

# The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

Summary of outcomes and recommendations from Working  
Group reports (2022)

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## Introduction

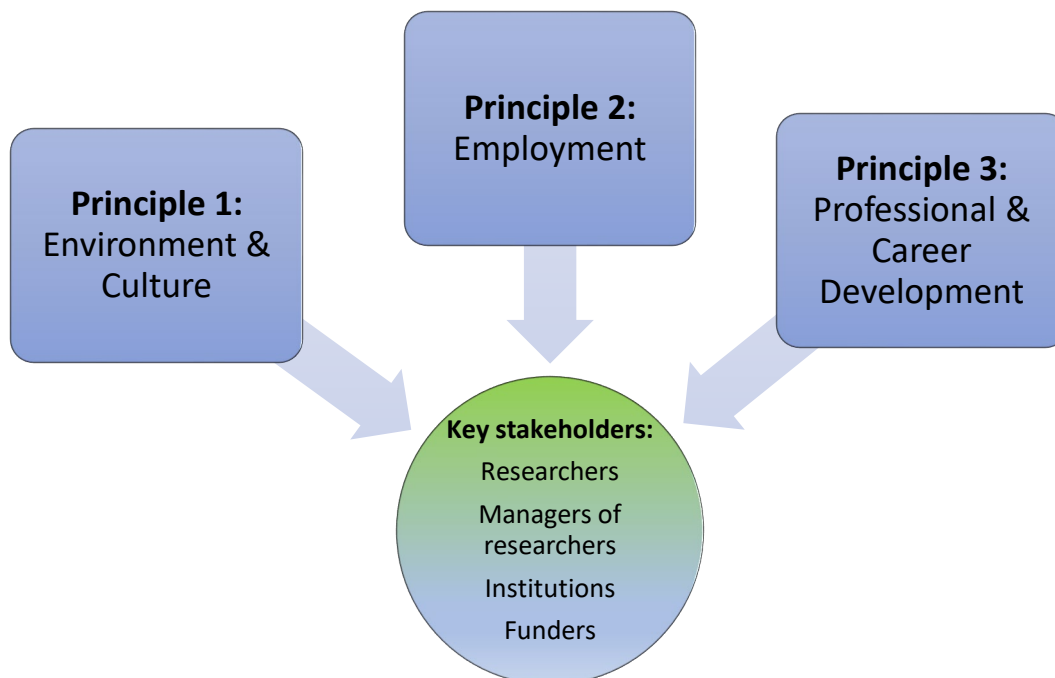
The **Researcher Development Concordat** (2019) aims to improve the research environment, career and professional development opportunities for researchers across the HE sector. This 2019 update and revised version of the Concordat ‘resets the expectations and provides a fresh impetus to drive the agenda forward through systemic change, share good practice and ensure that the highest standards are consistently applied throughout the UK.’

While recognising that the benefits of the Concordat apply to many groups who work on research within universities, the Researcher Development Concordat:

‘...focuses primarily on the rights and responsibilities of researchers who are employed solely or largely to conduct research, given the continuing pressing need to improve their working conditions and wider research environments’ (2019, p.1).

Within the University of Southampton, these staff predominantly reside at Level 4 research only and on fixed-term contracts.

There are three defining principles of the Concordat with key responsibilities for four main stakeholder groups across each of the principles (Figure 1).



*Figure 1 Principles and key stakeholders of the Researcher Development Concordat*

The Concordat defines managers of researchers as:

‘...individuals who have direct line management responsibility for researchers as defined within the Concordat. These managers will frequently be principal or co-investigators on research grants, although it is recognised that some researchers may be grant-holders and therefore they may be line-managed by another senior researcher or head of unit.’ (2019, p.8)

The University of Southampton has been implementing the Researcher Development Concordat since 2011, and we were recognised for our progress in 2012 when we achieved the *HR Excellence in Research* award from the European Commission. Until 2019, all UK institutions were signed-up to the Concordat via their membership of UUK. With the revised edition of the Concordat, research funders and employers were invited to demonstrate their commitment individually. The University of Southampton became a signatory to the revised Concordat in November 2020. This process allowed us to conduct a new gap analysis, which identified several areas of strategic importance where more work was required, and a new action plan.

### Why does this matter?

As the Concordat states: ‘In committing to implement its Principles, signatories will undertake regular review and reporting of their progress, and contribute to sharing practice across the sector, helping to ensure ongoing improvement over the next decade.’ (p.1).

Thus, being a signatory to the Concordat commits the University of Southampton to plan, implement, review, and evaluate its progress on improving the careers of researchers employed by the University. This commitment aligns strongly and directly with major strategic initiatives including the Research and People strategies, and the Organisational Excellence strategy, which includes the Modernising the Governance strategic major project and Reducing the use of Fixed Term Contracts and Casualisation. The Researcher Development Concordat overlaps with Health and Wellbeing, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategic plans and aligns with other institutional equality charters, notably Athena SWAN and the Race Equality Charter.

Demonstrating excellent research culture and support for research, and research careers, is also vitally important for strengthening our funding applications (as all the key funders have their own implementation plans) and submissions for the REF. Therefore, actions taken to meet our obligations to the Researcher Development Concordat have cross-cutting relevance across major spheres of activity for the University.

### Context of this report

In 2020/2021, the Concordat Advisory Group established five working groups, each led by a Faculty Concordat Champion, to look at long standing strategic issues affecting the researcher community. Each working group consisted of members of the research staff community, was sponsored by a senior leader, and was representative of the University. Over 100 members of the research community volunteered to participate in the working groups, with many more contributing feedback via short surveys, and focused questions.

The main aim of the working groups was to scope the current situation within the University and across the sector in respect of their core remits which focused on:

1. Researcher Development and Communications – led by Dr Mark Chapman (FELS)
2. Reducing the use of Fixed-Term Contracts – led by Dr Russel Torah (FEPS)
3. Developing Career Support – led by Professor Alison Gascoigne (FAH)
4. Wellbeing and Family Policy – led by Professor Delphine Boche (FMed)
5. Researcher Managers’ Development – led by Dr Meixian Song and then Dr Di Luo (FSS)

Three phases of work were planned: 1. Discovery and investigation; 2. Identifying, reporting, and agreeing on options; and 3. Implementation phases. **This report summarises the outcomes and recommendations of the Discovery phase across the five working groups, with the aim of informing phases two and three. Consequently, the recommendations included below are based on lived experiences of the Southampton context.**

## Summaries and key recommendations from the 5 Working Groups

The focus of [Working Group 1 \(Researcher Development and Communications\)](#) linked to Principle 3, Professional and Career Development, and, in particular, the following obligation:

### **Institutions must:**

- Provide opportunities, structured support, encouragement and time for researchers to engage in a minimum of 10 days professional development pro rata per year, recognising that researchers will pursue careers across a wide range of employment sectors.

This group therefore explored:

- The current situation and provision across the Faculties and best practice within the sector
- Awareness of the Concordat and the allowance of 10 days pro rata professional development for researchers
- Uptake of the 10 days professional development and
- Development needs and preferences of Southampton researchers

Overall, knowledge of the Concordat and the requirement for professional development of researchers was described as ‘basic’, ‘unsure’ and highly variable across the University. The group felt that Courses offered centrally (e.g. by CHEP, RIS, HR and the Library) and locally, are generally thought to be well-delivered and useful and that all schools and faculties have strengths but in different aspects. **Researcher managers need to play a stronger and more informed role in encouraging and enabling researchers to take up opportunities for**

professional development in line with the 10 days minimum commitment stated in the Concordat.

#### Recommendations on Researcher Development and Communications

- **Deputy Heads of School (Research) (or equivalent) to ensure that researcher professional development is costed into research grants** where eligible, and key stakeholders through the bidding pipeline are aware of this.
- **Ensure equity of access to professional development funding for activities for all researchers** e.g., some funders may not support the inclusion of professional development costs and so supporting the professional development obligation equitably will need to be supported and managed by the University.
- CHEP, and others providing relevant training opportunities, to consider making **only portions of courses in-person** (with prep or homework time as well), making them shorter and more flexible and, therefore, more likely that researchers can attend.
- **Appraisals should be used to provide an opportunity to discuss professional development** generally and the 10 days professional development specifically e.g., including a prompt question for researchers ‘Have you taken....?’ and for managers ‘Have you discussed / ensured...?’
- **List of professional development ‘ideas’ for the 10 days to be developed within schools and shared more broadly.**
- **Explore the viability and interest in a “Task Exchange”** which could include small discrete tasks to help/train others and can be used towards the 10 days professional development.

The focus of Working Group 2 (Reducing the use of Fixed-Term Contracts) linked to Principle 2, Employment, and directly to the following obligation:

**Institutions must:**

- Seek to improve job security for researchers, for example through more effective redeployment processes and greater use of open-ended contracts, and report on progress.

The group particularly focused on whether and how the University was implementing open-ended contracts for researchers in line with UK Government legislation and the University’s own policy. Specifically, that:

Any employee on fixed-term contracts for 4 or more years will automatically become a permanent employee, unless the employer can show there is a good business reason not to do so. [[UK Government](#)]

And

If you have four years' service with the University and at least one contract renewal, you may request your fixed-term contract is made permanent. This is subject to certain conditions and objective justification criteria. [\[UoS\]](#)

Overall, this group **identified a considerable lack of transparency, and wide variability, across the University in relation to the awareness and implementation of policies relating to the use of open-ended contracts.** Information about entitlement to an open-ended contract is often not shared or widely known and it is usually left up to individuals (researchers or line managers) to raise requests, which are handled on a case-by-case basis and may be raised too late. **Researchers feel devalued and disposable by the current process, which tends to position them as hired help for the academic project lead to complete their fixed term project.**

**The aim identified by the group is that within 3 years, a University-wide system should be in place whereby all research pathway staff on a fixed-term contract who reach the 4-year threshold are offered open-ended contracts to enable greater continuity of employment that positively affects their career.** Enabling this specific aim and reducing the precarity and casualisation of research contracts more generally, requires the University to recognise that they are employing skilled, talented, and ambitious **people to jobs** that are usually much bigger than the specific **role** being advertised.

#### Recommendations on Reducing the use of Fixed-Term Contracts

- **Make the implementation of the fixed-term contract to open-ended contract policy homogeneous across faculties;** the University policy should be implemented uniformly with no deviations.
- **Clarify the open-ended contract policy wording to be unambiguous about whether an employee on such a contract is a permanent member of staff.**
- **Ensure that the implementation of open-ended contracts at the University does not disadvantage researchers** with respect to funder policies on eligibility for leading on or being costed into grant and Fellowship applications.
- **The University needs a clear policy and mechanism for tracking research staff contract status in HR systems,** in particular around the time when a change to an open-ended contract should be triggered. Clear roles and time frame in this process should be defined for: staff member, line manager, senior management teams, University.
- **Enable more flexible application of the career pathways for researchers on open-ended contracts** so that researchers can develop a more mixed portfolio of skills and experience that recognises the changes in, and unpredictability of, external funding as well as ongoing internal requirements for teaching, assessment, and supervision.
- **Staff on the 'Research Pathway' who have an open-ended contract and suitable track record should be able to:**
  - Apply as project lead for Research Council grants even if the grant covers only part of the Researcher's salary (e.g 0.5 FTE).

- Be first supervisors of Doctoral researchers and undergraduate (Bachelors and Masters) project students.
- New/existing policies related to this matter should be applied consistently throughout the University, taking funding bodies into consideration.
- **The University should look for creative and progressive solutions** to enable researchers with funded roles at less than 1.0 FTE to contribute to other activities (teaching, research-related, admin) to permit a 1.0 FTE post overall, or to allow part-time employment on the grant, depending on the individual circumstances of the researcher.

The focus of [Working Group 3 \(Developing Career Support\)](#) linked to Principle 3, Professional and Career Development, and especially, the following obligations:

**Institutions must:**

- Ensure that researchers have access to professional advice on career management, across a breadth of careers.
- Provide researchers with opportunities, and time, to develop their research identity and broader leadership skills.
- Recognise that moving between, and working across, employment sectors can bring benefits to research and researchers, and support opportunities for researchers to experience this.
- Monitor, and report on, the engagement of researchers and their managers with professional development activities, and researcher career development reviews.

Overall, the group concluded that there is already much good practice in pockets of the University. Applying this more uniformly across the institution would improve the situation greatly. However, communication comes up again and again across the University as an issue that impacts the success of career development initiatives. Even when resources and opportunities are available, researchers in those areas often report being unaware of them.

Likewise, the University at present does not keep systematic track of researcher numbers, positions, etc. in any formal way; this task devolves informally to individuals to create and maintain lists, made complex by the diversity of contract types. **The more insecure the contract, the less likely researchers are to be visible to the institution (e.g., hourly paid casual research assistance). The overall situation is thus one of significant inconsistency in terms of the support researchers can expect across the University.**

[Recommendations on Developing Career Support](#)

- **Appoint a Researcher Careers Development Officer** to liaise with researchers and researcher networks; monitor career support provision across the University to



ensure equality of experience; and create and maintain networks of Southampton alumni and similar contacts in different fields who can act as case studies and sources of advice for researchers.

- **Augment resources available to researchers** so that every researcher has access to a baseline of research support funds to facilitate independent initiatives. The University should improve its resourcing for fellowship applications as this is currently considered 'meagre' when compared with other institutions.
- **Create and support Faculty Researcher Networks** such that all Faculties are required to set up and maintain/administer meetings of formal researcher networks or associations, to discuss career development broadly conceived.
- **Collate/access careers information resources** about career destinations and opportunities in multiple disciplines from across the University. The [Prosper project](#) at the University of Liverpool provides an excellent opportunity for strengthening our support in this area and is something we should be proactively seeking to join.

The focus of Working Group 4 (Wellbeing and Family Policy) linked to the Principle 1, Environment and Culture, and in particular, the following obligations:

**Institutions must:**

- Ensure that institutional policies and practices relevant to researchers are inclusive, equitable and transparent, and are well-communicated to researchers and their managers.
- Promote good mental health and wellbeing through, for example, the effective management of workloads and people, and effective policies and practice for tackling discrimination, bullying and harassment, including providing appropriate support for those reporting issues.
- Ensure that managers of researchers are effectively trained in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion, wellbeing and mental health.

Overall, the group concluded that the contents of the University Wellbeing SharePoint site are appropriate and relatively well populated and contains information on policy, training available to support line managers and links to external support.

The amendment on the Maternity Policy notifying that *"A woman on a fixed term contract will not be expected to repay contractual maternity pay if the contract expires or does not enable a return to work for the required 52 weeks following the period of maternity leave"* is a real improvement to support Early Career Researchers.

**However, there is limited access and awareness of the University Wellbeing SharePoint and improvements are needed in its organisation and type of contents. Communication with Research Managers about Wellbeing information and their responsibilities in relation to it also needs to be strengthened. Similarly, access to the Family Policy documents,**

**understanding of the information, and the support provided to navigate and implement the relevant policies all need to be improved.**

#### Recommendations on Wellbeing and Family Policy

- **Improve visibility and access to the wellbeing information** via a unique Portal accessible internally (e.g., link on Sussed home page) and externally.
- **Advertise the wellbeing support** to new staff via a Welcome pack as part of induction.
- **Tailor information to distinct groups** (e.g., staff, ECRs, Fellows, students) and keep the pages easy to navigate.
- **Create a dedicated webpage for Family policy** on the HR SharePoint with all documents and examples from staff at different stage of their career presented in accessible language and **add policies on Caring and Bereavement.**
- **Ensure that HR staff are trained on the Family policy** in respect of relevance to research staff issues, and to discuss arrangements and advertise the support available (e.g., the Parent and Carers Network).
- **Provide guidance and endorsement** of good working practices in alignment with wellbeing and other policies.

The focus of Working Group 5 (Researcher Managers' Development) linked to all Principles, and, notably, the following obligations:

**Institutions must:**

- Ensure open, transparent and merit-based recruitment, which attracts excellent researchers, using fair and inclusive selection and appointment practices.
- Provide effective line and project management training opportunities for managers of researchers, heads of department and equivalent.
- Ensure that excellent people management is championed throughout the organisation and embedded in institutional culture, through annual appraisals, transparent promotion criteria, and workload allocation.
- Ensure researchers and their managers are aware of, and act in accordance with, the highest standards of research integrity.
- Provide training, structured support, and time for managers to engage in meaningful career development reviews with their researchers.

The group emphasized **the vital importance of relationships between senior colleagues and researchers** to the successful career development of researchers, as well as the development of researcher managers. Recommendations from the group were based upon the idea that it is crucial to identify the different knowledge and skills required for

a line manager (who oversees appraisals) and a Principal Investigator, to ascertain the appropriate training and support that should be offered to managers.

### Recommendations on Researcher Managers' Development

- **Researcher managers should promote a healthy work environment and act as positive role models for research integrity and professional conduct.** This should begin with setting clear expectations during induction, and then being consistent with these e.g., by using email signatures that are clear: 'I do not expect you to respond to emails outside of your working hours'.
- **Provide training and clear, accessible information for researcher managers about how to respond appropriately to flexible working requests.**
- **Researcher managers should receive training on inclusive and equitable recruitment, management, and leadership of a research team,** including unconscious bias, bullying and harassment, handling poor performance, research integrity, and managing teams effectively e.g., Active Bystander training should be mandatory for all line managers.
- **Strengthen how such training is embedded, expected and rewarded within probation, appraisal and promotion processes** e.g., for researcher managers who are new to the University, training could be mandated within probation periods; for colleagues undertaking mentoring and supporting researcher career development, this should be recognised within appraisal and promotion applications.
- **Senior management of Faculties, Schools, and Departments should receive enhanced training on employment law and aligned university policies,** especially on psychological bullying.
- **More experienced researcher managers should be enabled and encouraged to support less experienced colleagues to become co-leads on grant applications** as an important mechanism for career and skills development.
- **Effective administrative support** for bid preparation and submission and researcher recruitment, support, and retention, is needed to enable researcher managers to do their jobs well.

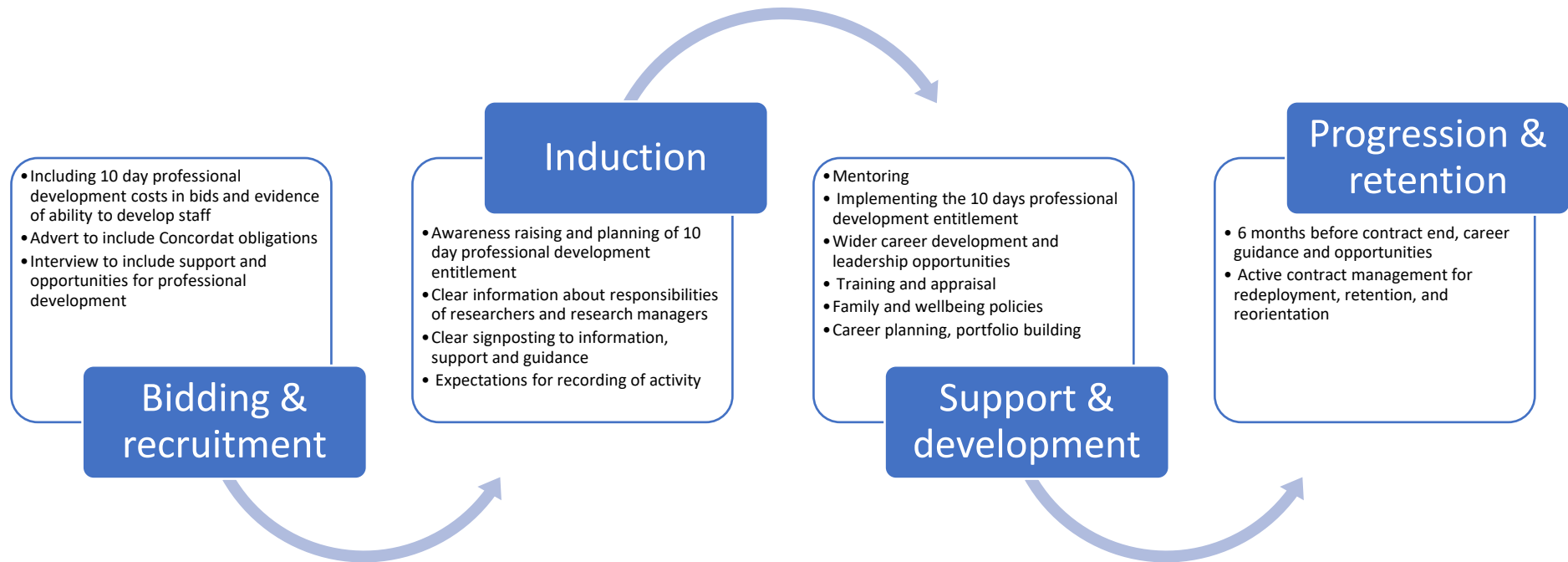
### Next steps

We extend our thanks to everyone who participated in the Working Groups as we now move into the implementation phase of the work. Many of the above recommendations have been included in the Concordat Action Plan which is actively managed and regularly reviewed. We have held discussions with Health and Wellbeing about signposting policies and related information, and with HR about the relevant strategic projects. The Working Groups have been stood down and new groups will be formed as needed to focus on specific actions and ensure their implementation. The Concordat Advisory Group will continue to monitor, review and refresh our action planning and strategic direction of travel in line with UUK and funder updates. Our next report on progress and updates is November 2023.

## Overall summary of key points for action

Figure 2 on the next page provides a visual summary of the main activities and actions that need to be prioritised throughout the research pipeline in line with our Concordat obligations. Most of these actions are directly drawn from the recommendations of the Working Groups as outlined above, and others (particularly around bidding and recruitment) are included based on our implementation of the Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan. The Working Groups focused mainly on actions and activities for supporting researcher career development once researchers are employed at the University. The Action Plan recognises that some actions need to be embedded within recruitment practices and policies before researchers begin their employment with the University, and it is this longer-term process that is depicted in Figure 2.

Report collated and synthesised by Professor Sarah Parsons (co-Chair of the Concordat Advisory Group) and Dr Julie Reeves (Vitae Researcher Developer Senior Fellow and Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP) Senior Teaching Fellow).



*Figure 2 Pipeline for implementation of key Concordat actions and activities*