of the questions. It was agreed that the consultation should be open for any individual or organisation to respond, and that evidence of implementation of the Concordat from funders, industry, the third sector, private researchers, and the research community as individuals should be encouraged in particular. Hourly paid lecturers (HPLs) who also carry out research, particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences, were identified as a group who should be encouraged to respond as they are unlikely to be included within CROS.

**Action:** Secretariat to draft questions for community consultation and circulate to Panel members for comments.

#### **Item 4 – Review of Principle 7**

14. The panel had a group discussion about the implementation of Principle 7. The panel considered the evidence for the implementation of this principle and considered where further work was needed.

#### **Item 5 – Review of Principles 1 to 6**

15. The panel split into three groups to review the evidence for Concordat principles 1 to 6. For each principle, the groups considered what success would look like for that principle, what type of evidence was needed – what did we have already and what was missing, positive outcomes, areas for improvement or where there has been little progress, and international comparators.

#### **Item 6 – Next Steps**

16. The panel reviewed the discussions so far. Key discussion points included:

- A need to be more explicit about definitions and stakeholders associated with the Concordat, and obligations for different groups
- The need for the Concordat to have a greater focus on outcomes and expectations, for example through case studies
- The potential for stronger links with the other Concordats
- Governance and ownership of the Concordat – it needs to be high level but there must be appropriate buy-in
- Review communications: Suggestions were made regarding individuals and groups who should be communicated with

**Action:** Panel members to suggest any stakeholders who should be added to the communications plan and identify those who should be consulted

**Action:** Secretariat to ensure appropriate engagement with all relevant groups

17. The Chair brought the meeting to a close and thanked the panel for their contributions.