

## **Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan**

- This paper updates the committee on the development of the SFC's Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan and seeks views on the document prior to its finalisation.

### **Recommendations**

- Consider the listed actions in the draft RD Concordat Action Plan.
- Offer insights on whether these actions are appropriate.
- Suggest other actions for inclusion in the Plan.
- Advise the executive on issues and opportunities in broader researcher development that are pertinent, especially with regards to the current Covid situation and the issues it has raised.

### **Financial implications**

- No immediate financial implications.

## Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan

### Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to update the committee on the development of the SFC's Action Plan and seek views on the document prior to its finalisation.
2. This is a discussion paper. It lays out suggested actions for development by SFC in response to the Researcher Development (RD) Concordat and seeks feedback on opportunities for further development and implementation of the plan or other aspects which should be included in the action plan.

### Background

3. The SFC is a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. This [Concordat<sup>1</sup>](#) is a statement setting out the expectations and responsibilities of researchers, their managers, employers and funders in relation to career development. It aims to increase the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK and to improve the quantity, quality and impact of research for the benefit of UK society and the economy.
4. Researcher Development continues to be an area of strategic importance to the SFC. We have a responsibility to help ensure that the next generation of researchers have a positive experience of post graduate education in Scotland that helps them achieve their degree/s and prepares them for their future careers both within and outwith universities. Covid- and Brexit- challenges have brought the issue of the next generation into clearer focus

### *Vitae Research*

5. BEIS commissioned Vitae, supported by UKRI and UUK, to gather evidence of the experiences of researchers during the first Covid-19 lockdown. The survey ran from 26 May to 9 June and attracted 10,408 UK respondents, of which 8,416 were from researchers working in universities and research institutes in the UK. A third of respondents were research staff and 60% were from Russell Group universities. The some of the report's findings include:
  - Approximately four in five respondents are showing some level of mental distress with higher levels of mental distress among doctoral researchers compared to research staff. Mental wellbeing was higher among individuals who felt well supported by the university and identified being able to access online skills training from their university.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy/concordat-to-support-the-career-development-of-researchers>

- A third of research staff respondents report being very stressed about employment status, with 60% very worried about their future career plans and job prospects. 40% of the research staff surveyed reported that their research contract ends during 2020. Only 10% reported that their funding has been extended in the context of the pandemic.
- Around a quarter of all respondents have caring responsibilities. Of these, around 90% have seen these responsibilities increase since the lockdown, 60% report a considerable increase. The large majority (88%) of those reporting a change in caring responsibility report that this has had a negative impact on their ability to meet the needs of their work.

6. Please see [here](#)<sup>2</sup> for more information, and [here](#)<sup>3</sup> for the full report.

### **Action Plan**

7. A draft of the SFC's Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan is provided as an annex to this paper.
8. World-leading research is one of SFC's strategic outcomes. As described in our strategic framework, we want to 'support the continued development of a world-leading internationally competitive research base that attracts the most talented international researchers to Scotland' and to create a research environment that 'provides equality of opportunity in the career progression of researchers'.
9. Researcher Development work has arguably been less prominent as an agenda in its own right recently as it has been blended into other aspects of work that SFC supports. This is positive, but does mean that the SFC has not considered the broader strategic aspects of the Researcher Development agenda independently, so it is appropriate to bring a paper to RKEC to discuss the actions that the executive have identified for development.
10. This is also a timeous point to discuss relevant pandemic-related challenges and if we would like to develop any additional, specifically Covid-related, actions or if the committee feels that such challenges would already be addressed by the draft Action Plan presented.
11. The universities and other supporting organisations should be commended for

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/impact-and-evaluation/the-impact-of-the-covid19-pandemic%20on-researchers-in-universities-and-research-institutes>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/impact-and-evaluation/covid-19-impact-on-researchers>

all that they have done to tackle recent challenges, but it would be helpful to have the committee's strategic insights on the future they see for the Scottish research base and how it interplays with the researcher development agenda.

### **Risk assessment**

12. There are consequences that will inevitably come from the development of the researcher development agenda in light of the commitments SFC will take forward in its action plan. This could lead to changes in what and how we support activities and engage with the sector on the opportunities and challenges identified. Given this work will impact on this and subsequent generations of researchers this is an important and significant agenda. This is compounded by the current Covid situation, making the risks more pronounced.
13. On this basis it is suggested that this work is a medium risk at this time.

### **Equality and diversity assessment**

14. Equality and diversity issues, and opportunities, will be explored when the scope and detail of the Action Plan has been better defined.

### **Financial implications**

15. This paper does not have any immediate financial implications for the SFC. As the agenda develops and the Action Plan is implemented there are likely to be implications for the Researcher Postgraduate Grant line as well as SFC budgets as actions are delivered.

### **Recommendations**

16. The Committee is invited to:
  - Consider the listed actions in the draft RD Concordat Action Plan.
  - Offer insights on whether these actions are appropriate.
  - Suggest other actions for inclusion in the Plan.
  - Advise the executive on issues and opportunities in broader researcher development that are pertinent, especially with regards to the current Covid situation and the issues it has raised.

### **Publication**

17. This paper will be published on the Council website.

## Further information

18. Contact: Andrew Youngson, Senior Policy Officer, tel: 0131 313 3469, email: [ayoungson@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:ayoungson@sfc.ac.uk).

## SFC Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan

### The Scottish Funding Council's vision and position

The SFC's current strategic framework states:

***'Our ambition is for Scotland to be the best place in the world to learn, educate, research and innovate, so that all of our nation can flourish.'*** And

***'Our purpose is to create and sustain a world-leading system of tertiary education, research and innovation that changes lives for the better, enriches society and supports sustainable and inclusive economic growth.'***

To support the delivery of these aspirational statements in our strategic framework we recognise the importance of supporting researchers in their professional development, irrespective of whether they continue in an academic career or fill roles in other fields.

The SFC is proud to partner with other key funders and stakeholder bodies to support the ongoing development of the research culture and opportunities available to researchers. Recognising that the research and innovation workforce of the future may look substantially different, this Concordat is a key statement of intent and a call to action in helping to recognise future needs and to adapt to meet them. This shift in needs and development of researcher culture is important within academia, but also more broadly as the majority of research staff undertake careers outwith traditional academia. We must work to make it easier for researchers to move agilely between sectors and organisations as their careers develop.

This Concordat aligns with other commitments and concordats in the Higher Education sector, which together provide holistic coverage of the research system and ensure that research cultures and environments nurture talent and enable excellent research.

### Our Ways of Working

SFC will work collaboratively with other funders and stakeholders, and engage with employers of researchers in taking forward actions in the Concordat. It will ensure that policies and approaches are evidence-based whilst also reducing the administrative burden on research organisations (ROs) where and if possible. We aspire to establish a baseline expectation of researcher development and support across the sector, but recognise that Scottish Higher Education Institutions are diverse in their nature and activities so we will avoid homogenised approaches

where they are not going to add value or will cause issues.

Alongside the new actions outlined later in this document to deliver on this Concordat's aims, it should be acknowledged that SFC is already actively delivering many of the core obligations through existing work across the organisation. We continue to work with institutions and stakeholders to identify, and where possible, share examples of good practice, where it already meets obligations and expectations, to help consolidate and build upon existing strengths in the sector. We will also continue to evaluate and engage with existing programmes and projects, as well as with the institutions we fund in supporting researchers, and to ensure that gaps in provision and other issues are identified and addressed where possible.

### **Additional Challenges and current context**

The SFC's approach to the Concordat will be directed towards the support and development of researchers. The Concordat raises a number of challenges for stakeholders and institutions to address, such as continuing challenges around job security and career destination tracking for researchers.

SFC will engage with other organisations in seeking to develop solutions to these, and other, challenges through the sector-wide working groups being established as an obligation of the Concordat Governing Body.

The SFC, both individually and as part of the Concordat Governing Body, will regularly assess the efficacy and outcomes of its interventions and consult with key organisations and stakeholders to further develop our action plan. The evolution of this plan will be informed and underpinned by evidence (including quantitative, qualitative and narrative) that supports the identification of what works in this context.

### **Additional note on current operating context**

The SFC will keep the actions and their proposed timelines for implementation under review, especially in light of the current coronavirus situation and its legacy impacts. We will be realistic and sympathetic to the challenges faced by our Higher education Institutions and other stakeholders at this time and maintain a dialogue with them, and through the Concordat Governing Body, will advise other bodies as to the situation and learning coming out of our implementation of this action plan.

The SFC reserves the right to amend, develop or remove any stated action in our action plan as necessary to give us flexibility in both the actions and timeframes when trying to take this agenda forward in these challenging circumstances. Such changes would be undertaken in dialogue with key partners and we will adjust the action plan and share it as appropriate should this be necessary.

## SFC Researcher Development Concordat Action Plan

<b>Leading and Communicating</b>				
SFC's engagement and intentions for the Concordat are to support culture change and development for researchers. Supporting Scottish higher education institutions to produce well rounded, able and highly trained experts is essential in driving economic growth and producing wider societal and cultural benefits.				
<b>Intended Outcome</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Outline success measure</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Suggested action owner</b>
Implement internal governance arrangements for the overview and the delivery of the Concordat.	Using our Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee we will monitor the implementation of the Concordat. This will inform the creation and operation of executive groups at SFC	Take forward a discussion with RKEC on our draft Action Plan.  Establish sub committees / internal groups as necessary to deliver specific actions identified.	December 2020 RKEC	AY
Look to integrate this Concordat with other cross-cutting SFC activities.	Using other SFC committees and internal groups, where appropriate, we will identify cross-cutting issues / opportunities to support the Concordat and its ethos and aspirations.	Establish internal groups as necessary to deliver specific cross cutting actions identified.	TBC	TBC



Engage with key HE sector groups and bodies e.g. US RTDC, practitioner communities	Using current groups and forums to highlight the Concordat's intended outcomes and promote it widely.	Present to any groups, committees and forums that this is pertinent to.	TBC	TBC
Use Outcome Agreement discussions to highlight the Concordat to the HEIs and engage in dialogue about their adoption/implementation of the Concordat.	Seek to develop OA guidance and brief/ support OA Managers of HEIs to take forward discussion on the Concordat with their HEIs.  (subject to the outcome of SFC's review of outcome agreements)	Revise OA guidance and brief the OAMs on the Concordat and implementation.	TBC	TBC
Monitor and evaluate the evidence base coming out of the implementation of the Concordat to ensure we have the evidence needed to inform further activities and expectations.	Develop actions in further detail and define success criteria/measures.	Review information gathered through the OA process to inform the SFC, Concordat Steering Group.	TBC	TBC
Increased awareness of the Concordat's principles, ambitions and obligations amongst researchers (and PIs /managers) in institutions funded by SFC.	We will consider if the institutions' adoption of the Concordat should be a condition of grant for receiving direct funding from SFC that supports researchers' activities and development, and if so when this could be implemented.		TBC	TBC
Continue to engage in the	We will collaborate with other funders to develop	Development of shared	TBC	TBC

development of the Shared vision and standards across the UK funding landscape for the Concordat.	consistent narrative around the Concordat and, where possible and where appropriate, seek to standardise national level expectations and provide funding on consistent and comparable terms to the other UK partners involved.	vision and expectations for researcher careers (that the larger funders have signed up to.)		
Concordat action plan contributes to and is harmonised with SFC policies and strategies/ strategic framework	The action plan for the Concordat is and will continue to be developed to deliver on aspirations in our strategic framework, and with reference to our current policies and practices. We will identify areas in need of development	Embed the Concordat into key documents that support it by raising its profile and ensuring it is considered more widely in areas of activities it touches on.	TBC	TBC
<p><b>Culture change</b></p> <p>The development of researchers and institutional research culture should be taken forward with the intention to ensure that the research environment encourages diversity of thought and experience and retains talented researchers of all kinds. SFC will recognise, and support, the activities that researchers undertake which are considered necessary to undertake high quality research and innovation both nationally and globally.</p> <p>SFC will work with UKRI's efforts in this space to seek the harmonisation of related research culture commitments into a single framework in due course.</p>				
<b>Intended Outcome</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Outline success measure</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Proposed action owner</b>
Strengthened support for research staff through engagement with HEIs on their professional development	Where there is evidenced, demonstrable need, identified through our OA process or by other means, we will use existing mechanisms or develop targeted	Review OA information and other sources of information obtained	TBC	TBC

and training	strategic investments to support of researcher development. We will monitor our funding to ensure it meets our objectives and addresses the gaps identified and delivers on any conditions of grant relevant to RD.	through engagement to inform further activities.		
Inform key people and communities about the Concordat, its purpose and progress.	Seek to engage with the SFC's Council and committees and other key groups (e.g. US RTDC) to keep them aware and involved in the development and implementation of this work.	Present / provide papers to key groups and people to brief them on the Concordat and action plan in greater detail and engage with them so they provide support and leadership for this in their own roles elsewhere.	TBC	TBC
Continue to support equality and diversity amongst the researcher community	SFC will continue with this work around equality and diversity (and access and inclusion) with reference to researcher development.	Identify opportunities were aspects of the SFC's E&D work might cross over and support the Concordat's aspirations.	TBC	TBC

### **Implementing and monitoring**

An obstacle identified in the review of the previous Researcher Development Concordat was the need for additional drivers to facilitate and enable culture change. The revised Concordat places obligations on Funders to ensure the Concordat achieves its objectives and improves the support and development of researchers. The SFC and its partners are mindful of the unintended consequences and potential for them to drive poor/ perverse behaviours. We will continue to work with UKRI and other major funders and stakeholders to co-design an integrated approach with buy-in from across

the sector.				
<b>Intended Outcome</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Outline success measure</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Proposed action owner</b>
Encourage the Scottish HEIs to sign up to the Concordat initially and then action their responsibilities under the Concordat, in due course.	Use the OA process to identify those institutions that have signed up to the Concordat and then monitor their responsibilities subsequently.	Establishing a clear position around which HEIs have signed up, and those who intend to.	TBC	TBC
HEIs in receipt of funding from the SFC sign up to the Concordat and fulfil with their obligations	We will explore if the institutions' adoption of the Concordat should be a condition of grant for receiving direct funding from SFC that supports researchers' activities and development, and if so when this could be implemented.	HEIs in receipt of funding are Concordat Signatories and up to date with reporting requirements currently in the Concordat.	TBC	TBC
Monitor the HEIs' progress and engagement with the Concordat and the delivery of their obligations to ensure the Concordat is being implemented.	As HEIs sign up to the Concordat we will monitor if this translates into tangible activity and the delivery of the Concordat's principles.	Visibility of the work the HEIs undertake to deliver the Concordat through the OA process.  (subject to the outcome of the OA consultation/ Review)	TBC	TBC
SFC has access to evidence and information on the experience of researchers, aligned to Concordat	Through our OA process we will collect information on the Concordat's implementation, activities and achievements. We will share this intelligence with the		TBC	TBC

principles.	CSG and other partner funders to inform the UK national overview.  (subject to the outcome of the OA consultation/ Review)			
The Concordat is implemented as a cross-cutting area of work informing SFC's activities, alongside its specific responsibilities.	SFC will promote the Concordat and its aspirations in an integrated fashion and not in isolation from other areas of work in driving cultural and operational changes, so as to deliver on the Concordat and our own strategic framework.		TBC	TBC
<p><b>Gathering evidence</b></p> <p>Interventions must be evidence based, with the aim of achieving our strategic objectives and delivering value for money. Many of the issues around the Concordat are poorly understood and several areas where further information is required to take actions / activities forward. These will be referred to the central Concordat Steering Group for discussion and consideration. A number of these challenges have already been identified by UKRI and the current list of actions is outlined below, which the SFC will support partners with where possible/appropriate.</p>				
<b>Intended Outcome</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Outline success measure</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Proposed action owner</b>
Use the OA process to gather information about the HEIs' uptake of the Concordat and any challenges/ opportunities they have that could merit centralised development or action, or provide	Embed an expectation into the OA process to raise the Concordat with each HEI we fund, and in subsequent years develop a deeper conversation  (subject to the outcome of the OA consultation/ Review)			

evidence to inform further actions and activities.				
Gain a better understanding of the barriers to secure employment.	SFC will work with CSG partners to engage with Scottish HEIs to understand and identify the barriers faced in gaining stable employment.	Identification of the barriers and incentives behind continued use of time-limited contracts		
Support the development of an evidence base of the benefits of healthy research cultures and well supported researchers.	SFC will work with partners to develop evidence for, and articulate the economic, social and cultural benefits of, healthy research cultures and sustainable careers for researchers.	Evidence synthesis and analysis report		