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# The Concordat

to Support the Career Development of Researchers

**Annual report 2023**



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# Executive summary

- This report provides an overview of the work undertaken by the Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group (RDCSG) in 2023 to monitor and evaluate progress, support signatories, and galvanise a strong community towards improving employment and support for researchers and research careers in UK higher education.
- In June 2023, the RDCSG supported the delivery of a free online event for all staff in the research ecosystem to explore key research culture and practice topics. The two-day event was hosted in partnership with the Technician Commitment Initiative, and the Research Integrity and Knowledge Exchange Concordats.
- The RDCSG has stepped up its focus on addressing the systemic issues of precarious employment contracts, limited opportunities for progression and promotion within academia, and inconsistency of supervision and support that affect the researcher community.
- The community have undertaken helpful activities and shown positive progress in implementing their Concordat obligations to support the development of research staff. Some of these activities are highlighted in this report.
- The RDCSG is committed to supporting the next steps of the Concordats and Agreements Review, Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029 and wider initiatives that will help to implement the Research and Development (R&D) People and Culture Strategy.



# Background

This report provides a summary of activities from the Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group for 2023–24.

The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, more commonly known as the Researcher Development Concordat, is an agreement between universities, research institutes, and funders to work collaboratively to create, maintain and support a positive, inclusive, and accessible research and innovation culture in the UK.

The Concordat has three defining principles covering environment and culture, employment and professional and career development. For each of these principles, the Concordat outlines the responsibilities of the four main stakeholder groups: researchers, managers of researchers, institutions, and funders. The specific ways in which the stakeholder groups are expected to meet these obligations are set out on the Concordat website.

Signatories to the Concordat are required to:

1. Raise the visibility of the Concordat and champion its principles within their organisation at all levels.
2. Identify a senior manager champion and associated group with relevant representation from across the organisation with responsibility for annual review and reporting on progress.
3. For organisations employing researchers, ensure that they are formally represented in developing and monitoring organisational efforts to implement the Concordat principles.
4. Undertake a gap analysis to compare their policies and practice against the Concordat Principles.
5. Draw up and publish an action plan within a year of signing the Concordat.
6. Set up processes for systemically and regularly gathering the views of researchers they fund or employ, to inform and improve the organisation's approach to and progress on implementing the Concordat.
7. Produce an annual report to their governing body or equivalent authority, which includes their strategic objectives, measures of success, implementation plan and progress, which subsequently is publicly available.

Oversight of the Concordat is provided by the Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group (RDCSG). This report provides an overview of the work undertaken by the Group in 2023–24 to promote Concordat implementation across the UK, monitor and evaluate progress, and support signatories.



# Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group (RDCSG)

As governing body of the Concordat, the RDCSG has committed to the following activities:

1. Oversee the implementation and review of the Concordat with appropriate sector representation.
2. Provide a platform to share and promote good practice for the benefit of the research community and its beneficiaries.
3. Maintain the Concordat as an online living document to reflect changes in the research system and align with relevant legislation, frameworks and other research-related concordats.
4. Publish and regularly update a UK implementation plan for the Concordat, including a communications plan, to ensure a coherent and sustained approach by the sector.
5. Set up specific working groups on topics where there are systemic challenges that require engagement of multiple stakeholders.
6. Work with relevant stakeholders to develop a consistent and robust way of tracking the careers of researchers to facilitate better understanding of career pathways, within and beyond academia, to inform Concordat-related activities.
7. Commission and publish a major review of Concordat implementation.
8. Report annually to the relevant minister and devolved administrations on key activities and progress in implementing the Concordat.

The group meets quarterly, and comprises representatives from funding bodies, higher education institutions, and other organisations and associations from within and outside higher education that are signatories to the Concordat's values. Between RDCSG meetings, an executive group, comprising representatives from each key stakeholder group, meets to support the secretariat with policy developments and sign-off communications.



## Strategy Group members

Academy of Medical Sciences

Advance HE

British Academy

British Heart Foundation

Cancer Research UK (CRUK)

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)

Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfENI)

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)

HR Excellence in Research Award Panel

National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB)

National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)

Research England

Royal Academy of Engineering

Royal Society

Russell Group

Science Council

Scottish Funding Council (SFC)

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA)

Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA)

Universities UK (UUK)

University and College Union (UCU)

Vitae

Wellcome Trust



## Acknowledgements

The work of the Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group and Secretariat is supported by funding from Research England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland, and the Scottish Funding Council.

### Contact us

Would you like to discuss the Researcher Development Concordat or share examples of how your organisation has been implementing its principles? Please contact us at [CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk).



# Research culture and practice forum

In June 2023, the RDCSG supported the delivery of a free online event for all staff in the research ecosystem to explore key research culture and practice topics. The two-day event was hosted in partnership with the [Technician Commitment Initiative](#) and the [Research Integrity](#) and [Knowledge Exchange Concordats](#).

Speakers included researchers, institutional concordat leads and members of concordat steering groups, as well as representatives from research funders, industry and policy organisations, showcasing the fantastic work being done across the sector to address research culture and practice issues.

## Day 1

Day 1 provided insight into the role of a number of different concordats and initiatives responsible for driving positive research culture, how universities are implementing them, and the benefits they bring.

There were also sessions outlining the changing landscape for technical professionals in higher education and research. The day ended with a future-facing discussion about maintaining momentum and ensuring concordats continue to be effective in a changing landscape.

Sessions included:

- Concordats 101: What are they, and how they drive positive research culture?
- How do staff at institutions implement the concordats and initiatives in practice?
- The changing landscape for technical professionals in higher education and research
- What does the future look like for research culture concordats and initiatives?





## Day 2

Day 2 took a deep dive into key research culture and practice issues, progress, and achievements.

Professor Melanie Welham, the UKRI Executive Champion for People, Culture and Talent, opened with an overview of the work that UKRI are doing to improve research culture. There were also sessions exploring examples of good practice in the sector to address the systemic issue of career precarity in academic research and technical roles. This featured a fantastic example of collaboration between researchers and senior leadership at the University of Bath in their [agreement to address casualisation](#).

Sessions included:

- Supporting research integrity: principles and practice
- Supporting sustainable research and technical careers
- Research career paths: applying research expertise beyond academia
- How does knowledge exchange contribute to a positive research culture?

### Watch the forum

All session recordings are available on the [Universities UK Events YouTube channel](#).



# Fairness of employment task and finish Group

RDCSG has stepped up its focus on addressing the systemic issues of precarious employment contracts, limited opportunities for progression and promotion within academia, and inconsistency of supervision and support that affect the researcher community.

We set up a task and finish group to be responsible for hosting a series of roundtable discussions with the sector to inform the development of a good practice guide for the fair employment of research staff.

The roundtable discussions focused on establishing a shared understanding of what fairness of employment is, the barriers to achieving it, and potential solutions. They focused primarily on cultures, behaviours and ways of working – choices that institutions can make to either enhance or inhibit fair employment – as opposed to financial and legislative aspects.

To reflect the diversity of the sector, the good practice guide will take a tiered approach, combining baseline expectations with the exploration of more ambitious ideas and innovative case studies in the sector. To maximise its impact, the guide will be short, concise and manageable, focusing on the following three themes that emerged from the roundtable discussions as priorities for progressing fairness of employment.

## Theme 1: Secure contracts and effective redeployment

The roundtable discussions identified several key challenges around addressing career precarity, including:

- **The prominence of so-called ‘open-ended contracts’ attached to funding, which still carry the same risk of redundancy.** Many institutional and sector-wide data collection processes do not recognise the distinction between these types of contracts and genuine open-ended contracts. This makes it challenging to get a realistic picture of sector and institutional progress towards improving job security for research staff.
- **Matching career ambitions with available redeployment opportunities.** A regional cross-institutional redeployment register could potentially create more opportunities.



- **The mechanical approach to end of contract letters.** Good practice involves putting human empathy at the forefront of language, and signposting to additional resources and bespoke support help navigate career transitions.
- **The explicit link between people and funding.** There are emerging examples of employers testing the feasibility of alternative models which break this link, for example the University of Bath's commitment to pilot a pooled resourcing model.

## Theme 2: Consistent quality of supervision and career development support

This theme explores how to ensure research staff have access to consistent and high-quality supervision and career development support. It explores some of the following challenges:

- **Increasing the uptake of 10 development days and ensuring they are embedded in tracking and recording processes.** Fostering a broad understanding of development allows for exploration and cultivating a wider range of skills that match individual career development objectives.
- The singular channel between Principle Investigators (PIs) and research staff can lead to inconsistencies and a lack of alternative avenues for support. Appointing a separate senior manager who is responsible for providing learning and development support to a departmental cohort of research staff – something that is relatively common practice in many other employment sectors – could help overcome this.
- Professional service staff at the centre who are responsible for supporting career development of all academic staff may not always be attuned to the unique contexts of staff on research-only contracts. The appointment of a trained HR professional whose specific remit is research staff could help bridge this gap.
- Testing the feasibility of roving researcher roles in STEM disciplines, as trialled at the MRC London Institute of Medical Science. Individuals in these roles work closely with scientists taking long term leave by maintaining momentum on their projects in their absence.



## Theme 3: Enabling diverse progression and promotion pathways

This theme explored the barriers that disincentivise researcher mobility across different employment sectors, and some of the potential solutions:

- There can be a stigma among researchers, often perpetuated by cultures in higher education institutions, that leaving academia is a failure. Similarly, research roles in academia that do not embrace diverse and non-linear career pathways limit opportunities for researchers to return, disincentivising the taking of risks and new career opportunities. [Prosper at the University of Liverpool](#) is an example of a development model which encourages diverse career pathways.
- **The lack of data on career destinations** can make it challenging for institutions to provide evidence of where, how and why researchers can apply their highly valued skillset across different employment sectors. Working towards a sector consensus on a joined-up approach to collecting this information would be beneficial.
- **There needs to be a cultural shift towards the celebration of alumni in other employment sectors**, and an alumni programme which prioritises maintaining these partnerships, for example at the Royal College of Arts.



# Statements from the Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group

In this section, RDCSG members provide updates on their organisation activities and progress in implementing their Concordat obligations to support the development of research staff.

## The British Academy

The Academy has announced its new Strategic Plan for 2023–27, which includes the priority of ‘strengthening and championing the humanities and social sciences’ and a core objective ‘to invest in the very best researchers and research’, amongst other points. The Academy continues to make progress across the principles of the Concordat against these themes and across different workstreams.

The Academy continues to offer funding to support the professional development of researchers. Several funding programmes, such as the Talent Development Awards, enable researchers to acquire new skills in areas such as the digital humanities and languages. In 2023, the Academy also launched a new Personal Leadership Development in Research programme, which delivered a residential course and in-person course on Induction to Management and Leadership in Academy Research Environments, and which was available to all our funded International and Post-Doctoral Fellows.

The Researcher Development Concordat is also referenced in the Academy’s funding terms and conditions, including requirements which support improvement of working conditions for researchers on terms no less favourable than those of comparable positions in their host institution.

We also support institutions themselves to develop policies and frameworks to promote sustainable employment and contribute to a coordinated approach across members of the Funders Forum. Concerns around employment and supporting researcher development also form the core of a major new project on SHAPE Research Careers and which is primarily focused on early- and ‘mid’-career researchers.

Our Early Career Researcher Network continues to offer a forum to engage with employers and researchers about early career researcher concerns, and the recent expansion to a new regional cluster in London means that this offering is now able to reach even more early career researchers at more institutions.

The Academy is partnering with several UKRI Research Councils and Innovate UK to support the EDI Caucus project: EDICa, launched in January 2023 and running



to 2026. The Caucus aims to synthesise extant evidence, identify gaps and prepare and disseminate information on best practice. It is using a flexible commissioning fund to conduct research and impact projects to create a step-change in EDI across the research and innovation systems.

The work of the project is being organised through three workstreams focusing on the career life cycle, the research process and the organisation of work. Year 1 activities have included:

- co-designing the programme of work through a Delphi study
- recruiting an advisory board
- taking a particular focus on projects on menstrual health and (peri)menopause in the workplace, and on the medium-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic
- understanding reviewer and assessor equity and diversity literacy

EDICa are also running a seminar series to keep key stakeholders and partners informed on the work as it is progressing and promoting industry-wide knowledge.

In 2023, the Academy also launched a new programme of Additional Needs Funding aiming to provide specific support to award-holders and potential applicants facing barriers to applying for funding or conducting research from caring needs, sensory impairment or other factors. This warmly received initiative is already attracting significant interest both from potential beneficiaries and other funders.

Monitoring and evaluation of grants and schemes continues to be a priority, recognised by the Academy's recruitment of a new team to focus on this. Recent evaluations include consideration of the Early Career Network, while a review of the British Academy Wolfson Fellowship scheme, Covid-19 recovery, Just Transitions, Newton mobility, and Advanced Professors is ongoing.

## Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK (CRUK) is a proud signatory of the Researcher Development Concordat to support the development of our community of brilliant researchers.

In 2021, CRUK published its first Concordat [action plan](#) and we reviewed this last year in 2023. In doing so, we outlined new actions to support the development of cancer researchers.

Actions we've undertaken in the past 12 months include:

- We've continued in our progress towards achieving [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion \(EDI\)](#) in research and now support ten positive action programmes. The first cohort of students has been supported as part of the [Black Leaders in Cancer PhD Scholarship Programme](#). This programme is a partnership with [Windsor Fellowship](#) and [Black in Cancer](#) to ensure that more people from



Black backgrounds enter and remain in the academic pipeline. A second cohort of students will be starting in the 2024–25 academic year.

- To improve recognition of postdoctoral roles and increase visibility of diverse career progression pathways, we piloted a new Postdoc Futures event last year, which was dedicated to postdoctoral women in celebration of International Women’s Day. Following positive feedback, an expanded version of the event will be held this year to empower more CRUK-funded postdocs to take the next step in their career.
- We’ve further expanded the positive action element of the [early career funding panels and committee observer scheme](#) to other underrepresented groups, to include non-binary researchers and researchers who are neurodivergent, have a disability or long-term physical or mental health condition.
- **As part of our fellowship application guidelines, we have set expectations of institutions hosting CRUK-funded fellows** to ensure clear commitments to access to training, career progression support, and the fellows’ future career trajectory. We’ll regularly evaluate these expectations to ensure full institutional commitment.
- We published our [Diversity in Funding Data report](#) in July 2023, and presented application rate, awards made and award success rate by the age, gender, ethnicity or disability status of applicants, indicating gaps in diversity to address.
- **For grant applicants and award holders with a disability, we consolidated all support as accessible web guidance.** We commissioned the [National Association of Disabled Staff Networks](#) to review the language and utility of the guidance with mixed-experience focus groups, and preliminary results suggest applications from researchers disclosing a disability increased since introducing the guidance.
- **We analysed applicants and reviewers’ perceptions of the narrative CV**, in use with the majority of our funding schemes, to enhance its value in research assessment.

## Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland

The Department for the Economy (DfENI) fully endorses the importance of creating and promoting a positive research culture. It is key to supporting and empowering our research community to focus on delivering the excellent research and world class innovation necessary to underpin our long-term economic growth and raise standards for our wider communities. As such, we are signatories to the Concordats to Support Research Integrity and the Career



Development of Researchers and a member of the Forum for Tackling Bullying and Harassment.

Unlike other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland has no separate higher education funding council; DfENI fulfils the roles of both a government department and a funding council.

In respect of our role as a research funder, our commitments under the Concordat have resulted in amendments and key changes being made to our conditions of funding. As a condition of receiving core recurrent research funding, DfENI requires Northern Ireland's higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide annual assurance on their compliance with the Concordat. Similarly, for non-core research funding, DfENI includes a condition requiring compliance with the principles of the Concordat in all letters of offer, as standard. The Department conducts an annual review of our commitments to identify any further actions which may be implementable, with the next review being planned for April 2024.

DfENI was pleased to be able to allocate additional in-year funding to HEIs in Northern Ireland specifically to contribute to the support of research culture activities, and to participate in a number of events marking the establishment of a new Research Professionals Network in NI.

This network, led by Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, will serve as a valuable regional resource to complement existing UK and all-Ireland networks. It aims to bring together research and innovation professionals in Northern Ireland to build connections and networks, enhance collaboration and partnership, and collectively discuss and address shared challenges for the research and innovation ecosystem in Northern Ireland. We look forward to working with other HEIs, research professionals from other sectors and key stakeholders from across the UK and Ireland to create and continue to support a thriving research culture in Northern Ireland and beyond.

In partnership with Research England and the other devolved administrations' funding bodies (HEFCW in Wales and the Scottish Funding Council in Scotland), we continue to fund the Concordat secretariat and we are committed to supporting an agreed approach to delivering this provision going forward.

DfENI also engage with the other funding bodies to design and develop the future Research Excellence Framework which includes a recognition of the importance of people, culture and environment in supporting excellent research. We are committed to improving research culture and researcher development through our engagement with Northern Irish HEIs, the Concordat Steering Groups, and the other devolved administrations.





## Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

As a national funder, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) engages with institutions, representative bodies, learned societies and other funders across the breadth of the research and innovation landscape. In every interaction, pan-Wales, nationally and internationally, HEFCW upholds the principles of the Researcher Development Concordat. Through research culture and environment as a priority policy area, HEFCW works to assure that Welsh institutions comply with the concordat through our Research and Innovation Review Meetings and Annual Assurance Review processes.

HEFCW's Action Plan for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers was published in 2021, identifying measures of success against obligations.

Support for personal, professional and leadership development for the future research leaders of Wales continues through HEFCW partnership with Welsh Crucible, the award-winning development programme for early career researchers for the 2022–24 period. In July 2023, HEFCW signed a memorandum of understanding with the Learned Society of Wales (LSW) to provide increased funding to promote research excellence in Welsh higher education. This includes support for LSW's Early Career Researchers Network which provides career and researcher support, collaboration and community for advancement of research excellence pan-Wales. HEFCW also funds the Welsh Innovation Network, which facilitates networks and collaboration of researchers pan-Wales, strengthening sharing of best practice and supporting career development opportunities.

HEFCW continues to prepare for its transition into the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research as outlined in the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022. HEFCW's input is informing the design of the Commission, with a focus on ensuring that people, culture and environment, as well as the principles of the concordat, are prioritised and upheld in the new organisation.

## National Institute for Health and Care Research

The mission of the [National Institute for Health and Care Research](#) (NIHR) is to improve the health and wealth of the nation through research and since our establishment in 2006, we have developed career pathways for clinical academics and created new opportunities for nurses, midwives and allied health professionals to integrate research with clinical practice. We have also grown our training portfolio to attract a broad range of non-clinical scientists into careers that are exciting and sustainable. Our core workstreams and areas of strategic focus align and support the principles of the Researcher Development Concordat. We aim to ensure that, in our role as a signatory, we take an inclusive approach to ensure the breadth of the NIHR research workforce is considered.



In 2023, we have focused on increasing the diversity of people applying for our awards and ensuring we have a balanced portfolio of career development opportunities. To do this we have mapped our current offer, identified gaps and are implementing actions to address the balance of our funding streams at all career levels and to encourage interest in professions and groups currently underrepresented within research.

We recognise the importance of career progression and job security in attracting and retaining researchers. Our Advanced Fellowships can now be taken for up to eight years, longer if part time, to provide more employment stability and some of our Infrastructure awards are moving from a five-year to a seven-year cycle, providing greater job security and opportunities for career development. We are piloting a new Senior Clinical and Practitioner Research Award, which will offer greater flexibility and provide more job security. We also acknowledge that the researchers we fund will move on to careers beyond academia. We have launched joint industry and charity funded Fellowships to give researchers experience working outside the academic sector and are encouraging applicants with an interest in entrepreneurship to apply for our Development and Skills Enhancement award.

We actively monitor and report on application and success rates for our career development awards and track progression of our award holders. We recently published an analysis of the NIHR Clinical Lectureship to understand barriers and enablers of undertaking a clinical academic career. We have published diversity targets for NIHR Academy professional committee and panel members and we piloted interventions to support inclusive decision making and recruitment. We are undertaking annual analysis and publication of demographic data for research applicants, increasing diversity of selection committees and improving use of language to be more inclusive. This will mean in future years we can take more targeted action, as well as track impact effectively.

This year we have also focused on understanding the barriers disabled people face when engaging with the NIHR. We will launch a Disability Framework in 2024 which will set out the NIHRs commitment to disability inclusion, and a series of actions which aim to remove these barriers. We will be developing reporting and metrics to ensure we can evaluate the impact of our interventions.

## Royal Academy of Engineering

The Royal Academy of Engineering is committed to creating cultures of diverse perspectives in which everyone can thrive and enrich our collective performance.

As a funder of engineering research, the Academy runs an extensive programme of grants and prizes for engineers at every career stage in the UK to support and celebrate the pursuit of engineering activities and to enable closer contact between academia and industry. Through support, training, mentorship and funding, the Academy cultivates outstanding and diverse engineering researchers, and we bolster engineering and technology research outputs with high potential for commercialisation and societal benefits. As a signatory of the Researcher Development Concordat, we strive for continuous improvement



through our support of research culture and career provision, as our action plan demonstrates.

In 2023, we continued to develop our Access Mentoring scheme which provides additional support to applicants from groups that are persistently underrepresented within UK engineering through the grant application process. This positive action will contribute to improving diversity in the talent pipeline and widening the diversity of applicants and awardees within the Academy's research grant schemes. The initiative supports applicants through the grant application process through mentoring from fellows or alumni to improve their application in one-hour (or more) focused sessions. Since its pilot in 2021, the Academy has reviewed the initiative through surveys. There have been 109 access mentees and feedback from both mentees and mentors has been overwhelmingly positive.

We have reviewed and updated our industry linked research schemes, increasing the flexibility available to awardees to encourage a wider range of diverse applicants. This flexibility includes part-time working, additional eligible costs, industrial contribution proportionate to company size, flexible start dates.

Behind the scenes, 2023 has also seen a step change in improving the Academy's grant-making processes with the creation of a grants processes and operations function. Crucial work is underway to improve our capability to collect, monitor, analyse and present data on applicants and awardees.

In May 2023, the Awardee Excellence Community inaugural event took place, officially launching the Academy's Awardee Excellence Community which exists to connect and harness the talent, passion and expertise of current and past awardees for public benefit bringing our awardees together to meet and network, share experiences and exchange ideas. The Academy CAFÉ (Connecting Awardees, Fostering Engagement) online event series continues to thrive. The webinars allow participants to share ideas, challenges and best practice in the current period and beyond. The discussions have included topics on early career recruitment and how researchers can better engage with industry, as well as specialist technical areas.

## Royal Society

The Royal Society engages in a range of activities to promote a research system that fosters excellence, treats people fairly and rewards the full range of scientific activity that benefits society.

As a signatory of the Researcher Development Concordat, we continue to report on the fulfilment of our obligations and provide annual updates to the Society's Grants Committee about the implementation of the Action Plan.

We undertake regular review of scheme documentation to ensure our funding calls include requirements which promote equitable, inclusive and positive research culture and support the improvement of working conditions for researchers. In November 2023, we reviewed the guidance for Host Organisation commitments to clarify expectations for the support provided to early career



fellowship applicants. The revised guidance includes a clear reference to the Concordat's principles as well as the expectation that the Host will provide successful candidates with the appropriate necessary departmental and institutional support to thrive in their career. The revised wording will be implemented to all future calls of the Society's early career fellowship programmes from July 2024 onwards.

Broadening access to careers to academia to talented individuals who are at the beginning of their research career and helping them to achieve their full potential is a key aspect of our work and an essential step in supporting scientific excellence. In September 2023, we launched the Career Development Fellowship: a pilot scheme that aims to support the retention of researchers from underrepresented backgrounds in STEM with the first cohort being researchers from Black heritage.

The scheme has been developed following cross-sector roundtables and Royal Society-commissioned reports which looked at trends across 11 years of Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) data and benchmarked the Society's early career fellowships against the eligible applicant pool.

The pilot scheme received over 200 applications. Successful candidates will receive 4 years of funding to support them to establish their fellowship project and a comprehensive 'wraparound support package' to enhance their growth and prepare them for their next step in their career.

The Society offers a range of training and networking opportunities to support the career development of its Research Fellows. An Engagement Advisory Group was established for the first time to ensure our programme meets the needs of research fellows, adding value beyond what is offered by their host organisations. In addition, we continue to engage with the scientific community through networking meetings and bespoke workshops on topics in line with the Society's strategy.

We have recently hosted a workshop focusing on discussing 'The skills of future research leaders' as part of the Creating Connections event in Liverpool. The workshop aimed to examine the skills that researchers themselves believe to be important in building a research career and to explore the ways in which the Royal Society can provide support and opportunities to Research Fellows to build on these. Topics discussed by attendees ranged from mentoring and networking strategies to increase industry and public engagement for academic researchers and practical opportunities for skill-development and network building.

The Royal Society is undertaking a programme of work entitled Science 2040. This is a five-year programme looking at what the UK science system could and should look like in the future. As part of this, we are convening a working group on future careers. This working group will focus on what STEM careers should look like in the year 2040 including the challenges and opportunities that the research system might face. This is anticipated to cover a broad range of areas including



career pathways porosity, incentives, skills gaps, career support and training needs. The working group will be used to inform the Science 2040 programme of work.

## Scottish Funding Council

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has been a signatory to the revised Researcher Development Concordat since 2019. As a funder, we seek assurance of Scottish institutions' compliance with the concordat through the annual Outcome Agreement process, and as a standard condition of grant on all strategic funds.

Alongside the other UK higher education funding bodies, SFC contributes towards the secretariat costs of the concordat, and members of SFC's research team sit on the strategy group. SFC presented at the Research Culture and Practice Forum jointly hosted by the Researcher Development and Research Integrity Concordats in July 2023, and is also represented on the UKRI Forum for Tackling Bullying and Harassment. SFC continues to engage with other funding bodies and stakeholders on addressing the recommendations of the Concordats and Agreements review.

SFC's Strategic Plan 2022–27 clearly sets out, among other relevant priorities, a commitment to promoting a supportive research culture for talented people and teams and SFC continues to explore ways to promote research culture and researcher development through its activities, as well as to gather evidence to support this. From the academic year 2022–23, we have asked universities to provide a research culture statement as part of their outcome agreements. This will feed into planned research culture work in the coming year. We continue to work closely with sector groups including Universities Scotland's Researcher Development & Culture Committee.

SFC's Advisory Group on Supporting Scotland's Postgraduate Researchers met between September 2022 and January 2024. The group's remit was:

- to provide SFC with expert advice on the purpose and future accountability approach for SFC's Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG)
- to consider a Scottish response to UK developments in the postgraduate researcher (PGR) landscape
- to provide SFC with expert advice on how we build our evidence base to inform the directions we take to support and champion postgraduate researchers in Scotland, including their training and development

A new template and guidance for RPG reporting, informed by the group's feedback, will be presented to Scottish HEIs in May 2024 for response in the autumn. The group's advice on UK-wide developments and the PGR evidence base has been invaluable and will continue to inform SFC's activity to support research culture in Scotland. We will also continue to benefit from their knowledge and support in an ongoing, informal, capacity in the future.



SFC's new Alliances for Research Challenges, officially launched in October 2023, will promote collaboration across the sector, ensuring specific support for those earlier in their research careers. We recognise the continuing role that research pools and their graduate schools, as well as SFC-funded national graduate schools, play in this space.

SFC is working closely with the other UK higher education funding bodies to develop the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise. REF 2029 will include a greater emphasis on people, culture and engagement (PCE). We have, and will continue to, engage with a wide range of stakeholders, institutions, research professionals and researchers from all career stages and disciplinary backgrounds to ensure development of a robust and meaningful set of indicators and a robust process for assessment of PCE within REF.

SFC's concordat action plan was published in August 2021. The plan will be reviewed over 2024 and updated to reflect progress against indicators and to identify areas of new and continuing focus.

## Universities UK

As secretariat of the Researcher Development Concordat, our role is to monitor and report on progress of individual research organisations, other signatory organisations and the sector as a whole in meeting the commitments of the Concordat. This also includes overseeing the RDCSG, managing the Concordat website and secretariat inbox, engaging with the Concordat community and organising the Research Culture and Practice Forum.

In May 2023, UUK, with Wellcome and UKRI, published phase two of the Concordats and Agreements Review. The review brought together the initiative owners and the research and innovation (R&I) community to look for potential future alignments to increase influence, capacity, and efficiency across the landscape.

We've been actively involved in discussions relating to REF 2029, UKRI's work on research culture initiatives, the Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy, and the Independent Review of the Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape. We've continued to be a member of the R&D People and Culture Ministerial Coordination Group.

## Vitae

As a non-profit programme that supports the development of researchers, Vitae has continued to promote the implementation of the Researcher Development Concordat across a range of activities.

Our Concordat Thematic Sessions have been central to our work around the Concordat in 2023. Sessions were held online and attended by researcher



developers, research managers, and policymakers across and beyond higher education.

Sessions included:

- Supporting managers of researchers in meeting their obligations (February 2023)
- The Employment principle: delivering stable and sustainable academic careers (March 2023)
- Designing success (measures): setting targets to measure impact (April 2023)
- Aligning the Concordat with research culture activity (November 2023)

Vitae has continued to manage the Concordat Platform of Practice, proactively seeking further case examples that address known gaps in cover, such as on the Concordat's challenging employment principle. Further targeted work is planned for 2024 to expand the breadth of examples on the Platform of Practice, particularly from non-higher education institution stakeholders.

Throughout 2023, we continued to run drop-in events for holders of the HR Excellence in Research Award, as well as targeted support around the development of action plans and success measures. We also ran the biennial Culture, Employment and Development of Academic Researchers survey (CEDARS), which is mapped to the Concordat. Key findings for 2023 are that around two-thirds of staff have good job satisfaction (68%), with female research staff having the highest levels (75%) and mid-career staff having the lowest levels (63%).

More widely, Vitae has been furthering key aspects in the Researcher Development Concordat through engagement on research culture. As part of a project for UKRI on research culture initiatives in the UK, Vitae mapped different definitions and perspectives on research culture across a wide range of policy and institutional documents, including the Researcher Development Concordat. The resulting framework on research culture includes 'How people are supported' as one of four overarching themes, including attention to employment and conditions, recognitions and assessment, embedding professional and career development, and ensuring inclusive and healthy working environments.



# Case studies

A selection of case studies that highlight good practice in supporting the development of researchers in the sector, listed in alphabetical order.

## Queen Mary University of London

The Queen Mary Postdoc Conference is an annual event co-created by a diverse, cross-disciplinary and representative organising team of postdocs along with research support colleagues, bringing postdocs from across the university together as a community and creating a forum for postdoc voices to be heard.

The conference provides practical development opportunities for key skills such as networking, presenting and leadership for the delegates, presenters, and particularly for the organising committee and Conference Chairs. The conference allows postdocs to shape their research culture and experience at Queen Mary creating outputs that enable them to:

- **Share and discuss their experiences of postdoc life and research culture** and propose changes they would like to see at Queen Mary through discussions with key stakeholders and a recommendation paper to senior leaders written by the postdocs chairing the conference.
- **Building and strengthening communities across disciplines and faculties on the day**, and providing ongoing opportunities to interact and network through hearing from existing research staff associations and resulting in the formation of three new research staff associations, and through an online postdoc-designed Sharepoint resource that enables Queen Mary postdocs to search for peer support and promote skill sharing across the university.
- **Raise the visibility of postdocs** as individuals and as a community.
- **Learn about the support available to postdocs at Queen Mary** and engage directly with the colleagues providing this support to help them better understand postdoc needs.
- **Hear careers talks from former Queen Mary postdocs**, which are written up as a series of postdoc career journey case studies and added to a growing resource as inspiration for Queen Mary postdocs.
- **Learn about the breadth of research being conducted** across the institution and celebrate each other's' research successes together.

The first Queen Mary Postdoc Conference was co-created by a team of 17 postdocs representing a range of disciplines, experiences and demographics. It was attended by 84 postdocs and produced six recommendations presented to





senior research leadership, which fed into 11 actions in the 2024–27 Action Plan to implement the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. Participants fed back extremely positively, requesting the conference run annually (according to 100% of feedback responses, and recommendation [1] in the recommendation paper) and senior leadership were very supportive of this recommendation. The conference, now in its second year, continues to empower postdocs to voice their needs and having action taken to address those needs wherever possible, strengthening the research culture they experience and creating long-term impact.

Further details: [Queen Mary Postdoc Conference 2024](#)

## **N8 Research Partnership support for Established (Mid-Career) Researchers**

Mid-career researchers are a broad and diverse set of people with correspondingly diverse needs. They have established themselves as independent researchers and have delivered significant research outputs. They are bringing in grant funding and reviewing for funders and journals and are in many ways the backbone of the research and innovation ecosystem in the UK.

At the N8 Research Partnership, the collective body of northern England's eight research-intensive universities, we have recognised that these researchers' needs and problems are often forgotten. There are examples of good practice across the N8 universities, but there is no common benchmark for good practice in supporting researchers at this career stage.

In March 2023, we pulled together a group of researchers from different institutions and disciplines. The group included those on teaching and research career paths, those who had been at this career stage for a long time and those who had just been promoted into it. We asked to hear about their experiences, what works and what needs improving. Take a look at our findings: [Established researchers report](#).

These researchers were engaged, positive, constructive and passionate. Workloads were an important part of the conversation, but did not dominate. Some of the discussion centred on definitions and terminology; the rest focused on support that would help people thrive during this career stage. The N8 universities are working together to take forward the recommendations, with an action plan and review points to keep ourselves accountable.

We are also working in partnership with the Eastern Academic Research Consortium universities to convene a small and informal online roundtable in April 2024. We will connect a subset of stakeholders drawn from universities and funders to think about how we might, together and with others, develop a more strategic approach to the development of established researchers in the UK. By putting the needs of established researchers centre stage, we will deliver healthier research cultures across all of our universities.



## University of Liverpool: Research in an Inclusive and Sustainable Environment

Research in an Inclusive and Sustainable Environment (RISE) was an institution wide initiative at the University of Liverpool that enabled colleagues to be recognised for their many and varied research contributions. RISE initially involved a series of conversations across the university over three phases focused on our research and impact policies.

RISE has drawn on the input of a broad range of 1400+ stakeholders, including research staff, managers of researchers, and with the relevant trade union. Our conversations have led to various interventions and new ways of working, including the formulation and launch of a new research Contributions Framework (CF). The CF sets out a broader range of potential academic contributions to be recognised and rewarded including activity which supports and develops others as well as grant attainment and the production of outputs. The CF aims to underpin a more supportive, mentored approach to enabling academic colleagues to develop and progress. A narrative statement approach will be adopted within professional development reviews (PDRs) to allow a richer, more structured and more consistent conversation about development and progress.

In terms of actions underway, following its launch in November 2023, the CF is being embedded to make sure there is greater clarity about academic expectations, factors that may affect progress and aspects of wellbeing. Work is also underway to pilot a new narrative statement-led approach within PDR structured to reflect the CF, and to pilot tailored online resources and face to face training for academic participants in their annual appraisals or PDRs.

The RISE vision for the longer term is to:

- develop the skills of PDR reviewers in assessing contribution, particularly in respect of specific academic discipline and in terms of relative quality
- significantly improve academic colleagues experience within PDR
- explore the potential of using the narrative-statement approach in other processes (promotion and progression)
- based on the learning from the pilot, embed the new approach to PDR across the academic community



## University of Liverpool: Collective Leadership@Liverpool programme for Research Staff and Managers of Researchers

The Academy at the University of Liverpool is responsive to the leadership development needs of researchers at different stages of their career. Whether research staff or managers of researchers at Grades 6–8, those who are new to research leadership or are looking to take their research leadership to the next level, the Collective Leadership@Liverpool programme supports cohorts of participants to develop the skills needed to empower, inspire and lead at the University of Liverpool.

The programme provides a collaborative learning experience which challenges researchers to think and act in new ways, to explore best practice and be part of a growing culture of leadership excellence across the university. It takes a blended approach, including coaching with a strengths assessment using Spotlight (a powerful and intuitive mindset and behavioural style tool designed to help individuals and teams develop adaptability). The programme also includes workshops and masterclasses with leaders both inside and outside of the higher education sector through a 'Lense on Research Leadership' strand. It has been designed in collaboration with external leadership specialists to help participants develop the skills needed to empower, inspire and lead others at the University of Liverpool.

Four core thematic areas are included in this programme:

- Leading in the higher education environment
- Leading authentically
- Leading in an inclusive culture
- Leading impactful teams

There are two key elements: group sessions and masterclasses. In group sessions, participants come together collectively, irrespective of traditional roles or areas of work, in sessions covering content and discussion relevant for all institutional leaders. Masterclasses are context-specific and support the participants in applying their leadership learning to the context they work in. They are open to all relevant staff beyond the current cohort, thereby fostering cross-disciplinary and cross-leadership stage discussions.

During the pilot year of 2022–23, six researchers completed the programme in addition to three technical pathway leaders and five research-related leaders. 43 additional research leaders attended the research-themed masterclasses that were open to all researchers across the university. Participants report that the Collective Leadership@Liverpool programme is successfully fostering a culture of



leadership excellence through collaborative learning, innovative approaches, and inclusivity across different career stages, ultimately contributing to a more empowered and impactful research community.



# Priorities of the Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group in 2024

In 2024, the RDCSG is committed to a range of activities to further enhance the effective governance and implementation of the concordat, as well as continue to support policy developments in research culture and career development.

## Major review of the concordat

A dedicated task and finish group of the RDCSG will be responsible for determining the detailed scope and approach to the major review of the implementation of the Concordat.

The group will conduct scoping work, including scanning policy developments and engaging with the sector, to outline the options and recommendations for the review, including a consideration of the Concordat's progress up to this point, the outcomes, evidence and next steps.

The review will include an assessment of the Concordat's communications and engagement strategy, and how to meaningfully engage key stakeholder groups including researchers.

It will also consider how the Concordat can effectively align with other key research culture concordats and instruments in the sector, including REF2029 people, culture and environment statements.

## Fairness of employment

The RDCSG is committed to maintaining momentum on its activities to improve the employment conditions for staff on research-only contracts, exploring systemic issues of career precarity and limited opportunities for progression and promotion both within and beyond academia. This will involve promotional work of the good practice guide, stress-testing its ideas and recommendations with employers and the wider sector.



## Annual research culture and practice forum 2024

Building on the success of the 2023 Forum, the RDCSG will support the delivery of a research culture event in 2024 that will further explore issues affecting the research community including fairness of employment, career progression beyond academia, embedding 10-day development tracking, support for researcher managers, and alignment with other research culture initiatives and instruments.

## Concordats and agreements Review

The RDCSG has been proactive in exploring opportunities for greater alignment with other Concordats and initiatives in the sector designed to shape research cultures and practices.

Representatives of the RDCSG attended an event in March, bringing together initiative owners to progress the actions from the Concordats and Agreements Review, which recommended moving towards a more holistic culture-centric approach designed to enhance efficiencies and reduce needless bureaucracy.

As an initial step, the RDCSG will explore how to coordinate and align reporting processes to avoid duplication.

## Engagement

The RDCSG will continue to engage with the full breadth of stakeholders to support provision to implement the Concordat, targeting the following range of stakeholder groups to ensure voices from all areas of the research and innovation system reach strategic level:

- heads of departments, deans, senior research leaders, institutional Concordat champions
- researcher developers
- researchers
- principal investigators
- concordat leads, research and innovation administrators
- industry leaders
- funding leaders



- other concordats and agreements steering groups

We welcome discussions with current signatories, prospective signatories, concordat leaders, funders, senior university leaders, industry leaders and research staff on improving the Concordat.

JUNE 2024