

GuildHE / CREST Response to Consultation on the Concordat for the Support of the Career Development of Researchers

Rachel Persad, Policy Manager (Research & Innovation), GuildHE:
rachel.persad@guildhe.ac.uk

Purpose

The review highlighted that the existing Concordat has had some impact in driving cultural change. What in your view would make the revised Concordat more effective? What are the opportunities and challenges (within your organisation / across the sector) in implementing the Concordat?

More effective

- Meaningful engagement with researchers to implement workable policies and procedures at institutional level.
- Balance between enforcing good practice and permitting institutional context to influence how the principles are implemented.
- Raising awareness of the concordat amongst researchers and senior managers - these groups are in our experience the least engaged in the specifics of such sector-wide initiatives but are the key people that can either benefit from or influence change.

Opportunities

- Sector wide agreements help emerging research cultures establish good practice and create benchmarks for progress towards institutional goals.

Challenges

- Institutions with emerging research cultures will need flexibility in applying the principles. For example, the stipulation of specific numbers / percentage of training hours will be harder to apply where research is not routinely supported by external grants, and will therefore draw on limited institutional resources.
- The concordat needs to be applicable to all institutions conducting research and employing researchers. Balancing the effects on a research-intensive, mid-sized, and emerging research-active institution will not be easy.
- We urge consideration of where the most appropriate levers lie to make changes to research culture and researchers' experience. For example insisting on practices within funded grants is more likely to result in success, than expecting employers to take the entire burden on compliance.

Structure

In general, do you support the proposed structure of the revised Concordat to include:

Principles - Strongly Agree

Obligations - Agree

Examples of good practice - Strongly Agree

In general, do you support the structure segmented by these different groups?

Researchers - Agree

Principal investigators - Agree

Employers - Strongly Agree

Funders - Strongly Agree

How can the structure or format of a revised Concordat improve accessibility and use by researchers, PIs, employers and funders?

We have some concerns over the emphasis on PIs as key individuals to support others and help deliver the objectives of the principles in practice. This group is not homogeneous, it is made up of a great variety of individuals with different levels of experience, both in and outside of research, training, and other commitments. There are already high expectations on PIs to manage grants, people, and often multiple projects. We are wary of placing too much responsibility on PIs without an acknowledgement that they themselves will need support of their institutions and funders, and access to quality standardised training in management skills.

PIs also hold a great deal of power over more junior researchers, and may therefore have a certain amount of conflicted interest in how those individuals progress and in what direction. Additionally, as was highlighted at the recent Royal Society conference on Research Culture, PIs may not have depth of knowledge or awareness of careers outside of their academic field.

It strikes us that the role of PIs needs more careful consideration. Others involved in projects, such as Co-Investigators, may warrant more detailed thought, or perhaps a more distributed model for delivering researcher support, such as that achieved through mentoring schemes.

How can the revised Concordat best facilitate equality and diversity in the research environment and create a more diverse and inclusive research culture?

The Concordat has to date tended to be drawn from a lab-based science model, where cohorts of researchers working in teams is the norm. It may be advantageous for the revised Concordat to consider the quite different reality facing researchers in arts, humanities and social sciences where small numbers of researchers often work in isolation. It would be

helpful to see a greater emphasis on and examples of how institutions can build a community and a supportive environment for researchers, especially those working remotely and part-time.

Audience

Do you agree with the recommendation to explicitly broaden the definition of 'researchers' to include all staff engaged in research?

We agree with an expanded definition of researchers with some important caveats.

Where institutions are establishing or growing their research cultures, and particularly where research is a smaller element of the overall activity of an institution, it is important that individuals engaged in research are supported. This is not least because research works to much longer timeframes than teaching. As such, developing a research culture in a teaching-focussed institution can see tensions arise between the immediate needs of resources presented by teaching commitments and the longer term investments required to build a research profile. We would argue against a dichotomy between teaching and research, as this is largely false in our experience, and are therefore supportive of the notion of broadening the definition so that all those involved in research are recognised and their contribution acknowledged.

However, we are sympathetic to the concerns raised by colleagues elsewhere in the sector that broadening the definition dilutes the effect and potential usefulness of the Concordat, and may in fact be detrimental to the very individuals it is intended to support. As such, we would welcome wording that expressed a focus on those that are tasked to conduct research, whether via their contract, workload allocation, or similar systematic mechanism at an institution, whilst acknowledging that others that are involved but not directly conducting research may require a level of support to perform their role effectively, and that the Concordat will have an effect on them.

We also question the term 'hidden researchers' as potentially unhelpful. This idea has wider implications, such as potentially overstretching the allocation of resources, and staff self-defining as research active when that is not in their remit. As we have seen in the current REF guidance, defining research active individuals is not a one-rule-for-all exercise. Bringing in the idea of 'hidden' work muddies that water further. We recommend better alignment with existing models of defining research activity such as that being developed in the REF, and that used for meeting the criteria for Research Degree Awarding Powers, rather than introducing a new category.

Finally, it may be that the Concordat cannot in itself stimulate changes in practice or culture, but rather needs to rely on levers elsewhere in the system. We would suggest that funders, specifically the Research Councils and UKRI, have the most power to enforce compliance with the principles in funded grants. We would hope that this would begin to drive changes elsewhere in institutions. We acknowledge that this approach would focus the effects predominantly on a traditional 'researcher' rather than the expanded notion, and in institutions that are most well-established and research intensive. However, such a focus could enable better monitoring of success and revelation of good practice from which others could learn.

Are there any groups that should be specifically excluded from the Concordat definition of 'researchers'?

We would not wish to see any group 'excluded'.

GuildHE / CREST would like to see any individual with a remit for research to be supported appropriately at their institution. At institutions with a specialist focus, a stronger history of teaching than research, or which are establishing their research environment, there is more fluidity amongst staff who may fit into multiple categories as defined above. Therefore we would not wish to see any specific exclusions in the Concordat, but rather an accommodation for institutions to respond to their own specific context and apply the principles accordingly.

Career and Research Identity

In principle, there should be increased support for researchers to develop their career and research identity

Strongly agree

How should the Concordat support researchers to develop their career and research identity?

Funders place "increased emphasis and support on uptake of 10 days' training"

Strongly Agree

Employers place "increased emphasis and support on uptake of 10 days' training"

Agree (with caveats)

"Allocated time within grants for developing researcher independence" Strongly Agree

"20% of a researcher's time allowed for developing independent research and skills"

Agree (with caveats)

Please provide some context: How can these be implemented? What are the barriers? What additional factors and alternative models should be considered?

The application of blanket metrics such as the 20% / 10 days is problematic; such stipulations make an assumption about the relative size and resource of an institution. To give an example, to apply for RDAP institutions must reach 30 completions, regardless of the overall size of the institution or research cohorts. Because there is no room for interpretation of this metric, it really stands in the way of small and specialist institutions' progress towards an independent research culture.

We would strongly recommend that the wording of the revised Concordat indicates such stipulations are expected in the conditions of external grants, but are to be applied proportionately, yet consistently, in other scenarios, such as where research is supported by institutional investment, underpinned by QR, funders from outside the UK, or by charitable funds. In institutions where teaching is more intensive an activity than research, achieving this amount of training time, without adding more time on top of existing commitments, is not practical.

In addition, we would also like more consideration of what is meant by ‘training’ and ‘developing researcher independence’ in different disciplines. It may be fairly transparent in some areas, where time away from lab activities are clearly developmental for the individual rather than the research being undertaken. In other disciplines, such as performing or visual arts, or those with connections to industry through applied research activities, it may be challenging to define where the individual’s development and the research itself resides.

Whilst we support the principle of supporting researchers’ development through time to pursue personal development activities, more flexibility is required to make the Concordat truly relevant to all kinds of institutions.

Contracts, mobility and promotion

The revised Concordat should address the use of fixed term contracts for researchers

Agree (with caveats)

Please provide some commentary: If the revised Concordat should address the use of fixed term contracts, how should it do this? What alternative models and existing good practice should be considered?

There are a variety of reasons why a fixed term contract may be used. In a smaller institution with a emerging research environment such contracts can be advantageous in progressing areas of work that would not happen without recourse to more flexible employment arrangements. We would recommend that the wording of the Concordat accommodates for this, encouraging progress towards more sustained employment arrangements, rather than insisting on the removal of flexible options such as fixed term employments.

The revised Concordat should address the progression and promotion opportunities for researchers

Agree

The revised Concordat should address the expectation of mobility for researchers

Agree

Communication, dissemination and sharing practice

What is the most effective way of ensuring all relevant audiences are aware of the Concordat?

In our opinion there is opportunity for the Concordat and sector wide assessments such as the REF to be better aligned, and this may help to engage a very broad spectrum of individuals, researchers and those that support them as well as senior managers of institutions, with the principles it upholds. For example, the REF has developed a list of indicators for the environment part of the exercise. Compliance with, or working towards the principles of, the Concordat would seem a good indicator to us.

What should happen to encourage and facilitate sharing good practice within your organisation?

Through our research consortium, we already have an excellent mechanism for sharing good practice. We would be willing to promote, disseminate, and run workshops on the Concordat, as we have done so in the past for previous iterations. We would welcome engagement from Vitae and other interested parties to achieve this.

What should happen to encourage and facilitate sharing good practice across the HE sector or learning from other sectors?

The Vitae conference, and other sector wide professional conferences, are well organised and well attended events that could provide a forum for such sharing and learning opportunities, although they are more costly to attend and more generic in focus than smaller institutions can often justify. It may be worth the concordat signatories considering how ongoing communication and dissemination might be achieved to continue discussions in a way that keep the full diversity of institutions involved in the conversation.

Governance

How can continued sector ownership be best achieved? Who should be represented? What does true sector ownership look like?

N.B. Currently, representative groups (e.g. Universities UK, Guild HE, Russell Group) are Concordat signatories on behalf of the individual institutions.

We welcome the opportunity to be signatories to the Concordat, and are happy to continue to be so. We would appreciate an acknowledgment that Universities UK and GuildHE are the two representative bodies for higher education, whereas the Russell Group and others are mission groups with quite a different relationship to the sector and the governance of it.

In our view ‘true sector ownership’ is where all institutions, regardless of size or perceived reputation or importance, are given equal access to information, advice, and guidance, and equal opportunity to have their views and perspectives taken into account. We would, for example, like to see better engagement with the full diversity of institutions in the enhancement and development of the Concordat: the smallest institution involved in the panel for the review was University of Coventry, a fairly substantial institution, and there were no specialists involved apart from those in STEM.

Having individual institutions as signatories is not, in our view, a wise step. This puts an extra complication in the way of institutions understanding and communicating their relationship to the Concordat.

Individual institutions (as well as the representative bodies) should be invited to be signatories of the revised Concordat

Disagree

Monitoring and review

How should the implementation of the Concordat principles be evaluated within your organisation?

As a representative body we would not be involved in the evaluation of implementation at our member institutions.

How should implementation of the Concordat principles be evaluated as a sector?

Sector wide evaluation will be a challenge, particularly as institutional diversity will result in implementation looking quite different in each context. Should our recommendations above be implemented, such as tying training obligations to research funding grants, that may give a baseline for evaluating the implementation to be enhanced by more qualitative surveys of activities and behaviours.

How helpful is it to be able to benchmark progress against others?

Slightly helpful

How useful is the HR Excellence in Research Award in supporting your implementation of the Concordat principles?

Useful

How important is it that researcher career data is collected at an

Organisational level - Important

UK level - Very important

Whilst we support the collection of data we would also highlight that this presents challenges for institutions in terms of data collection, including having infrastructure and tools in place to do so, and GDPR compliance, particularly for individuals who have moved on from the institution. Persistent identifiers, such as ORCID, could be of potential use, although there may need to be more consistent uptake of these to make them a robust data source.

About GuildHE

[GuildHE](#) is an officially recognised representative body for UK Higher Education. Our members include universities, university colleges, further education colleges and specialist institutions from both the traditional and private (“for profit” and “not for profit”) sectors. Member institutions include major providers in art, design and media, music and the performing arts; agriculture and food; education; maritime; health and sports.

The [Consortium for Research Excellence, Support and Training \(CREST\)](#), a sub-association of GuildHE, exists for institutions that have achieved high levels, or aspire to achieve high levels, of research excellence concentrated in smaller communities of research practice. It is the only non-geographic collaborative research network in the UK and provides key shared services and training.