

Concordat Benchmarking

Report to the Strategy Group – 22 October 2009

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In March 2009 the Research Concordat Executive Group (RCEG) discussed six “benchmarking” projects. This paper considers whether these are in fact benchmarking projects and what the use of the label means for the review of progress required by Principle 7 of the Concordat. It then examines the six projects in turn. There then follows some suggestions for other benchmarking activities that RCEG may wish to consider for the longer term. This leads to a discussion about the schedule for reporting and proposes that RCEG sets out what observers may expect to see and by when.

Background

In January 2009 the Research Concordat Strategy Group (RCSG) considered a paper (RCSG/09/04) entitled “Benchmarking process”. The paper noted that “There is a commitment under Principle 7 (Implementation and Review) of the Concordat to ‘procure and independent benchmarking study to assess the state of the sector at the launch of the Concordat’.”

According to the minutes of the meeting:

16. The Group **agreed**:

- i. The principles of the benchmarking process.
- ii. The six projects, with priority to be given to projects 1 (cohort data), 2 (CROS), and 3 (HEI strategies).
- iii. That the executive group would sign off the specifications and budget.

The agreed principles were:

- i. To minimise the burden on institutions and to facilitate the replication of the benchmarking process in three years by the use existing data, information and processes wherever possible
- ii. To benchmark the UK sector and not individual institutions, i.e. avoiding the creation of ‘league tables’
- iii. To ensure the process is useful and positive for institutions by highlighting innovative and good practice.

The six projects RCSG authorised were:

1. Understanding the research staff cohort
2. Exploring the experiences of research staff through CROS
3. HEI approaches to embedding career development for researchers in HEI strategies
4. Reviewing the use of fixed term contracts
5. Views and perceptions of principle investigators
6. Funders responses to the Concordat.

RCSG agreed that the first three would be priorities. It also noted that “None of these projects will give a comprehensive benchmark of the sector, but collectively they should provide a ‘picture’ that allows the Strategy Group to review progress...”

“Independent Benchmarking Study”

Principle 7 of the Concordat states that “The sector and all stakeholders will undertake regular and collective review of their progress in strengthening the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK.” In the Concordat brochure, Section F (which discusses Principle 7) states that “The Signatories agree... to procure and independent benchmarking study to assess the state of the sector at the launch of the Concordat [and] to undertake and publish a major review of the implementation of the Concordat after three years... taking account of progress against the benchmark report...”¹

The wording suggests that the original concept was for a single benchmarking study to take place to capture a picture of the sector as near to the launch date as possible. However, from RCSG meetings in November 2008 and January 2009 emerged a much more detailed but also longer term strategy. Six projects were identified that would help define and measure the state of research careers in the UK.

Independence was achieved by apportioning the work among different players. Vitae, a new organisation managed by CRAC, the career development organisation, and funded by Research Councils UK, took on three of the projects. Two were taken on by Universities UK, the representative body for the executive heads of UK universities. The sixth remained the responsibility of RCSG and its chair, with the help of the Concordat Coordinator. Details of these six projects are set out below.

The paper, agreed by RCSG, used the term “benchmarking” to encompass the six projects. In fact, very few of them are benchmarking projects in the usually-accepted sense. Rather, some are attempts to provide the basic information against which future activity will be judged while others simply seek to inform those responsible for implementation what action is needed to promote the Concordat.

Benchmarking is generally seen as the process of comparing against a widely accepted industry standard or best practice. Benchmarking provides a snapshot of performance and helps practitioners understand their position in relation to a particular standard. By this definition, a benchmarking project would compare Research Staff development in UK Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) against other, similar organisations. For example, it would compare

- HEIs against the private sector
- UK HEIs against OECD competitors
- HEIs against the leaders in their own sector.

However, the term “Benchmarking” is not always used in this strict context and, at their meeting on 14 September 2009, the Executive Group decided to continue using it, while clarifying in their reports their use of the term. The importance of sharing practice was

¹ *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers*, Section F, paragraph 2b and 2e, July 2008.

emphasised, as was the need to avoid comparisons between institutions. The Executive Group proposed that a clear statement be produced early on stressing that the aim of the benchmarking projects was to establish the current state of the sector so that future progress could be measured.

The aims of the six projects agreed by RCSG seek (in the words of the RCSG paper, quoted above) to “provide a ‘picture’ that allows the Strategy Group to review progress” by improving our knowledge of research staff, HEI policies, line managers’ views and funders’ activity. While the six projects will not show whether the UK higher education sector is catching up with, staying level with or falling (further) behind comparable organisations, it will enable us to establish a starting point and measure progress from there..

Update on the six projects

Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS)

CROS is the most developed of the six projects, having been run successfully for several years. Promotion, coordination and analysis are conducted by Vitae. The 2009 CROS is complete and the results were launched at the Vitae Research Staff conference on 7-8 September. Members of the Strategy Group should have received copies of the aggregated report by post.

CROS is a web-based survey designed to gather anonymously the views of research staff in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) about their experiences, career aspirations and career development opportunities. This gives a snapshot of the views of research staff respondents and provides a national context against which individual institutions can compare and evaluate the data generated by their own staff.

HEIs participating in CROS recognised the value of being able gather the views of research staff within their institution. CROS allows HEIs to compare institutional results against the UK aggregate of all participating HEIs, against benchmark groups (e.g. aggregates for 94 group institutions) and against the institution’s own responses in previous years.

The first CROS was run in 2002 and repeated annually through to 2006. Participation was open to all HEIs and 53 HEIs have participated in at least one year. A record 51 HEIs participated in CROS 2009, of which 16 were Russell Group institutions and 12 were 94 Group institutions. 71% of the responses came from Russell Group institutions and 15% from 94 Group institutions. The balance were from a range of other institutions.

At the point of formal survey closure, 8 June 2009, response data had been received from 7482 respondents, of whom 5908 had completed questionnaires. Only completed questionnaires were used in the analysis. Vitae estimate that this represents a response rate of around 20 percent, which gives a confidence interval of 1 point at the 95 percent confidence range.

Understanding the research staff cohort

Understanding the Research Staff Cohort builds on existing work, especially work by the Research Base Funders Forum led by HEFCW that tracked Research Staff careers from 2003/4 to 2006/7. The aim of the project is two-fold:

1. To improve the quality of the data collected on research staff, by discussing how the collection of data might be improved with HEIs, data collectors and analysts and those that rely on these outputs, and
2. To produce a follow up report looking at the 2009/10 data with the ambition of producing triennial reports from here on.

This Research Concordat Implementation Coordinator is leading the project, which includes representatives of HESA, the Funding Councils, UUK and the sector.

Insufficient understanding of who conducts research or even how many are employed within an HEI is often cited as an indication of the low status of the researcher within HEIs. Principle 2 of the Concordat explicitly addresses the need for researchers to be “recognised and valued by their employing organisation as an essential part of their organisation’s human resources and a key component of their overall strategy...” There is a perception that some HEIs do not even have a central list of their researchers.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) gather data on employment from HEIs. This includes categories “Research” and “Senior Researchers and Lecturers” (though there is not a category for junior research staff who also have teaching functions). In addition, HESA collects data on staff on permanent and on fixed-term contracts. These two variables can be cross-tabulated (see Annex I). However, the information is only as good as the data receive from HEIs and it is widely accepted that HEIs are not always punctilious about their collection and provision of data to HESA.

The project complements CROS, which ought to provide an understanding of experience of researchers.

On 16 September the sector-wide group met to discuss what information was available, what would be helpful and how the gaps might be filled. The meeting resulted in a table of required information and proposed sources, seven recommendations to HESA, a number of additional fields that might be added to CROS and recommendations for other partners. Five areas were also identified where additional work would be required, as there was no obvious source of information. These would require their own projects to take forward.

HEI strategies

An important implementation challenge surrounds the policies and strategies of HEIs. HEIs will need to have HR strategies in place to ensure that research staff are regularly appraised, supported and developed.

On 14 September the Executive Group agreed to go ahead with a survey of HEIs. At previous meetings, members had discussed developing a badging system or charter mark. However, it

was felt that this might be premature; that it would be necessary to establish what HEIs are doing at present and draw up a picture of the sector before implementing a badging system.

In addition to serving as a benchmarking project for the Concordat, this project will also help demonstrate UK compliance with the European Charter & Code. The European Commission has agreed that the UK higher education sector as a whole can use the Concordat as its delivery mechanism for the Charter & Code. Consequently, the HEI strategies project will enable individual HEIs to demonstrate compliance with the Charter & Code.

The Strategy Group should note that compliance with the Charter & Code enables HEIs to use the Charter & Code logo on publications and to highlight their institution on the Euraxess website. As a result, this approach may also act as a badging mechanism.

The project will take the form of a survey of HEI administrations (rather than of research staff or management). This will provide valuable and robust data on HEI strategies. A copy of the survey was discussed by the Executive Group on 14 September and recommendations made. A further draft is currently being drawn up.

Reviewing the use of fixed term contracts

At their March 2009 meeting, RCEG agreed that the above three projects should be prioritised. However, they also authorised the following three projects.

Vitae is taking the lead in reviewing of the use of fixed term contracts (FTCs). Vitae have asked Dr Liz Oliver of the European Law and Policy Research Group at the Liverpool Law School to look at university policies on FTCs. She chose to focus on Russell and 94 Group universities as these employed the majority of UK research staff. An initial review was made of published policy documents; no attempt was made to contact institutions that had not published their policies on FTCs. The aim of the enquiry was not to develop a definitive categorisation of policy approaches but to get a sense of difference approaches so as to identify case studies and be able to place them in context.

Dr Oliver acknowledges that a more informed study might result from a survey of human resources departments in universities. However, HR departments' are already being surveyed as part of the HEI Strategies project. It may be worth adding a question on FTCs to the HEI strategies survey. Note that figures for the number of FTCs and open ended contracts is already available (see Annex I).

A final report on this project will be available in the new year. Once published, it will be sent to Strategy Group members. The Coordinator recommends that it be considered at a future Executive Group meeting, which may also wish to discuss whether the project needs to be taken further, and if so under what terms.

One possible approach would be to examine the reasons for using FTCs and institutional thinking around employee tenure. This may call for a qualitative approach, which would also

reveal the *effects* of using FTCs upon employee morale and training and development opportunities, and what impact FTCs have on the decision-making of researchers and would-be researchers. There are synergies with CROS, which has revealed no correlation between staff morale and contract status.

Another area of synergy is with one of the new projects identified by the project to understand the research cohort. This would seek to examine whether the contracts on which research staff are employed are considered to be “academic contracts”, and whether they are covered by the university’s statutes (in the case of pre-1992 institutions).

Views of principle investigators

In March 2009 the Executive Group identified a need to understand the views of Principle Investigators (PIs), and further noted that engagement of this group was the most difficult aspect of Concordat implementation.

At the Executive Group meeting on 14 September 2009 the Coordinator proposed a qualitative research project that would seek to establish the barriers to improving researchers’ career development and how PIs might help move this forward. It was based on a number of one-to-one interviews and group discussions and aimed to produce a report that explores the views and opinions of PIs, the barriers they identify and possible avenues for improving PI support. The Executive Group did not endorse the proposal, but requested that it be revised to

- Identify specific terms of reference and desired outcomes
- Better form the topics into a semi-structured discussion
- Make sure PIs are seen as partners (and so review the way the questions are phrased)
- Engage with PIs as an opportunity to recruit advocates for Concordat implementation.

The Coordinator is happy to progress with items 2 to 4 on the above list, but feels that the Terms of Reference need to be set out by the Strategy Group. He therefore recommends that the Strategy Group set out clear terms of reference for the project at their meeting on 22 October 2009.

Funders response

Following a proposal by RCEG in March 2009, Sir Ivor Crewe wrote to the funding bodies that are signatories of the Concordat setting out the Concordat benchmarking process and requesting that they reply outlining how they plan to implement the Concordat. A draft of this letter is attached at Annex II. Replies were requested by 24 August and an oral update can be provided by the Concordat Coordinator at the September meeting of CEIG.

Funders are fairly cautious about their role in pushing implementation. The Research Councils are happy to act as champions of the Concordat and are in the process of producing an implementation plan. According to HEFCE, funding councils cannot restrict flows of money

on Concordat grounds, so while they are willing to use their good offices to encourage HEIs to implement the principles of the Concordat they cannot tie implementation to funding.

In the context of benchmarking, however, there is scope for funding bodies to request that funded projects/institutions report on research staff development. One way forward would be for funders to then produce an annual report on research staff development as reported to them by funded projects/institutions: this could be a stand-alone document or form part of an overall Concordat implementation report. Sensitivity needs to be shown with regards excessive or duplicate data collection, however. Where possible, existing data should be used, and where additional data is required provision should not present too great a burden for institutions.

Possible future projects

As well as the six projects discussed above, there are a number of other potential projects that could be run to benchmark the UK higher education sector against rivals for research talents, namely other sectors of the UK economy and research opportunities in other countries. The Strategy Group should note that these are proposals for the future and it is not intended that these be taken forward in the near term.

Research staff development in the private sector

One of the main comparators for research careers in higher education is the private sector of the UK economy. The Strategy Group may wish to consider authorising a project to compare the experiences of researchers in private enterprise with those in HEIs and also to explore how career paths transit between the two sectors.

The Executive Group or those tasked with taking this forward might also want to consider widening this variable to consider experiences between the commercial, charity, academic and government sectors. Others might also be considered, though there is a risk that a proliferation of 'sectors' may reduce the ability of the project staff to draw clear conclusions.

The experience of research staff in other OECD countries

Qualified (particularly post-doctoral) staff are highly mobile. UK post-docs work throughout the world. If UK HEIs are really to understand the challenges they face in attracting quality staff they need to know the state of the competition. In this context, it should be noted that the UK may prove to be well in advance of competitor nations; in this case, UK HEIs will be able to trade on this information, while competitors will benefit from the knowledge that they must raise their game.

In addition, it is a stated ambition of the European Commission that HEIs across the European Research Area (ERA) will sign up to the EU Charter and Code and then submit to periodic external evaluation no less frequently than every four years.² UK HEIs will meet the ambition set out in the Charter and Code through implementation of the Concordat. However,

² *Human resources strategy for researchers incorporating the Charter & Code*, Information note from the European Commission.

the fact that assessments will take place across the ERA provides an opportunity to benchmark progress across the EEA. The timescales being discussed would suggest that such a piece of work would not be possible before 2012 and perhaps nearer the middle of the decade.

BIS also benchmark research performance against competitor countries. RCEG may wish to approach BIS with a view to seeking co-funding for this project.

Comparing research staff development in HEIs and other public sector bodies

Assuming a narrow focus was taken for the public/private comparison, a separate piece of work might be considered benchmarking various aspects of the public and quasi-public³ sectors. One obvious area would be to compare academic researchers with health research.

Work to implement the Concordat has *de facto* focused upon early stage post-doctoral researchers employed within higher education. This is not to suggest that this should be, or is, the limit of either the ambition of the Concordat or the working that is currently being undertaken. But it is this group around which work has centred. Nonetheless, other groups and sectors are also covered by the Concordat. The National Institute for Health Research is a signatory and has plans to deliver the seven principles. RCEG may wish to consider benchmarking the academic and health sectors against one another to provide an opportunity for each to learn from best practice in the other.

The above projects could be achieved by a combination of quantitative and qualitative research among researchers at comparable points in their career and other benchmarking techniques such as desk-based policy/procedure comparisons. Any survey of non-academic research staff would need to mirror CROS so as to provide comparative data. Qualitative work would include a sample the primary variable in which would be between public and private sector employees (perhaps, but not necessarily, specifically academic and industry). Desk-based comparisons of the HR procedures in each body would be fairly straight-forward.

The main challenge would be to get cooperation from the benchmarking bodies. The key would be to demonstrate the benefit that their organisation would derive from participation. As noted above, the benefit for leaders is that they can use the evidence to attract talent; for others that they can learn from the success of leading institutions. Support from other European nations could be encouraged in the context of the EU Charter and Code (especially if the Commission lent its support); other OECD countries might be harder to persuade.

³ The divide between the “public” and “private” sectors is blurred. Academia, for example, relies largely on public money and is seen as a continuation of education, and so is often lumped in the public sector. However, HEIs are in fact (at least nominally) autonomous institutions that might be better viewed as in the private (but not commercial) sector.

The Executive Group expressed interest in the following future research projects:

- Comparison between research staff development in academia and clinical research staff development in the health sector; between research staff development in academia and research staff development in other research institutes;
- Encouraging other employers of researchers to participate in existing projects (e.g. CROS)
- Comparisons with other parts of the public sector
- Comparisons between the public and private sectors
- The use of CROS to compare practice in disciplines.

Schedule for research and reporting

The Terms of Reference agreed by the Strategy Group in January 2009 commit the Strategy Group to making annual reports to the Funders Forum. However, the Implementation Plan agreed by RCSG in March 2009 did not set out a specific timetable for producing outputs from the research. Principle 7 section 2 commits signatories:

- b. to procure an independent benchmarking study to assess the state of the sector at the launch of this Concordat.
- c. to contribute an appropriate share of the costs of supporting implementation and review, including the benchmarking report.
- d. to draw up an implementation plan for the Concordat, to ensure a coherent and sustained approach by organisations operating in the sector and the appropriate use of survey and monitoring tools such as the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS).
- e. to undertake and publish a major review of the implementation of the Concordat after three years reporting to the signatories and taking account of progress against the benchmark report and the views of researchers and employers (both outside and within the HE sector).⁴

The reference in subsection e is important. The commitment to “undertake and publish a major review of the implementation of the Concordat after three years” could be interpreted as requiring publication of a report in July 2011, three years after the Concordat was launched. It is clear from RCEG’s implementation plan that it was not their intention to make a full report in 2011. Even the most advanced of the benchmarking projects (CROS) will not be able to yield comparative data by that date (the 2009 CROS survey will be repeated in 2011 but analysis will not be ready until September 2009). Furthermore, it is premature to believe that significant change will have been affected by 2011. The change that the Concordat seeks ultimately to achieve is cultural, altering the attitude that HEI administrations and staff have towards the researchers working amongst them.

In addition, the Executive Group agreed that HEIs should be expected to report biennially, as this would align with both EU Charter & Code reporting proposals for self-assessment and with the proposed cycle for undertaking CROS.

This paper recommends that the Strategy Group report annually to the Funders Forum and that these reports be published. However, the Strategy Group is asked to note that these yearly reports will reflect the previous year’s progress. Because of the biennial reporting cycles by HEIs and the fact that CROS is conducted in alternate years by discrete sets of

⁴ *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers*, July 2008.

universities, the annual reports will not directly relate to the immediate prior report. The Strategy Group may wish to consider two options:

1. Produce *Biennial Reports on Implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers*, and alternate these with interim reports so that the Funders Forum continue to receive an annual progress report;
2. Produce annual reports that reflect activity that has taken place the previous year, recognising that alternate years will focus on different areas of work (e.g. the 2009 and 2011 reports will include CROS data on the 2009 CROS cohort; 2010 and 2012 will contain data on the 2010 CROS cohort and also the HEI strategies reports).

The revised Implementation Plan that the Strategy Group is asked to consider on 22 October 2009 includes a proposed reporting timetable.

Conclusion

The above provides an outline of progress on the benchmarking projects agreed at the March 2009 meeting of RCEG:

- CROS 2009 is now complete; a different set of HEIs will conduct CROS in 2010 and the 2009 cohort will conduct it again in 2011
- The HEI strategies survey is being revised and will be sent to HEIs shortly
- Recommendations have been produced for improving the data collected on research staff and the analysis of that data
- Vitae have conducted initial analysis of published policies on FTCs and will report in the new year
- Sir Ivor Crewe has written to Funders to request updates on their implementation of the Concordat and responses have been received
- RCEG has been asked to agree terms of reference for a study of the views of principle investigators.

The Executive Group has also identified further areas of research to be discussed further in the future. A list of specific implementation achievements to date is provided in the accompanying Implementation Report.

Annex I: HESA DATA - Staff role cross tabulated with terms of employment

The table below was produced on 2 July 2009 from HESA data. This suggests that there were a total of 37,986 Researchers and 36,968 Senior Lecturers & Researchers working in UK HEIs, each group representing approximately 10% of total HEI staff employment.

Within the category Researcher, three quarters were on FTCs, while just 7.3% of Senior Lecturers & Researchers were not on open-ended/permanent contracts.

Grade group * Terms of employment Crosstabulation

Count

		Terms of employment		Total
		Open-ended/Permanent	Fixed-term contract	
Grade group	Data not required	165598	31555	197153
	Professors	16756	1557	18313
	Senior Lecturers & Researchers	34270	2698	36968
	Lecturers	37420	14554	51974
	Researchers	9413	28573	37986
	Other Grades	14977	15085	30062
Total		278434	94022	372456

Annex II: Copy of letter from Sir Ivor Crewe to funding bodies

Dear

Implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

It is now a year since the launch of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and as a signatory you will be aware that its implementation is central to its success. The Concordat has been widely circulated within all UK higher education institutions and I encourage you to ensure it is promoted and championed within your own organisation. It will also be important that each organisation now considers how the principles set out in the Concordat can be embedded into policy and practice.

To oversee the implementation and review process a Strategy Group has been formed, with me as Chair. The Strategy Group has appropriate representation across the sector with members from higher education institutions, researchers, funders and professional bodies. Our role will be to maintain momentum, promote the Concordat, discuss and monitor progress, and develop an understanding of where further action may be required.

To assist institutions with implementation we have employed a full time coordinator, Thomas Papworth, based at Universities UK. His role is to ensure that we generate real progress towards making research careers more attractive and sustainable. In addition he will coordinate the review process so that the Strategy Group can demonstrate clear advances by 2011. The contribution of the Funding and Research Councils in supporting this post is a crucial contribution to the promotion of the Concordat. If you wish to contact Thomas Papworth you can call him on 0777 137 2971 or email him at Thomas.Papworth@UniversitiesUK.ac.uk.

The membership, terms of reference and the papers of the Strategy Group are published on the Concordat web site: <http://www.researchconcordat.ac.uk/>. At our first meeting a number of implementation and benchmarking projects were agreed. One of these benchmarking projects is to consider the responses of funding bodies to the Concordat. The Strategy Group did not think it appropriate to tell funders how to incorporate the Concordat into their policies; we are aware that implementation will differ according to the type of funding organisation. It is therefore important to identify how the Concordat has and will continue to influence funders' policy and practice. This is important both with regard to the implementation of the Concordat and to the need to address the common perception in HEIs that, irrespective of funders' terms and conditions, grant applications that include provision for the career development of researchers are regarded as less competitive by review panels.

The Concordat highlights a number of areas which may be relevant to your organisation. These include:

- The need to ensure that guidance about the pay and grade of researchers and any permitted flexibility in grants is clear(Section A 5)
- The need to support continuity of employment of researchers - funders are expected to make it a priority to consider how their policies, guidance and funding can be enhanced to help employers to achieve this objective (Section B 4)
- The importance of ensuring that policies and guidance highlight the communication and other skills that are needed to be both an effective researcher and a highly-skilled professional (Section C 3)
- The signatory funders need to ensure that the terms and conditions of, for example, their project grants include the expectation that the employers they fund will adopt the principles of the revised Concordat (Section F 3)
- The need to recognise the value of policy and operational innovation and of sharing good practice between institutions and the promotion of these throughout the implementation and review process (Section F 4)
- The desirability of the funding signatories aligning their support for transferable and career development skills (Section F 4)

The Research Councils have recently agreed to undertake an Implementation project and a paper on this is available on the Concordat web site: it may highlight useful areas for implementation in your own organisation.

The Strategy Group has written to your organisation's representative on the Strategy Group to request that they provide a brief response which outlines how your organisation is implementing the Concordat. We hope that this will inform a report to the next Strategy Group meeting, which will take place on 22 October 2009.

Thank you for your help in driving forward this important work and do please let me know if you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely

Professor Sir Ivor Crewe
Chair, Concordat Implementation Strategy Group