

Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers – Progress Report 2024

1) Introduction: Purpose and Background:

The **Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers** (the Concordat) is an aspirational set of principles, setting out the conditions required to create the best culture for researchers to thrive. As a signatory we agree to improve employment conditions and support for researchers. Management and implementation of the Concordat (originally launched in 2008) is led by Vitae, who also co-ordinates the **HR Excellence in Research Award (HREiR)** in the UK. The HREiR is a voluntary initiative which recognises the University's commitment to improving working conditions and providing career development opportunities for research staff and is an important mechanism for implementing the principles of the Concordat and for enhancing Research Culture at Northumbria.

2) Principles and Responsibilities of the Concordat:

The Concordat has three defining principles:

- **Environment and Culture:** Excellent research requires a supportive and inclusive research culture.
- **Employment:** Researchers are recruited, employed, and managed under conditions that recognise and value their contributions.
- **Professional and Career Development:** Professional and career development are integral to enabling researchers to develop their full potential.

Responsibilities and obligations beneath each principle are set out for four main stakeholder groups: researchers, managers of researchers, institutions, and funders. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders within organisations to implement Concordat principles, and to work together to address systemic issues in the employment and career development of researchers. There are seven key responsibilities of signatories to the Concordat and our activity against how we meet the key responsibilities and obligations are listed in below in section 5) **Progress Review**.

3) The Concordat at Northumbria University

Northumbria University first became a signatory of the Concordat in 2012. Following the publication of a new Concordat in 2019, Northumbria reaffirmed its commitment to the revised document in March 2020. In 2023 we were successful in retaining our HREiR award at the 10-year review point. <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/news/northumbria-university-retains-hr-excellence-in-research-award/>

4) Governance and Implementation

Prior to the 2023 HREiR submission, the Research Development Strategy Group (RDSG), reporting to RaKE, was responsible for embedding the principles of the Concordat within relevant initiatives and frameworks and ensuring alignment with other relevant activities. However, over the last two years, the work to enable the Concordat principles has occurred alongside a broader university drive to create a supportive, inclusive, ambitious, diverse research culture that helps all our researchers and those enabling and supporting research to flourish. Our emerging Research Culture Action Plan sets out Northumbria's commitment to supporting and sustaining an inclusive and healthy research culture. From 2023 the Dean of Research Culture (DRC) as Chair of the Research Culture Committee (RCC) now has oversight to all research related Agreements, Concordats, and Declarations.

5) Progress Review

Our key responsibilities and obligations against as signatories of the Researcher Development Concordat have been met as follows:

1. **Raise the visibility of the Concordat and champion its principles.** Information about Concordat commitments is included in all researcher development training. Work took place in 2023/24 to raise the awareness of our emerging Research Culture Action plan.

Key messages around the RD Concordat and how this, and other Concordats and Commitments underpin and govern Research Culture are now available on our new Research Culture webpages external: <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/research-culture/concordats-and-commitments/>

2. **Identify a senior manager champion and associated group.** As of September 2023, the DRC, through the RCC has oversight, monitors and advises on activities and progress of the Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan.
3. **Ensure researchers are formally represented in developing and monitoring organisational efforts to implement the Concordat.** Researchers are represented on the RCC as are technical staff that support research. Membership of the committee comprises representatives from all parts of the university that play a role in research, including early career academics (including those on fixed term contracts), members of university executive, technicians, RIS staff and academics across career points.
4. **Undertake a gap analysis to compare our policies and practices against the Concordat Principles.** In 2023, to identify gaps and develop the 3-year forward looking plan (2023-26) RDSG carried out a gap analysis using a theory of change model to prioritise actions against the Concordat principles. RDSG developed a shared vision, key outcomes and activities for the Concordat, putting happy researchers at the heart of the plan with better quality, more impactful research, and integrity and good conduct embedded in our research culture. To achieve the vision, outcomes were described as: improved research environment, better collaboration between industry policy makers and the public, Northumbria is known for its excellent researcher development offer (with better engagement), improved funding applications and better recognition and understanding of the value of academic citizenship.
5. **Draw up and publish an action plan within a year of signing the Concordat.** The latest Action Plan (2023-26) was published on the University website in May 2023 and revised in October 2023 following Panel suggestions from our successful 10-year review interview.
6. **Set up processes for systematically and regularly gathering the views of researchers we employ, to inform and improve the organisation's culture.** The Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research survey (CEDARs) is used to gather the views of researchers, in addition to the University's annual staff survey. We ran CEDARs in spring 2023 and are running CEDARs again in 2025 (closing 31st May 2025). In 2023-24 we have also consulted widely on the Research Culture Action Plan which interfaces with the RD Concordat actions and principles.
7. **Produce an annual report to our governing body which subsequently is publicly available.** This paper, which will be made available on our webpages by May 2025, is our annual report covering the last 12 months since publication of our February 2024 Annual Report and forms part of our evidence for the successful retention of the HREiR award. This report is accompanied by an updated version of our 2023-26 Action Plan, which sets out how we intend to meet each of the Concordat's principles under the themes of Environment and Culture, Employment, and Professional and Career Development.

6) Key achievements in 2023-24

6.1 Research and Innovation Services (RIS) Researcher Development review: a broad review of the current RIS offer began in September 2023. This initiative forms part of the RIS strategic development plans for 2024-25 and aims to pull together the current training and development offer from RIS into a holistic programme of activity. We aim to work with the ECR community to develop and deliver a bespoke programme aligned to the ECR Forum, to work with Research Group Leads to give them resources and support to enable their groups to thrive and to work collaboratively with Organisational Development to develop a cross University, all career stage leadership offer.

A Researcher Development Working Group has been established to identify any gaps in the current RIS offer, look at diverse delivery platforms, and how we deliver a programme that is inclusive and supports learning across all career stages (including an inclusive offer for PGRs where appropriate). Our current offer was mapped against the VITAE Researcher

Development Framework (a nationally endorsed structure) which describes the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of successful researchers.

6.2 Cohort Programmes:

Project and Application Development: In 2024 the Research Development Team in RIS delivered 4-day intensive programmes for project and application development. The minimum expectation is that colleagues finish the programme with a robust plan for the application's content. The two types of intensive programmes provided in 2024 were:

- **UKRI Responsive-Mode Project Development and Application Planning:** this programme has been delivered 3 times in 2024. Spring and Summer covered AHRC, EPSRC and ESRC responsive-mode schemes, and the remit was expanded to include NERC responsive-mode schemes from the Autumn programme. From the first UKRI Intensive Programme of 2025, BBSRC and MRC responsive-mode schemes were also covered. This means that all the UKRI Research Councils with responsive-mode schemes are catered for, expanding the disciplinary backgrounds of colleagues that can attend.
- **British Academy Fellowships Development and Application Planning:** designed to support colleagues apply to either the Innovation Fellowship Route A, Mid-Career Fellowship, or Senior Research Fellowship. Thus, the admission criteria to attend this intensive programme differed by scheme.

6.3 Early Career Researchers:

6.3.1 ECR Forum: In December 2024 we held an ECR Networking event where we piloted activity from a new ECR Development Series 'what do funders want, who is my funder' – see below for details. From February 2025 we have established a new ECR Management Group and Chair. Activity to review the profile of our ECR Forum has been initiated. Northumbria has an inclusive approach to ECRs: research staff (including those in fixed term postdoc positions), PGR students and technical staff). We do not currently capture the specific career profile of our members, and we want to ensure that we are catering for the specific career needs of our ECR group members, specifically encouraging career development engagement from those research staff who are on fixed term contracts. At the Forum bi-annual networking event planned for June 2025 we plan to continue awareness raising of the Concordat obligations and reiterate the stakeholders Concordat responsibilities, including how to use the 10 days per year development time committed to in the Concordat.

6.3.2 ECR Annual Development Series: We have worked with this community through the ECR Forum to create a development series, that fits with the needs of our broad ECR base. Offering the time and opportunity for self-reflection, career planning and skills development through a new ECR specific researcher development series complementing the ECR Forum networking activities, we are enabling ECRs to be proactive in their own career development. The ECR Forum Development Series, fully launching in September 2025, aligns with the broader RIS review of Researcher Development activity and will be aligned to the new VITAE Researcher Development Framework which also launches in September 2025.

6.4 Rejection and Resilience Workshops: Rejection is a routine part of an academic career, and our ambitions, as individuals and as a university, can expose us to greater risk of rejection. This programme of activity aims to acknowledge that rejection is a normal part of the research process, and to create supportive spaces for researchers at all career stages to share their experiences and develop coping strategies. The programme currently includes in-person events, online toolkits and resources, and will continue to develop over the 2024/25 academic year.

6.5 Athena Swan:

6.5.1 Research and Innovation Services (RIS): Working with Advance HE, Northumbria participated in a trial to open out Athena Swan to professional support departments. RIS is one of the first professional service departments in the UK to receive an Athena Swan award. To achieve the award RIS undertook significant engagement with colleagues across the department, including a survey in December 2022 and follow up listening sessions in June 2023. The listening sessions illuminated several issues that were then developed into a draft action plan by the Departmental Self-Assessment Team utilising a 'Theory of Change Approach' at a workshop in July 2023. The action plan was reviewed and evolved further with input from RIS colleagues through development mornings, and workshops in October and November 2023.

6.5.2 Institutional Award: Work has progressed over the past year towards applying for Silver Athena Swan with a planned submission for March 2025.

6.6 Vice Chancellor's Fellowship Cohort Programme: following a review of the first full year cycle of development activities for Vice Chancellor' Fellows, the Dean of Research Culture, Organisational Development and Research and Innovation Services have collaborated with the current VCF Cohort to co-design a programme of community building and networking activities to launch in September 2025.

6.7 Leadership Development Programme: Organisational Development (OD) have launched a five-day immersive Leadership Retreat development programme designed for colleagues who are managers, typically at grades 7 or 8. As part of a mixed cohort of both academic and professional support colleagues, participants will spend an entire week together focussing on personal growth, reflecting on their leadership roles, and exploring their impact and the legacy they want to leave as leaders.

6.8 Research Group Leadership: Research groups are key drivers of research culture and excellence in our academic ecosystem. The formalisation of Research Groups and their Leads has created spaces of focused research activity working at scales that can foster vibrant, fair and inclusive ways of working. From January 2025, we have outlined an 18-month plan with a programme of activities and a toolkit of resources under development to support Research Group Leads to cultivate and share inclusive and effective approaches to research leadership.

6.9 Induction Review: Work has taken place to review our Induction process to ensure all new staff have an excellent on-boarding experience with contacts, resources, support and tools to enable them to flourish. All new starters now receive invitation to complete an experience survey and in response to focus groups with new starters surveyed and focus groups with new starters pre and onboarding tasks have been reviewed and a People Guide developed. The People Guide aims to signpost key information about working at Northumbria to ensure that all staff have the information needed to succeed in their role and contribute to our collective goals.

7) To be addressed in 2024-25

7.1 Environment and Culture:

7.1.1 Research Group Leadership: In 2025 our aim is to build research leadership capacity and confidence to support the development of research groups as inclusive spaces for creative, curious and collaborative research that supports our ambitions.

Our current Programme plan, which started in January 2025 and continues until the end of July 2026, will create and deliver development activities for research group leads that will focus on growing capacity and confidence in leadership skills, sharing good practice and encouraging peer to peer mentorship within the community.

The programme will be co-created with research group leads and to enable this, early in 2025 we will invite expressions of interest for representatives on a Research Group Leads (RGL) Steering Group. The Steering Group will help to co-create content for the annual RGL Conference, as well as suggesting topics for the bi-annual RGL Fora which will be an opportunity for the community to lead development sessions and share good practice around their common challenges and goals. [2025 Research Group Leads Plan.docx](#)

7.3 Professional and Career Development:

7.3.1 Understanding the profile of our ECR Forum: Activity to review the profile of our ECR Forum has been initiated by the new ECR Forum Management Group. We are aware that since the 2023 HREiR submission where we reported 175 fixed term research staff (of which doctorally qualified at G7x5; G6x72; G5x21; G4x2), we have significantly grown our research grant and contract income and therefore the number of staff on fixed term contracts associated with external grant income will have grown. In 2025, we are keen to identify any specific activity that would be beneficial for this group of ECRs in terms of career planning, therefore we plan to hold focus groups in April, ahead of the broader Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research survey (CEDARS) survey closure in May 2025.

New Forum sign-up form will be developed to capture ECR 'profile' (e.g. PGR, established academic staff, fixed term contract) for all new Forum members so that we can best cater for our diverse ECR community.

7.3.2 ECR Forum Researcher Development Series: In September 2025 we will formally launch the new development series. The activities that are offered through this programme compliment the ECR Forum networking activities, the RIS Researcher Development offer and the VITAE Researcher Development Framework and will be focussed around four key themes: 1: Career mapping & career development planning for careers both in academia and in other sectors; 2: Recognise your strengths and identify areas for improvement/development; 3: Leadership; 4: Health and wellbeing

7.3.3 Vice Chancellors Fellowship Cohort Programme: This programme will start in September 2025. Over the three years of the fellowship, VCFs will have access to a bespoke rolling programme of community- building and networking activities. There will be nine sessions over the course of the fellowship, 3 sessions per year (Oct, Jan & May). There will be flexibility within the programme to include topic specific workshops suggested by the VCF community or to focus on emerging themes or opportunities arising in the external research funding landscape. [VCF Cohort Programme Mar 2025.docx](#) This Programme will be underpinned by the development offers that are already available through OD, Library and RIS.