

Research Excellence Framework consultation
Higher Education Funding Council for England
Northavon House
Coldharbour Lane
BRISTOL
BS16 1QD

15 December 2009

Dear sir or madam,

The Research Excellence Framework consultation

It is now 18 months since the launch of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (the Concordat). As you know, I chair the Research Concordat Strategy Group, which includes representatives from across the higher education sector including members from higher education institutions, researchers, professional bodies and funders (including HEFCE and the other UK funding councils). 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 recent meeting on 22 October 2009, members of the Strategy Group requested that I write to you on their behalf to emphasise the importance of career research staff to the UK's higher education sector and to urge you to reflect this in the Research Excellence Framework (REF). In particular, the Strategy Group notes that the REF aims to "Support better management and sustainability of the research base" (paragraph 14f of the Consultation Paper). This is fundamental to, and cannot be delivered without, the successful career development of research staff, as was recognised by the Minister of State for Science and Innovation when he said, in June 2008, that "high quality, well-motivated research staff are critical to maintaining and developing [a] world-class research base."

The Strategy Group therefore welcomes the Secretary of State's recommendation that "The REF should continue to incentivise research excellence... and not create disincentives to researchers moving between academia and the private sector." The Strategy Group recognises the importance of encouraging open movement of research staff between the various sectors of the economy, as well as across the UK, the European Research Area and beyond. The Strategy Group thus agrees with the statement (paragraph 109) that "Encouraging researcher mobility is a specific policy aim of the REF and we wish to ensure that the framework creates a positive environment for researcher mobility." The Strategy Group is particularly pleased to note that the REF will recognise, and give equal weight to, research undertaking outside of higher education; that institutions will be encouraged to identify and highlight cases where researcher mobility has contributed to the impact of the institution's research outputs; and that promoting researcher mobility and networking with other sectors will reflect positively on the institution.

Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

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The Strategy Group also welcomes the commitment to equality and diversity (paragraphs 111 – 113), which aligns with Principle 6 of the Concordat, which states that “Diversity and equality must be promoted in all aspects of the recruitment and career management of researchers.” The Strategy Group recognises the challenges facing policy makers in operationalising equality and diversity statements and therefore welcomes the statement (paragraph 111c) that

Staff with particular circumstances that adversely affected their capacity to undertake research during the REF assessment period will be enabled to submit fewer than the maximum number of outputs. This includes early career researchers, staff working part-time, staff who had career breaks, staff who spent time working in business or other research user sectors, and those who had prolonged absence due to ill-health.

The Concordat commits signatories to “ensure that the working conditions for researchers who provide the flexibility necessary for successful research performance”. In addition, it recognises that for those “have taken career breaks, including parental leave, have worked part-time, or have taken atypical routes into research, the ‘early career’ period may be prolonged, and this may be a time where the risk of attrition from the research path is most acute.” It therefore urges that “working conditions ... allow both female and male researchers to combine family and work, children and career.” For this to be possible without it having a deleterious effect on their career progression, it is important that research staff with flexible or atypical work patterns be treated equally with regards their inclusion in the REF and other assessment exercises. This is essential both for their own progression and in making it easier for institutions to respond positively to requests for flexible working.

The Strategy Group notes the key characteristics of excellence that Units of Assessment will be expected to demonstrate. While the Consultation document correctly identifies five areas of importance, the Strategy Group recommends that the REF include as a sixth, explicit characteristic that a Unit of Assessment (UOA) is expected to demonstrate the extent to which they develop their research staff. As Gareth Roberts noted, “The product that the PhD researcher creates is not the thesis – vital though that is to their subject area through the creation of original knowledge – no, the product of their study is the development of themselves”. The ultimate measure of the success of academic research in the UK is not the production of specific research outcomes but the development of world class researcher. This should be explicitly recognised within the REF.

The Strategy Group is therefore pleased to note that some weighting is given to Research Environment within the REF, but would wish to emphasise that a key aspect of the research environment is its capacity to nurture and develop research staff. The Strategy Group welcomes the statement (paragraph 27e) that “Submissions will include details about research staff, their outputs, and other qualitative and quantitative information about research-driven impacts and the research environment,” but would also suggest that the REF reflect the extent to which research staff at all levels are given opportunities to develop their careers, and institutions ensure through open and transparent means that the best researchers are recruited and retained. We also note that Research Environment will only account for 15 per cent of the total REF assessment. As the development of research staff is only one aspect of Research Environment, the Strategy Group is concerned that this will not constitute a significant part of the overall assessment. We recommend that the development of exceptional researchers be emphasised as much as possible and given greater weighting than is currently implied.

The Strategy Group approves of the intention that the REF will aim “to encourage desirable behaviours at three levels: ... individual researchers... research units [and]... whole HEIs”. This reflects Principle 5 of the Concordat, which states that “Individual researchers share the responsibility for and need to pro-actively engage in their own personal and career development, and lifelong learning” and also the wider nature of the Concordat as an agreement between all parties, including individuals, research leaders and employers.

The Strategy Group understands the proposal to assess the work of a sample of researchers within institutions, rather than all academic staff. The Strategy Group hopes that the REF ensure that the selected staff represent researchers from all levels, and at all career stages, within each UOA so as to ensure that quality is reflected across the spectrum of research staff and that the REF reflects the diversity within the institution. In addition, there should be no discrimination between those on open-ended and on fixed-term contracts. We therefore welcome the statement that “The assessment process will be designed to encourage institutions to submit any eligible staff who have produced research of high quality during the assessment period but who may not have published outputs spanning the entire period” and that “These will include ‘early career’ researchers... part time staff, researchers who had spent time away from their academic base... [as well as] established researchers recruited into HE from businesses or other sectors” (paragraph 35), and hope that the final framework will ensure that this is realised in practice.

With regards to the structure of the assessment panels, the Strategy Group welcomes the fact that these will include people with experience other than as researchers. It would urge that these include experienced personnel with appropriate expertise in human resource practice in research environments. This is essential if the REF is to reflect “Management: staff development... [and] training...” (paragraph 79b-c).

In conclusion, the Strategy Group fully supports the efforts of HEFCE and its partners in seeking to perfect an assessment framework for research in higher education, which aligns with the aims of signatories and supporters of the Concordat. We look forward to the outcome of this consultation and hope that the REF will encourage UK institutions to maximise the potential of academic and research staff and help demonstrate that the UK remains a world leader in research.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ivor Crewe', written in a cursive style.

Professor Sir Ivor Crewe
Chair
Research Concordat Strategy Group

