

# Consultation Response on the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

7 January 2019

## Background

A consultation to inform the revision of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers was launched by Vitae in September 2018. This followed an independent review of the Concordat which was commissioned by the Concordat Strategy Group, of which the British Academy is a member, and which published its findings and recommendations in June 2018. The Concordat, last updated in 2008, is based on an original statement made in 1996 between funding bodies and universities which aimed to improve the support for contract research staff in their career development, and is a statement of the expectations and responsibilities of research funders and institutions in this regard.

Further information about the Concordat is available from:

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy/concordat-to-support-the-career-development-of-researchers>

## Introduction

The British Academy warmly welcomes this opportunity to respond to the consultation to inform the revision of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. The Academy is responding both as a research funder and as the UK's national body for the humanities and social sciences. The responses made here take into account both aspects of the Academy's role, as well as the views of our Postdoctoral Fellows, collected via survey, as representing those early career researchers whose development the Concordat specifically targets.

We will be happy to work further with those developing the Concordat and will share findings and publications from our studies in this area.

## Response

### **What makes the current Concordat effective in driving cultural change? What would make the revised Concordat more effective? What are the opportunities and challenges (within your organisation / across the sector) in implementing the Concordat?**

The Academy agrees with the findings of the review that the Concordat has had an impact at institutional level, but that its implementation has been varied across the sector and often tailored to meet specific contexts and aims.

The Academy believes it is important that a revised version of the Concordat does not attempt to impose a prescriptive set of obligations and principles which do not accurately reflect the variety of career structures that exist across academic disciplines. If it is to be most effective in supporting the career development of researchers, the Concordat should enable institutions to retain a degree of autonomy over how to interpret and implement the principles of the Concordat so as to best serve the characteristics of their departments and disciplines and to meet the needs of their individual researchers. Definitions and terminology employed by the Concordat, such as what is meant by ‘researcher’ and ‘mobility’, will also need to be clear and consistent throughout to ensure that principles and expectations are not misinterpreted.

The Academy supports the recommendation that the sector as a whole take a more strategic approach to skills and skills development. If the Concordat is to be successful in this aim, it should recognise the value of the diverse career paths which researchers take. Work conducted by the British Academy as part of its ongoing Skills Project is helping to identify the diverse career paths followed by early career researchers in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, as well as highlighting their key skills and attributes. Outputs and publications derived from this work will also be of benefit to the Concordat’s development.

As recommended by the review, we agree that there should be coordination between the development of UKRI and the revision and future development of the Concordat, and that UKRI should use its influence to further the cause of the Concordat and its aims. UKRI can have an important role to play, but this must be balanced within the governance and ownership of the Concordat to ensure that there is adequate input from other sector stakeholders.

In general, we also support the proposed structure of the revised Concordat to include principles, obligations, and examples of good practice, as well as its segmentation by group for researchers, principle investigators, employers, and funders.

### **How valuable will be the proposed structure in engaging the relevant groups? What changes to the structure or format of the revised Concordat will improve accessibility and use by the relevant groups?**

The Academy holds the view that the format of a revised Concordat will need to be short, clear, and consistent, if accessibility and use by the relevant groups is to be improved.

We believe that, while examples of good practice should form part of the Concordat more broadly, these should not feature in the main body of the Concordat, but rather be linked out, so as not to clutter the core of the Concordat.

The Academy believes that the use of terminology needs to be clear and consistent throughout the Concordat, as well as being suitable for the intended audiences. The Academy believes, therefore, that use of the term ‘obligations’ is problematic. Greater sector and institutional buy-in could be achieved by using ‘expectations’ instead, as this suggests more institutional independence and input in the process, rather than the imposition of rules onto stakeholders. This alternative would also enable the removal from the Concordat of inconsistent uses of ‘should’, ‘will’, and ‘must’, which imply different degrees of agency and importance where none may be intended. The way that researchers are referred to will also require consistency. Currently the proposed revised version of the Concordat makes use of both ‘research staff’ and ‘individual researchers’, seemingly interchangeably. Given the intended expansion in the remit of the Concordat, greater consistency and clarification will be needed if it is to be clear to whom the Concordat is referring.

We also believe that use of the term ‘principle investigators’ does not by itself fully reflect all aspects of a research career structure. ‘Research leaders’ is a term that is already used by Vitae and may be appropriate to use in addition to ‘principle investigators’, to ensure that the Concordat is more broadly representative.

### **How can a revised Concordat best embed equality and diversity into the research environment and create a more inclusive research culture?**

The Academy agrees that this is an important point and that equality and diversity should be embedded and supported in all aspects of the Concordat. This will need to be of particular consideration with regards to the proposed expanded definition of ‘researcher’ and can also be helped by the Concordat engaging with issues surrounding fixed-term contracts, promotion criteria and opportunities, and mobility – as discussed further below.

A revised version of the Concordat should make clear that diversity and equality concerns apply equally to all protected characteristics. The needs of families, in particular researchers with young families or wishing to start families, was highlighted by the Academy’s own early career award holders as an area currently lacking appropriate equality and support. These individuals felt that early career researchers can be unfairly disadvantaged in terms of time allowances, responsibilities, and the availability or accessibility of networking opportunities (the latter of which often take place out of ‘office hours’ through events such as evening research seminars). This was identified as a particular issue for young female academics, who were also seen as being especially affected by the prevalence of fixed-term contracts for the same reasons. One practical solution to addressing this inequality would be to adopt a common policy across the sector that researchers are entitled to maternity, parental, or adoption leave without needing to complete a minimum period of service.

Issues surrounding ethnic and social diversity were also identified by our early career award holders. Whilst it was felt that the Concordat could go some way to supporting improvements, they pointed out that this needed to be addressed in school-level provision as well as higher education and early career employment. The Academy believes that the Concordat can play an important part in addressing issues of equality and diversity in higher education. If such concerns are to be addressed more fully, however, the Concordat can help to make the case for wider institutional and cultural change across all aspects of education.

**What are the opportunities and challenges in extending the definition of researchers to include all staff engaged in research? Should the definition of researchers be consistent across the higher education sector? Should research staff continue to be a specific target audience within an inclusive approach?**

The Academy agrees with the proposal to explicitly broaden the definition of ‘researchers’ to include all staff engaged in research and the wider remit of the Concordat that this would entail. In the arts, humanities, and social sciences, research is undertaken by individuals on a wide variety of contract types, all of whom should benefit from the principles of support for career development. If the remit of the Concordat is to be successfully expanded in this way it is important for there to be clarity about what is meant by this broader definition and this should be clearly stated in the introductory sections of the revised Concordat.

We believe that the revised Concordat should be consistent in its use of terminology, in order to avoid misinterpretation or the unfair prioritisation of some contract types, and thus some researchers, over others. The proposed revised version of the Concordat currently makes use of both ‘individual researchers’ and ‘research staff’, particularly in Principle 1, where use of ‘researchers’ would be more appropriate and consistent given the broader definition proposed. We believe that, in broadening the definition of ‘researchers’, the Concordat would also make a valuable point about the need to support and value all those engaged in research in higher education. This will also have a positive effect on efforts to increase diversity and inclusivity across the sector and in the implementation of the Concordat.

While the Academy supports the broader definition of ‘researchers’ at the level of principle, we do not believe it is feasible that monitoring of the implementation of the Concordat should apply to all those researchers covered by this proposed expansion. Whilst the Academy believes that the principles of the Concordat should apply to researchers more broadly, the burden of adherence on every aspect for every staff member engaged in research would be extremely burdensome and impractical for institutions. We believe that only those on fixed-term contracts (i.e. the postdoctoral model) should be subject to monitoring under the terms of a revised Concordat. With regards to this particular element of the Concordat, use of the term ‘research staff’ would thus be appropriate to make the distinction clear. This would allow the Concordat to retain a continued focus on research staff as a specific target audience, within the broader understanding of ‘researchers’.

We believe that ‘Researchers employed outside of academia’ should be specifically excluded from the Concordat definition of ‘researchers’. The structure of research and research careers is different for non-academic organisations and to include these researchers would necessarily overcomplicate the Concordat and may, therefore, have an impact on accessibility and buy-in from academic employers, funders, and institutions. The inclusion of ‘researchers employed outside of academia’ would also take the Concordat beyond the remit and oversight of Vitae.

**How can increased emphasis and support on the uptake of 10 days’ training by employers and funders, as well as allocated time within grants and 20% of a researcher’s time allowed for developing independent research and skills, be implemented? What are the barriers? What alternative and existing models and approaches should be considered?**

The Academy agrees that it is important to encourage greater support for researchers to develop independence, independent research, and skills. We fully support the proposal of increased

emphasis on the uptake of a researcher's 10 days' training allowance. We also agree that time should be allocated within grants for developing researcher independence. This accords well with the Academy's own principles as a funder and our intentions to enhance the training and development offered to our early career award holders. If a revised Concordat is to specify time allowance for development of independence within grants, however, this will need to be phrased in such a way that takes account of the different nature of grants available and the relative degrees of independence that they already offer for researchers, as well as disciplinary differences. As an example, the British Academy's own early career award holders are already 100% independent in their research.

If included in a revised Concordat, the Academy believes that this principle should be explicit in its application to both funders and employers and will need to be supported by all sector bodies to ensure coordinated and concerted efforts to improve this provision. There should be an expectation that both funders and employers are required to offer opportunities for career development. It is also important that this principle be communicated to all researchers clearly and in a timely manner, so that they are aware of the opportunities available to them and their rights in this regard.

If this element of the Concordat is to be successful in its application, the Academy believes that this revision should be supported by investigation into why the 10 days' training allowance is not currently achieving the desired impact. This may entail wider considerations of the higher education culture and environment which do not fall solely within the remit of funders and employers.

The Academy supports the endeavour to increase the time allotted to researchers for their own independent research and skills. We believe, however, that the proposal that 20% of a researcher's own time be allowed for developing independent research and skills is problematic in its current wording. A revised Concordat should not seek to be too prescriptive in its wording of expectations surrounding time allocations within grants and contracts for developing independent research skills. 20% of a researcher's time will necessarily be interpreted differently for different individuals on different contracts and under different funding principles. To be too prescriptive would risk putting barriers in place against the diversity which exists in academia across disciplines and across those individuals that a revised Concordat would wish to bring under the banner of 'researchers'. Less prescriptive wording would, by contrast, allow more individuals to benefit from increased support and may encourage consistent uptake of this expectation by funders and employing institutions across the sector.

We also believe that such an expectation should be clearly stated, so as not to be open for exploitation by institutions and employers. Several of our own early career researchers expressed concern that institutions may encourage researchers to use their 20% time allowance on teaching or administrative duties, to meet institutional needs, at the expense of independent research and other skills development. It should be made clear that the researcher should have the ability to decide how this time should be spent on their own development; something which supports the aim of increased researcher independence. There should also be recognition that what is done with the 20 % of time allowed can vary, not just between disciplines, but between different researchers; something echoed in the views of the Academy's own early career award holders.

Terminology will be important here and the Academy believes that referring to the 20% time allowance as an 'entitlement', rather than as a 'requirement' would mitigate against employer or funder push-back, and also empower researchers to request and make use of this time for their own development.

### **How should the revised Concordat address the use of fixed-term contracts? What alternative models and existing good practice should be considered?**

The Academy agrees that the use of fixed-term contracts is an issue within academia of particular concern to early career academics, resulting in instability that can have detrimental effects on their career development, opportunities for progression, and on their individual wellbeing. The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers could certainly be used as a tool in addressing this issue. The Concordat should recognise, however, that fixed-term contracts are not only an issue for early career researchers. There is also a lot of variety and diversity in the nature and length of contracts across those disciplines which the British Academy advocates for and supports. Fixed-term postdoctoral contracts are relatively rare in arts, humanities, and social science subjects, but an issue which needs addressing for these subjects is that of short-term teaching contracts. Different considerations such as this should also be taken into account when redrafting the Concordat, particularly given the proposed expansion to the definition of ‘researchers’.

The Academy feels that questions surrounding fixed-term contracts are closely related to issues of diversity and inclusion in academia more broadly. If the issue of fixed-term contracts is to be fully addressed, we believe that a fundamental culture shift in academia and higher education will be required. For example, this issue is largely absent from some of the data most commonly used by Government. The Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) survey data has counted fixed-term contracts of more than a year as permanent contracts. As a result, the precarious reality of employment for many early career researchers is lost, making it more difficult to publicise the issue and make a case for change.

Work that the British Academy has been conducting into postgraduate research careers and progression, as well as the relationship between teaching and research, could help inform the Concordat’s approach to these issues. The Academy will share publications and findings from this research with the Concordat Strategy Group for their consideration in this regard.

### **How should the revised Concordat address progression and promotion? What alternative models and existing good practice should be considered?**

The Academy sees this as an area of the Concordat where considerations of equality and diversity should be particularly apparent. Current inequalities in opportunities for progression and promotion adversely affect certain groups, in particular women and those on teaching fellowship-type contracts. It is also clearly linked to the issue of fixed-term contracts.

The Concordat should encourage equality of opportunity for progression and promotion, regardless of contract type or career pathway. A revised Concordat should also support diverse career paths through increased flexibility within academia for researchers to move between teaching and research focus, without this resulting in certain career trajectories being closed off. This will help researchers to develop a broader range of skills. There should also be the opportunity and flexibility for researchers to move into careers outside of academia, without this closing off opportunities to return to academia. The current language of ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ careers creates a false dichotomy around career pathways. The Concordat could help to change this by encouraging greater career flexibility and by avoiding negative bias towards researchers leaving academia in the language that it employs, as stated in Recommendation 5 of the review. Just as the skills developed as a researcher within academia can bring value to work outwith academia, so it should be recognised that experiences and skills gained in a non-academic workplace can be beneficial to the academic environment. This is something that the British Academy’s work on postgraduate

pathways, and on the teaching-research nexus, is seeking to explore and we would be happy to share publications and findings from these projects with the Concordat Strategy Group.

We believe that, if these issues are to be fully addressed to the benefit of all types of researcher, a fundamental culture shift is required in higher education and academia. A revised Concordat could contribute to this debate through its expectations of employers by encouraging greater clarity in promotion criteria, as well as equality of opportunities for researchers on different contracts.

### **How should the revised Concordat address mobility? What alternative models and existing good practice should be considered?**

The Academy believes that clarity is needed in the Concordat on what is meant by ‘mobility’ as it relates to researchers, and whether this refers to diverse career paths which include non-academic careers, or whether it includes an individual’s ability to move between institutions and contract types. Both are important considerations but come with different positive and negative aspects which a revised Concordat should be sensitive to.

Mobility across institutions and contract types can have positive impacts through the range of experiences, and learning and research environments which it can make available. Mobility is also an essential element in interdisciplinary and internationally collaborative research. As was mentioned above, we believe that researchers should have the flexibility to move between different contract types which may, for example, have a focus on either teaching or research. This is something which should be emphasised in the revised Concordat, whilst being balanced with an understanding of the limitations and problems which an increased emphasis on mobility can also entail. Potential negative impacts of the drive for increased mobility should not be ignored, particularly those for women, those with disabilities, and researchers who have young families or may wish to start a family. Increased mobility could also be seen as a contributing factor in the proliferation of fixed-term contracts. This works against diversity, equality, and inclusion by disadvantaging certain groups, in particular those with caring responsibilities and those with disabilities. Mobility requirements and fixed-term contracts can also negatively impact upon and disadvantage international early career researchers who may be subject to certain visa requirements and restrictions.

The Concordat should also take into account the fact that an increased emphasis on mobility can mean a lack of sustainability for many early career researchers. This can adversely affect family life and considerations such as the ability to obtain a mortgage, but it can also have detrimental effects on individual researchers’ mental health and wellbeing. The precariousness involved can also make it more difficult for researchers to develop a work-life balance, due to the uncertainty of their situation.

The Academy therefore believes that the revised Concordat should address mobility in terms of both its positive and negative aspects. As with considerations surrounding fixed-term contracts and diversity and equality, a cultural change across the higher education sector will be required if the issue of mobility for early career researchers is to be fully addressed. The Concordat can certainly contribute to motivations for this change.

### **Which groups have insufficient awareness of the Concordat currently? What should happen at a UK and/or organisational level to reach and influence these groups?**

Based upon feedback from the Academy surveying our own early career award holders, there appears to be little awareness of the Concordat amongst early career researchers. If the remit of the

Concordat is to be expanded and the understanding of ‘researchers’ broadened, communication of the Concordat, its principles, and expectations will need to be improved at all levels.

We believe that there is a need to develop awareness amongst researchers of the implications of the Concordat, the actions that employers and institutions are taking as a result of this, and what the impact of the Concordat has been in terms of the career development of researchers to date. Institutions, sector bodies such as Vitae, and funders could all help to raise awareness of the Concordat amongst early career researchers, how it applies to them, and the difference that the Concordat is making in practice. The Academy believes that it is important for this information to come from all stakeholders, particularly HEI leadership, if awareness is to be raised sufficiently.

The Academy also supports the need for greater training of principal investigators and research leaders. Provision of such training would need to be of a consistent standard across the sector. This would help to raise awareness of the Concordat within this group, as well as to enable them to better communicate it to their own researchers. This increase in support for principal investigators and research leaders to better fulfil their roles would also help to foster a healthier research culture more generally.

The Academy believes that more generic materials summarising the Concordat should be made available to researchers by their employers, funders, and institutions. Vitae could also work with stakeholder groups to develop these materials and promote the Concordat within their networks. In order to make these materials as accessible to as many individuals as possible, they should be produced in a variety of formats, including audio and visual, as well as text-base.

The Academy would be happy to make use of our own networks to help promote awareness of the Concordat. As a funder, the Academy will also do more to promote the Concordat, its principles, and expectations, within the materials and guidance that we provide our early career award holders.

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

The effective use of existing networks and the development of new networks will be essential for encouraging and facilitating the sharing of good practice. A refresh and expansion of the membership of the Concordat Strategy Group to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are represented would further facilitate this kind of communication and may help to open up and develop new networks. We think that such a refresh is essential.

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

If sector ownership is to be achieved, the Academy believes that the current and suggested future wording of the Concordat could be changed to support this. Use of the phrase ‘obligations’ suggests that the Concordat is something being imposed on employers and institutions, rather than something which the sector has ownership of and should be actively engaging with. In order to mitigate against potential push-back, use of ‘expectations’ may be more appropriate and beneficial.

We also believe that membership of the Concordat Strategy Group should be refreshed as part of the revisions informed by the recent review. This would be a positive step in helping to ensure that



all stakeholders are represented, as well as helping to ensure a greater sense of sector ownership of the Concordat.

The Academy believes that if the sector is to have ownership then the sector should be fully represented in all its guises. The Creative and Performing Arts, for example, are not currently represented on the Concordat Strategy Group. These disciplines are seeing increasing research activity and their teaching methods often involve research through practice-informed learning. As a result, 'researchers' in these disciplines would also come under the Concordat's proposed broader definition. We also strongly agree with the proposal that individual institutions be invited to be signatories of the revised Concordat, as well as the representative bodies.

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

The Academy could periodically review our alignment with the principles and expectations of the Concordat in both our role as funder and as an advocate for the humanities and social sciences.

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

The Academy believes that periodic review across the sector would be the most effective means of evaluating the implementation of the Concordat's principles, without adding undue burden on organisations and institutions.

### **How important is it that researcher career data is collected, at an organisational, UK level? What data do you already collect? What would facilitate better collection and sharing of data? What are the challenges?**

We agree that career data on researchers is important and that it should be collected systematically across the sector.

The Academy currently collects data on the progression of its Postdoctoral Fellowship award holders. Work conducted as part of the British Academy's Skills Project will also help to increase the available data on postgraduate and early career researcher progression and career pathways across the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

The Academy believes that better tracking of postgraduate students can help towards better tracking of postdoctoral and early career researchers. Currently, the postgraduate-focused questions in HESA's survey are not compulsory and, as a result, a potentially useful source of data is hampered by unpredictable response rates and unreliable data. Currently available resources such as this should be utilised more fully, and the Concordat could perhaps encourage institutional participation in these survey questions.

### **Any other comments**

The British Academy would like to re-emphasise the diversity which exists across disciplines in terms of the shape of research careers. This is something that will need to be taken into account if a

revised Concordat is to be effective and to succeed in supporting the career development of researchers holistically over the next 10 years.

The British Academy would be happy to help ensure that the full spectrum of disciplines is suitably represented and supported as Vitae produce a revised Concordat following this consultation.