

**The Concordat Strategy Group
response to the Independent Review
of the Concordat to Support the
Career Development of Researchers**

September 2018

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The Concordat Strategy Group (CSG) welcomes the thoughtful report from the External Review Panel and thanks the chair, Professor David Bogle, and Panel members for their commitment to this important review.

The Concordat was launched in 2008 to provide a framework to support the career development of researchers in UK universities and research institutes. The review summarises progress made in implementing the principles of the Concordat and highlighting areas where further action is needed.

The CSG decision to commission an independent review of the Concordat was timely and aligns with the Government's ambition to increase investment in research and development to 2.4% of GDP by 2027 and addressing future innovation skills needs are key elements of the Industrial Strategy. Academia, industry and the third sector all need highly-skilled individuals able to work effectively across disciplines and sectors, with a broad range of professional competencies.

A sector consultation, announced alongside this initial response, will run until the end of the year. We are seeking broad input from (but not limited to) institutional senior management, principal investigators, researchers, funders, employers and other stakeholders.

In advance of the community consultation, the CSG provides this initial collective response on the report. It is important to note that the report contains a range of recommendations from overarching principles to very specific actions. The implications of these will need to be considered both at a sector level and an individual organisational level within perspective of their own missions, strategies and policies. We welcome the anticipated feedback and discussions as the HE community digests the report and reflects on the potential implications from their own perspectives and contexts. We anticipate that a revised Concordat will be published in spring 2019.

Review recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Concordat should continue to be used in order to maintain the UK's standing as a world leader in its support for researchers, and to continue to improve the culture of researcher support. However, some revisions are required to ensure it is effective in driving culture change.

The CSG agrees that the Concordat is an important document in driving change and that there is a continued need for the Concordat to improve the research culture and support for researchers. The CSG welcomes the opportunity for the community to co-create a revised Concordat that reflects this changing research environment and ensures that the UK remains a world leader in developing policy and practice to support the career development of researchers. The CSG agrees that this revised Concordat should also reflect more strongly that one of the key outcomes of research is the supply of highly-skilled people who have the potential to pursue very successful careers across a wide range of employment sectors.

Recommendation 2: The focus and primary aim of the Concordat is for the support of research staff. The definition of ‘researchers’ used in the Concordat should be explicitly broadened to include staff not primarily hired as researchers, but who are research active. Any reporting relating to the implementation of the Concordat should be clear about the groups of researchers to which it refers.

The CSG agrees with the principle that the Concordat should be inclusive and recognise the value of supporting all staff who are engaged in research. However, we also believe that the research staff community should continue to be the primary focus for the Concordat. We recognise the complexity for institutions in defining the boundaries of the research community and how to implement the Concordat principles effectively in practice. The CSG looks forward to engaging with the community to identify the different ways the Concordat could apply to different staff groups engaged in research within different institutional contexts.

Recommendation 3: A revised Concordat should focus on researchers in academia but with recognition that the issues in industry and other sectors are similar, although the challenges may be different. It must also emphasise that the principles and obligations apply equally to all research staff, regardless of contract type.

The CSG agrees that the Concordat should continue to focus on researchers employed in higher education institutions and research institutes. We also welcome potential cross-learning from other sectors employing researchers, a need for greater interaction and support for mobility between academia and business, and conversations around the breadth of future careers for researchers.

Recommendation 4: There should be increased support for researcher independence, including autonomy in their own career development, and the freedom to innovate.

- A revised Concordat should address the tension between PIs and postdoctoral independence, setting out clearly the obligations for both groups.
- There should be increased emphasis and support, by both funders and employers, for uptake of researchers’ 10 days training allowance.
- Development of researcher independence should be supported through allocated time within grants.
- 20% of a researcher’s time should be allowed for developing independent research and skills.

The CSG agrees with the principle that there should be increased support for researchers to develop their individual research identity and professional competencies looks forward to engaging with the community on this positive recommendation. The development needs of individual researchers may vary in intensity and nature over time and may be realised differently depending on individual needs and disciplinary contexts. We also recognise that researchers should be aware of the wide range of employment opportunities open to them within and beyond academia and understand how they can develop and apply their knowledge, experience and competencies to be competitive and successful in diverse occupations. The CSG welcomes discussions on how research staff can develop their capabilities at an appropriate level and welcome examples of existing good practice across the sector.

Recommendation 5: A revised Concordat should promote finding solutions to the problems of mobility, time-limited contracts and promotion that many researchers face.

As noted in the review, although there has been some reduction in the use of fixed-term contracts over the ten years of the Concordat, they are still by far the predominant form of contract for research staff in most institutions. The CSG agrees that the Concordat should promote solutions to the problems that arise from the use of time-limited contracts, including through the greater use of open-ended contracts, and should continue to encourage improvements in employment conditions for researchers to ensure that they are not treated less favourably than other staff¹. We encourage all stakeholders to participate in the conversation to develop good practice and share experiences to help drive change in the sector.

Recommendation 6: The language, formatting and structure of the Concordat should be updated.

- Updated to reflect modern policies and practices. It is essential that the Concordat is informed by and linked to any relevant new or revised legislation or policy frameworks.
- More succinct but link to specific examples of good practice.
- Accessible to all stakeholder groups. Consideration should be made to the format of the Concordat to ensure it remains relevant and up to date. Different formats may be required for different stakeholder groups.
- Restructured to articulate the responsibility of different stakeholder groups, including research staff, PIs, employers and funders. A structure of principles and Obligations would clearly set out the responsibilities of the different groups in driving and implementing change.

The CSG is in full agreement with this recommendation. We will support the sector to continue to have ownership of the Concordat and actively engaged in updating the language of the Concordat principles, obligations and guidance. We agree that maintaining the revised Concordat in a format that is updated as legislation, policies and practices evolve will keep it relevant. Providing clearer articulation of the responsibilities for funders, institutions, principal investigators and researchers will enable the effective implementation of the Concordat principles. Accordingly, the CSG is issuing a sector consultation on the review recommendations, draft revised Concordat and processes for future evaluation and review.

Recommendation 7: Equality, diversity and inclusion should be integrated throughout a revised Concordat, outlining specific responsibilities of stakeholder groups in supporting this area. Whilst avoiding repetition, the retention of an updated principle is also required so that it remains a priority.

The CSG agrees that equality diversity and inclusion is an important priority for the research system and welcomes the proposed focus on this through integration of ED&I into all principles and a specific ED&I principle within the revised Concordat. In addition, we recommend the revised Concordat considers related issues, such as researcher wellbeing and mental health, bullying, harassment and safeguarding, and the research culture.

¹ The Fixed-term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2002
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2002/2034/contents/made

Recommendation 8: A communications plan should be developed which ensures that the Concordat remains relevant to new and updated legislation / policy, and which ensures that all relevant stakeholder groups have appropriate access to the Concordat.

- The list of signatories should be reviewed and, if required, updated.
- Funders should require all PIs to be aware of the Concordat and ask them to communicate it to their research staff.
- Employers should ensure that the communications plan is implemented throughout their organisation, and should monitor researcher engagement with the Concordat, for example through participation in annual surveys.

The CSG believes that for the Concordat to continue to improve the career development of researchers there needs to be better awareness of the Concordat and engagement with the principles by all stakeholders. The CSG acknowledges that the level of awareness is low within the researcher communities, particularly senior researchers, and that funders, institutions and other stakeholders all have a role to play in increasing awareness of the Concordat, and measuring its subsequent impact.

The CSG is developing an active communication and engagement plan both for the promotion of the review report and associated consultation, and in the promotion of the revised Concordat targeted all stakeholders. Individual CSG members will consider how they can promote and engage the research community in the Concordat through their networks. We encourage institutions to develop their own communications strategies to raise awareness of the Concordat with their principal investigators, researchers and other relevant groups.

Additionally, the CSG welcomes the opportunity for institutions to make progress in implementing the principles by considering how the revised Concordat is embedded in their institutional governance and human resources strategy to achieve real change across the institution.

Recommendation 9: Concordat signatories should prioritise a more comprehensive collection of researcher and research careers information, and the Concordat Strategy Group should investigate options to achieve this.

- The UK should aspire to support data collection exercises that are comparable with international models.
- Funders should support research into the most appropriate methods required to obtain such data.
- Existing surveys, including CROS and PIRLS, should be updated to ensure that broad comparability can be made about researcher aspirations and career paths across the sector. Such surveys should aspire to be as representative of the sector as possible.
- Best practice should be shared on ways to engage with researcher alumni communities.
- The Higher Education Statistics Agency should be invited to join the Concordat Strategy Group as a delivery partner.

The CSG agrees on the importance of better data on researcher careers and careers information and advice for researchers. The UK would benefit from more coordinated and collaborative efforts to achieve robust longitudinal career data for all employment paths, such as the US have for STEM researchers². There are existing sources of data that could be utilised, including HESA Graduate Outcomes, LEO, ResearchFish, ORCID and social

² <https://nsf.gov/statistics/about-ncses.cfm#community&service&core>

media tracking, and the CSG looks forward to engaging with the sector and other stakeholders on how this might be achieved collectively.

Recommendation 10: The Concordat must continue to be owned by the sector, with implementation overseen by a representative steering group.

- The Terms of Reference of the Concordat Strategy Group should be reviewed.
- The membership of the Concordat Strategy Group should be reviewed, ensuring that all relevant stakeholder groups (including researchers, PIs, employers and funders) are represented, and/or in working groups which report to the CSG. To represent employers of researchers beyond academia, the involvement of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is welcomed.

The CSG supports sector ownership of the Concordat and that implementation will need sector oversight. The CSG agrees with the need to review the governance structures to ensure appropriately balanced representation across the sector, including researchers, principal investigators, senior university managers and employers beyond academia, to facilitate open discussion and engagement across the sector.

Recommendation 11: The sector should take a strategic approach in considering the skills needs of the UK through commitment to activities which develop the skills of research staff regardless of contract length and in preparation for diverse career paths.

The CSG recognises the importance of taking a strategic approach to the research and innovation skills needs of the UK, within the context of the global demand for skills. For example, the Concordat will play an important role in the supply of talent needed to achieve the Government's target of 2.4% of GDP invested in R&D. Two-thirds of this target is expected to be achieved through investment by industry in R&D, which will necessitate the supply of highly-talented researchers with a broad range of professional competencies.

Recommendation 12: There should be a coordinated approach between the development of UK Research and Innovation and the Concordat going forward. UKRI should use its sectoral influence to ensure appropriate consistency across different research domains.

The CSG agrees with the value of aligning Concordat related activities with the strategic aims of research funders collectively, the sector and other organisations with interest in the health of the UK research system.

Recommendation 13: A revised Concordat should include a new principle for funders. Funders should ensure that the principles of the Concordat are adopted through changes to funding processes.

The CSG supports the addition of a new principle for funders. The CSG recognises that funders' requirements, for example on grant applications, can be positive drivers, change behaviours and help achieve implementation of the Concordat principles. The CSG recognises that funders individually and collectively will explore ways in which they can reflect the Concordat through their own policies, processes, terms and conditions, where appropriate.

The CSG also welcomes a new principle for principal investigators as important stakeholders in the Concordat. Principal investigators have a key role to play in supporting

the development of researchers through appropriate line management, performance management and realising potential and it is the responsibility of university managers to ensure that principal investigators are supported in delivering this. We look forward to working with the sector to identify good practice in engaging and supporting principal investigators in their role in implementing the principles of the Concordat.

Recommendation 14: The UK operation of the HR Excellence in Research Award, or any other relevant awards, should be reviewed to ensure it remains relevant as a driver for change.

- A meta-analysis of data for best practice (from published action plans) would give a composite picture of the 'ideal', along with case studies for implementation.
- Evaluation of applications for the award must be evidence-based and institutions may require more guidance on requirements.
- Strong consideration should be given to the use of a graded assessment (e.g. bronze / silver / gold).
- There must be a quality assurance of reviewers and of the reviewing process, to ensure that assessment panels are representative of the sector.
- Views should be sought from organisations outside academia (such as businesses, charities and others) in order to produce guidance for HEIs on the requirements of the award

Recommendation 15: The UK operation of the HR Excellence in Research Award should be reviewed to ensure that all UK HEIs have access to the UK application process and are not constrained in applying for any associated EU funding beyond Brexit.

- A revised membership model for Vitae should be considered, which separates services associated with the HR Excellence Award and other Vitae activities, and which operates in an open and transparent way.
- The Concordat Strategy Group must ensure that processes are in place to maintain UK standards for researcher development which are at least comparable to those set by the EU.
- Guidelines should be developed to outline any funding implications for UK HEIs who are not in receipt of an HR Excellence Award.

The CSG agrees monitoring and reviewing progress in implementing the Concordat is an important principle and there is value in doing this at an institutional and sector level. The CSG agrees that the UK process for achieving the HR Excellence in Research Award has been a useful vehicle for maintaining institutional engagement with the Concordat. With the outcomes of Brexit undecided, the future of the UK process for the HR Award is currently unknown. Furthermore, there is no collective agreement within the CSG that the HR Award should become a requirement for UK funding. The CSG agrees that it is for individual funders to consider how they judge possession of the HR Award within their policies and processes.

Next steps

The CSG is committed to working with the sector to build on the work done so far in implementing the current Concordat principles to meet the changing needs of the UK research base and supply of talent for the UK economy.

The CSG agrees that the sector should co-create and maintain ownership for the new Concordat and therefore it is important that there is broad engagement across the sector in this process. Professor David Bogle, as chair of the External Review Panel will present their findings and recommendations at the Vitae conference, 17-18 September with Professor Julia Buckingham, as chair of the CSG presenting this initial response. A series of workshops at the conference will enable conference participants to explore the recommendations, challenges and opportunities and these will be used to inform the detail of the consultation.

The sector consultation, announced alongside this response, will seek feedback on the review recommendations, the revised Concordat principles and the implications for different stakeholders. Although the review report provides a potential draft of a revised Concordat, the CSG believes that it is essential to consult widely before deciding how the new Concordat should be shaped. The CSG is keen that the consultation reaches a broad audience and encourages responses from institutional senior management, principal investigators, researchers, funders, employers and other stakeholders. We will seek further sector engagement through focus groups and activities engaging different audiences and testing key proposals. CSG members will collectively and individually develop and implement communication and engagement action plans to achieve this broad engagement and also the subsequent dissemination of the revised Concordat. The revised Concordat will be developed in partnership with the sector. We envision the consultation will run through the autumn term with redrafting of the Concordat during the spring term.

Summary

The CSG has considered the External Review Panel's report and recommendations and welcomes the proposals to update and strengthen the Concordat. The Industrial Strategy and 2.4% target signals a real change in the UK research and innovation environment and the supply of highly-talented researchers is critical to successful its implementation. The revised Concordat will be the start of an exciting journey for the sector to work together in improving the professional and career development of HE staff engaged in the research and innovation endeavour and support their employability within and beyond academia.

About the Concordat

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers is an agreement between funders and employers of research staff to improve the employment and support for researchers and research careers in UK higher education. It sets out a vision of working practices, roles and responsibilities that we believe will further the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK, and thus ensure the continued provision of well-trained, talented and motivated researchers essential to the continuation of our research excellence and economy prosperity.

The Concordat Strategy Group (CSG) is responsible for promoting the implementation of the principles of the Concordat across the UK, in line with its implementation strategy and in partnership with other bodies. It consists of representatives from a diverse range of organisations with interests in researchers, including funders, academies, professional bodies, institutions, researcher networks and other stakeholders. The current terms of reference and membership is available at www.vitae.ac.uk/concordat