

University of Exeter
University Executive Board 24th October 2024

Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers: Signatory Annual Report 2023/24

1. Executive Summary

As part of our institutional responsibilities as a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers¹, we are committed to the presentation of an annual report to our governing body on our plans and actions in support of the Concordat aims and objectives; the report will subsequently be published on our website. We present our fourth annual report – which will be submitted to Council following UEB and Senate approval – in this paper.

2. Alignment with Strategy 2030

Our commitment to the obligations set out in the Researcher Development Concordat align with our Strategy 2030 commitment that ‘Our research excellence will be underpinned and enhanced by an open, ethical and supportive research culture and environment’.

3. Context

- 3.1 The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers is an agreement between stakeholders (funders, institutions, researchers and managers of researchers) to improve the employment and support for researchers and researcher careers in higher education in the UK. The Concordat presents a set of obligations for each stakeholder group, aligned to its three key pillars: environment and culture, employment, and professional and career development.
- 3.2 The University became a signatory² to the latest iteration of the Concordat in 2020, following changes to the Concordat in 2019 (the original agreement was formed in 1996 and revised in 2008) which required individual universities to become direct signatories. In doing so, we committed to a number of signatory responsibilities, including the presentation of an annual report to our governing body (to be made publicly available); this paper presents our fourth annual report.
- 3.3 Our commitment to the principles of the Concordat is reflected in our achievement of the HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiRA)³, held by Exeter since 2008 (we successfully retained our award at the last review in September 2023). The HREiRA is based on an assessment of our progress and performance in meeting our institutional obligations to upholding the principles of the Concordat.
- 3.4 Adherence to the Concordat is expected by key funding bodies including UKRI, major charitable funders (e.g. Wellcome Trust) and EU funding programmes.

4. Our responsibilities as a Concordat signatory

4.1 Signatory responsibilities

In signing up to the Concordat, we committed to addressing seven signatory responsibilities. We had addressed these responsibilities in full at the point of publishing our first Concordat Signatory Report in December 2021; a summary of the responsibilities and how we met (and continue to meet) them is provided in Appendix 1.

4.2 Annual Report to governing body and delivery of institutional obligations.

Our fourth annual report is presented in Appendix 2. This articulates how we are working towards the delivery of our institutional responsibilities under the three pillars of the Concordat.

5. Recommendation/s to UEB

UEB is requested to ENDORSE the annual report for onward submission to Senate. In line with our responsibility as a Concordat signatory to make publicly available an annual report which has been received by our governing body, the annual report will be published on the University website after it has been received and approved by Council.

6. Financial Implications

None arising directly from the report. Indirectly, failure to demonstrate our commitment to the Concordat could impact our reputation and our ability to attract researchers to Exeter, and to secure research grant funding.

7. Risk Assessment

Demonstrating our commitment to supporting and implementing the principles of the Concordat is important to:
Demonstrate the quality of the research environment that we offer to researchers and attract researchers to Exeter;
Meet the expectations of a number of funders, including UKRI, which expect HEIs to show compliance with the Concordat.

8. Equality & Diversity

Equality and Diversity implications are considered within our HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiRA) action plan, which is structured around the Researcher Concordat Principles.

9. People Impacts

None directly arising from the report. Our commitment to the implementation of the principles of the Concordat itself supports a number of positive outcomes in respect of its aims to create the best culture for researchers to thrive.

Appendix 1. Concordat Signatory Responsibilities Summary

By signing the Concordat, we are committed to addressing seven institutional responsibilities; these are listed below along with our progress against each responsibility:

1. **Raise the visibility of the Concordat and champion its principles within their organisation at all levels.**

Achieved – New online resources have been created in 2024 that explain the Concordat and highlight key areas where researchers can get involved. This includes a self-test quiz that will provide us with valuable feedback on engagement with the resource and how well readers have understood the concordat and its aims and ramifications. This complements the new Research Culture SharePoint site and toolkit.

We are also delivering an annual event during National Post-doc Appreciation week on the concordat and what it means for our research community. As part of these activities we will be promoting participation in the Culture, Employment and Development of Researchers Survey (CEDARS), which enables us to measure awareness of the Concordat and our progress in implementing it.

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.**

Achieved – Our Concordat Steering Group has been revised during 2024 with a view to enabling work to support the Concordat to be conducted thematically by small working groups rather than taken to the main Steering Group. This new format is expected to be deployed in Autumn 2024. The Group will have an academic Chair (a change from the previous PS-led group) who will champion our commitments under the Concordat.

3. **For organisations employing researchers, ensure that they are formally represented in developing and monitoring organisational efforts to implement the Concordat Principles.**

Achieved – As well as greater representation on our updated institutional Concordat Steering Group, the researcher community have a number of routes to support work to implement the Concordat Principles and to voice their own concerns, issues and opportunities: Early Career Researcher Networks, associated Representation Forums and representation on the University Research & Impact Executive Committee, with three meetings per year dedicated to ECR matters. Strategic issues for our researchers are also taken to various boards across the university by appropriate peer or staff representatives, including the Research and Impact Executive Committee, Wellbeing Inclusion and Culture Committee and Race Equality Group.

4. **Undertake a gap analysis to compare their policies and practice against the Concordat Principles**

Achieved - Building on our initial gap analysis, we have strengthened our collaboration across researcher and people development and wellbeing and EDI teams to ensure relevance, access and engagement to development support, resources and training for our researcher community. This has resulted in a number of new actions with each team that we are now pursuing to help improve engagement, outcomes and monitoring of success. Associated actions are included in our Concordat “LIVE Action Log”.

5. **Draw up and publish an action plan within a year of signing the Concordat**

Achieved – A new Action Plan covering the period 2023-2026 has been completed as part of our successful submission for the HR Excellence in Research Award 12-year review, and can be found via our [dedicated HR Excellence in Research web page](#). This new action plan has been externally assessed as part of our 12-year review resulting in the successful retention of our HR Excellence in Research Award.

6. **Set up processes for systematically 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.**

Achieved – We get regular feedback from our researchers via our Early Career Researcher Representation Forums and Networks, dedicated RIEC meetings and participation in the national PRES and CEDARS surveys.

Feedback from all sources is reviewed by the Concordat Steering Group, reporting to the Research and Impact Executive Committee.

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- 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.**
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Achieved – our fourth annual report is published in December 2024.

Appendix 2. Concordat Signatory Report 2023/2024

The report below relates to the three Concordat guiding principles, which are referenced at the start of each section (further details and detailed action plans can be found via our related [HR Excellence in Research web page](#)):

- **Concordat Principle 1 – Environment and Culture**
 - *Excellent research requires a supportive and inclusive research culture.*
 - **Concordat Principle 2 – Employment**
 - *Researchers are recruited, employed and managed under conditions that recognise and value their contributions.*
 - **Concordat Principle 3 – Professional and Career Development**
 - *Is integral to enabling researchers to develop their full potential.*
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1. Research culture (*Concordat principle 1*)

1.1 Monitoring of Departmental action plans

Individual departmental action plans are monitored via annual research meetings (chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor Research and Impact – DVC R&I). The action plans are now specifically monitored with respect to how ECR needs are being heard and addressed. The effectiveness of these action plans is evaluated in multiple measures from the CEDARS and PRES survey tools.

1.3 Research Culture SharePoint site

We have launched and are promoting our new Research Culture SharePoint site and associated Research Culture in Grants Toolkit. Engagement will be monitored and reported back to DoRIs and DoPGRs. The SharePoint site highlights our commitments and achievements around inclusively working together; careers and wellbeing; responsible research; assessment and recognition. The Toolkit is designed to help our researchers integrate research culture into their grant bids, structured around the same themes contained in the SharePoint resources and highlighting: funder requirements; their role as researchers; and the university's role.

1.4 Supporting research culture

1.4.1 The role of Technical Services

For the first time we have research technician-specific actions in our plan, including supporting access for research technicians to more of our researcher development training. We continue to work closely with the Technician Commitment working group and will seek to utilise the relevant data from their recent Technician Skills Survey, to better understand how we can support this section of our research community.

1.4.2 Responsible Metrics

Our institutional commitment is evidenced through a continued strengthening of the Responsible Metrics Champions group, which includes ECR and PGR representation. The group have established a roadmap of activity with the intention of informing policy decisions, increasing awareness about responsible assessment and supporting culture change. Responsible Metrics are also being highlighted in promotion guidance and there has been an associated advertising campaign, which is linked to newly developed online guides.

2. Research leadership, people management and employment (*Concordat principle 2*)

2.1 PGR supervision and pastoral care training

A refreshed programme of supervisor training is now being delivered, supported by investment from our 'Enhancing Research Culture' funding from Research England. Evaluation results have been overwhelmingly positive. New courses have been added to the training, focusing on i) Decolonizing doctoral supervision, ii) Supporting part time PGRs, iii) Supporting upgrade for supervisors and examiners and iv) Dealing with unsatisfactory progress, engagement and attendance. In addition, new Pastoral Care training is now available and in August we launched a new dedicated PGR supervisor newsletter.

2.2 Research leadership and PDRs

The [Research Leadership Development Programme](#) (RLDP) has evolved to have a stronger focus on research leadership with people management skills being developed through a collaboration with People Development which includes accreditation through the Institute of Leadership. The latest programme has

been fully booked. We continue to review and update this programme to better integrate into the overall people management and leadership provision for all colleagues.

A Researcher Manager and Leader Checklist has been developed with People Development and is currently being piloted with the aim of improving induction for all new researcher managers.

There is a new Performance and Development Review (PDR) process now in place with enhanced training featuring more coaching skills, new forms and new policies and supporting resources in place. Faculty-based training is also being devised to support discussions about the new promotion and progression criteria in PDRs.

2.3 New promotion and progression criteria for E&R and R-only colleagues

The criteria for promotion were reviewed in 2022/23 with the aim of simplifying and making clearer the progression routes for all academics. Changes made include moving to one set of criteria for all academics with clear indicators as to what evidence is required based on job family and career stage. This approach will make clearer the progression routes not only within in the current job family, but within alternative career pathways should colleagues wish to make a move. The criteria have been structured into five categories, Research, Education, Business Engagement and Innovation, Citizenship and Leadership and Management.

2.4 Researcher wellbeing

Wellbeing services are signposted during all levels of induction to the university for all research staff, ECRs and PGRs. Newsletters to staff, ECRs and PGRs contain a wellbeing section and there are support pages, with links to services, on the [Doctoral College](#) and [ECR hub](#) websites.

Since 2023 there has been an increased focus to develop greater awareness of stress Risk Assessments, HSE management standards and the colleague mental health and stress toolkit. All these now have greater prominence in management inductions and training and in the Researchers' Welcome event.

Wellbeing activities to support academics (including researchers) has also been a feature at Faculty WICCs with departments feeding back wellbeing concerns to the central WICC and to Exeter Academic Steering Group. Additionally, the University is now seeking to achieve the University Mental Health Charter (UMHC). The UMH is a set of principles that universities commit to working towards to improve the mental health and wellbeing of their communities by encouraging universities to achieve a whole-university approach. WICC supports the achievement of the principles outlined in the UMH framework, which aim to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes for our staff and students.

2.5 Fair Employment For All initiative

We have continued to increase the proportion of permanent contracts for researchers; since 2023 the proportion of research staff employed on permanent contracts has increased by 4 percentage points from 33% in July 2023 to 37% in August 2024, in line with our Concordat target.

The University Executive Board has agreed as a priority for 2024/25 that the University should further explore the use of bridging funding options to preserve continuity of employment in between research funding contracts, and the matching of researchers coming to the end of their contract with new opportunities arising from the award of new research grants.

UEB has also approved that from the commencement of the 2024/25 academic year, there will be a limit of 2 years on new fixed term contracts, with exceptions permitted in certain circumstances. The employment status of current staff on fixed term contracts will be reviewed stages: firstly for those with 3+ years' service; then 2+ years in Spring 2025. These reviews sit alongside the ongoing review of fixed term contracts at their expiry date.

2.6 Our Early Career Researcher Strategy

Over the past year we have reviewed and refreshed our ECR strategy, (alongside our Postgraduate Researcher Strategy). Strategic leadership for ECR matters is now aligned directly with the DVC for Research and Impact (rather than the Dean of the Doctoral College) and we are developing an ECR 'hub' as a separate (virtual) entity for ECR support, distinct from the Doctoral College, under which umbrella ECR support was previously located. The strategy will be finalised and an implementation plan developed during 2024/25.

3. Developing our researchers (*Concordat principle 3*)

3.1 Career development

We have seen continued high level of engagement in support for ECR and PGRs, featuring 1:1 career guidance appointments and specific career development opportunities: 16 different workshops attended by 136 different E&R and R-only colleagues. We have also delivered online workshops as part of the GW4 network.

3.2 Professional and technical skills

We are continuing to evolve our researcher development programme to cover both ECRs and research skills for all career stages, working in close collaboration with People Development and Exeter Innovation, as part of our ECR and PGR strategies. We are revitalising the core researcher development programme in consultation with researchers, Directors of Research and Impact, colleagues across Research Services and the before mentioned departments. The programme will focus on research leadership, EDI, research integrity and guidance on the use of AI. A full roadmap is being developed for our programmes for future consultation via the Research & Impact Executive Committee.

3.3 Commitment to a healthy and safe environment

Following actions to improve engagement in health and safety training in critical areas, we have succeeded in increasing participation in specialist training by over 50% and have also achieved an 8% increase in compliance with mandatory H&S training.

3.4 Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The focus in Departmental EDI Action Plans and at Faculty WICC level on improving engagement with mandatory EDI training rates has resulted in a 5% increase in uptake since 2023 (representing an extra 115 colleagues); now just 2.1% below the “all staff” compliance.

We have just appointed a one-year research and EDI policy manager, to help take forward actions from the prior research & EDI deep dives, funded by our 'Enhancing Research Culture' funds.

There is now a drive to strengthen governance around EDI including improved connectedness with Faculty WICCs.

The Concordat SG now meets regularly with an EDI colleague to address EDI related actions and to maintain our above-sector CEDARS scores – as of the 2023 survey our achievement was: Q44.4 committed to Equality and diversity 76% (+3% on sector); Q47.3 Trust to investigate discrimination 65% (+6%); Q48.3 Trust to investigate bullying 60% (+4%); Q50.1 Personally felt discriminated against 11% (-8%).

Examples of major EDI initiatives:

- We have continued the PhD Scholarships for Black British Researchers scheme with enhanced mentorship.
 - [100 Black Women Professors Now](#) - New cohort and post programme support: The university has supported a second cohort of six women to engage with the 100BWPN programme and hosted the annual summit in January. We are now considering the approach to post-programme support for participants to ensure we maximise the outcomes from the programme and enable participants to achieve progression.
 - We have refreshed our PGR strategy which include a number of workstreams (to be implemented over the next 2-3 years) to support EDI initiatives in recruitment and student experience.
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3.5 Mentoring

Within our university-wide One Step Beyond mentoring scheme for academics we currently have 30 live partnerships with 25 mentors and 83 mentees. Our evolving approach is to encourage more Faculty-based schemes (with various departments undertaking pilots or due to launch) as these are better tailored to the requirements of our academic colleagues. We are also planning to transition to a new mentoring platform during 2024/25 which will allow for a more self-directed and personalized mentoring experience.

4. Communication and the voice of the researcher (*Concordat principles 1,2,3*)

4.1 Engagement in key committees, groups, and support networks

All faculties have ECR networks, but we continually encourage specific disciplines to engage and form new networks with administrative support from the Doctoral College (Researcher Development and Research Culture team). There are currently 18 [ECR Networks](#) (ECRNs) led by 34 ECRs.

In 2023-24, a revised representation structure was put in place which allows ECRs to come together both informally to network and share good practice, as well as in more formal meeting settings to discuss and raise any issues affecting the ECR community. ECR Network Leads and ECR Representatives attend the ECR Representative Committee, where they can give updates and take ideas and requests forward. The Representative Committee is chaired by one of the ECR Representatives who sit on the university-wide Research and Impact Executive Committee (RIEC) and typically meets four times a year.
