

Response to RCUK consultation on Concordat to support the career development of researchers.

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The RSC welcomes the review of the 1996 concordat. Our specific responses to the questions are detailed in the following document. However, we would recommend that the phrasing used becomes more concrete, to ensure that the concordat's principles are acted upon and become embedded within academia; words such as "encourage" and "consider" need to be replaced with stronger more proactive phrases.

The RSC believes that the original concordat has had relatively little effect and is struck by how few researchers are even aware of its existence. To have any significant effect any new concordat must have teeth. The RSC does recognise that the so-called "Roberts Money" has had an effect on the training of researchers but contends that this illustrates the need to back any principles with schemes (and money) to enable effective implementation.

In summary the RSC believes that the current draft contains too many principles and that there is too much text under each principle. The Concordat would benefit from being significantly shortened.

Specifically the RSC believes that principles 2, 3 and 4 could well be combined into a single principle.

The overall guiding principle for the Concordat must be that contract researchers are employees and therefore they should be treated the same as other employees. Following on from that contract researchers should be included in institution appraisal, mentoring and training schemes just like other staff. The appraisal system is critical to ensure that the career development of researchers is undertaken seriously by research managers and by the researchers themselves. The RSC recognises that these schemes may well need to be adapted to suit early career researchers; for example, researchers are employed to carry out research and not to teach or administrate like the majority of permanent academic staff and consequently not all training courses available for junior lecturers will be appropriate for researchers.

The RSC also believes that much of what is included in the concordat is part of what should be considered as general "good practice". For example, open and transparent appointments procedures should be the norm for the recruitment of all staff. Similarly, the text under the principle on diversity is essentially a general statement of diversity good practice and is not specific to contract research workers.

The RSC has developed an approach to Good Practice in partnership with the Athena Project. The university departments which have the best practice and qualify for Athena SWAN silver and gold awards have systems in place for all staff. The RSC commends its report "Good Practice in University Chemistry Departments" and the associated "Good Practice Checklist", and schemes such as Athena SWAN and the Institute of Physics' Project Juno as tools in improving practice within Higher Education Institutes and their constituent departments.

One specific comment that the RSC wishes to make concerns training. The RSC believes that earmarked training budgets should form part of grants given to institutions by research councils (and other funders). These budgets should be available to researchers to spend on appropriate training courses above and beyond those normally available to staff. The RSC believes that the administration costs of such a scheme would be outweighed by the advantages gained in giving researchers some control and independence over their training.

Questions:

1. Are these the right guiding principles?

Whilst these principles are basically correct we feel that they could be easily condensed to form a more succinct set of guidelines for employers to follow.

2. Are these the correct definitions?

Yes

3. Are any additional requirements for recruitment and selection procedures needed to ensure the best researchers are employed to promote excellence in research?

While the primary criterion for employing researchers in universities is their ability to perform outstanding research it is important that their other linked skills are also taken into consideration. Equally where money is applied for a named individual to continue working it is crucial that their current experience and salary is taken into account when calculating staff costs. .

If implemented, the points highlighted within this section should in many cases improve the current researcher recruitment process however thought should be given as to how such systems can be universally implemented. It is important that a fair and transparent recruitment process is undertaken in the recruitment of all contract research workers.

4. Will this strengthen the retention of key research staff, support their development, and enhance the value placed on researchers by their institutions?

Points 13 – 19 provide a framework for improving the recognition of the value of researchers by organisations, however, it is crucial that a fixed term contract within an academic institution provides suitable preparation for a career both inside and outside academia. The information highlighted in point 15 is key to enforcing point 13 as without concordance between employers and funding bodies institutions cannot hope to provide secure employment contracts for researchers.

Whilst point 17 encourages institutions to implement their own career framework we would suggest an example framework be provided to limit variation between institutions. Similarly whilst point 18 encourages research managers to accept their share of responsibility of active performance management, in particular through the appraisal system, we feel that this

should be embedded within academic good practice making it an obligatory part of researcher supervision responsibilities rather than an optional extra.

5. Will this provide researchers with the appropriate transferable skills and flexibility to be successful in any chosen career?

Yes, however it remains important that the methods for developing the abilities of researchers need to be highlighted in order for institutions to have a benchmark from which to base their internal development frameworks. Also the limited scope of some contract terms makes it very difficult for researchers as short term contracts are rarely accepted as stable employment, hindering both personal and professional development. As such it is important to make some provision for researchers to enable them to progress to a permanent contract whether within academia or externally.

Whilst point 22 is a positive step the problems of funding such training as well as allowing researchers time away from their other responsibilities in order for this to be achieved must be addressed. Similarly the question of how the value of this additional training is going to be demonstrated to managers must also be addressed, as well as methods of monitoring and support.

6. Will it enhance career development for all researchers?

Yes, provided contract researchers are given access to accurate, targeted and relevant careers advice through the structured appraisal system. Also, the training requirements need to be communicated to both contract researchers and managers as well as being enforceable to ensure this practice becomes embedded within academia.

7. Do researchers have other responsibilities?

No

8. How else can researchers contribute to their own careers and development?

The suggestion that researchers attend UKGrad mentoring courses is applauded however consideration needs to be made in terms of funding such development opportunities to ensure all researchers have equal chances. Similarly the number of places available on such courses needs to be considered, to allow all those who want to attend the opportunity.

Managers must allow and encourage contract research staff to attend such events.

Allowing contract research staff control over their own ring-fenced training budget, held by HR, would give them a greater degree of ownership of their own training needs and development.

Personal Development Planning (PDP) and recording should be encouraged and a framework provided in order for researchers to be able to contribute to their own careers and development.

9. Does this ensure sufficient attention from employers and funders to promoting diversity, above existing practices and legal requirements?

Whilst this principle is correct we feel this applies to all staff. As such contract research staff should be treated according to UK employment law and general good practice in common with other staff members.

Whilst point 37 covers one of the key issues within the careers of researchers provision needs to be made to ensure institutions endeavour to commit to this principle despite the restrictions of fixed term contracts. In this way a method of reviewing this needs to be implemented to ensure such processes are transparent to all involved.

Flexible working considerations are beneficial in most cases however it must be noted that many general services are centralised within institutions and as such will limit the time during which such flexible working is feasible. Particular issues with regard to laboratory working must also be considered, these include issues relating to the use of centralised equipment and laboratory working particularly during pregnancy.

10. How can the implementation of the Concordat be effectively monitored?

In order for this concordat to be successful implementation needs to take place throughout organisations across the country to ensure all researchers have the same opportunities and provision. However, monitoring such implementation will be a huge task and can only take place with full support of funders. The suggestion of implementing a three yearly report process will enable some monitoring to take place however support for this in the form of "spot checks" would allow further regulation.

11. Are these suggested information sources appropriate?

Yes However, in terms of sharing good practice across academia it would be valuable to include a link to the RSC's Good Practice in University Departments report.

12. Will they add a disproportionate burden to employers and funders? Is a three-yearly report appropriate?

No, provided funding and time allocation is in place to allow time for reports to be written no extra burden should occur to employers, however funders may find this extra cost an added burden.

We feel that if organisations are agreeing to this concordat they should amend their terms and conditions of grants to include this expectation, within a defined time-frame. Without this we feel that adhering to this concordat becomes optional despite the fact that organisations are signatories.