

Concordat Annual Report 2021

Introduction

The University of Kent is pleased to publish the first Annual Report for the [Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers](#), also known as the '[Researcher Development Concordat](#)', to which the University [committed](#) in June 2020.

Its purpose is to review progress made in the last year towards implementing the [Principles](#) of the Concordat, as per Kent's [signatory responsibilities](#). The report:

- 1) lists the strategic objectives underpinning the work to realise the aspirational aims of the Concordat
- 2) identifies measures of success against which to judge efforts to implement the Concordat Principles, including key deliverables
- 3) refers to the accompanying Concordat Action Plan (July 2021-June 2022), including critical next steps to further embed researcher development at Kent.

Strategic objectives

The Graduate and Researcher College (GRC) is coordinating initiatives to embed the Concordat Principles as part of the University's [strategy](#) to strengthen the support available for colleagues who research at all stages of the academic lifecycle. This is in conjunction with the Researcher Development Advisory Group (RDAG), Professional Services Departments (PSDs) and six Divisions. This work is a central component of the new GRC strategy which is being developed to recognise the former Graduate School's expanded remit since October 2020. (This will go to Senate for approval in November 2021 and will run alongside the wider [University of Kent Strategy 2025](#).)

The strategic objectives underpinning this work are:

- to embed the Concordat Principles across the institution, ensuring that the tenets of the Concordat are fulfilled and Kent upholds its obligations and signatory responsibilities
- to coordinate efforts by colleagues through the GRC by collaborating across a range of PSDs and Divisions to implement initiatives to drive the necessary changes and cultural shift
- to provide demand-led, holistic researcher training, development and support for colleagues across all career stages, including but not limited to our Early Career Research (ECR) staff
- to encourage, support, challenge and inspire colleagues in the Kent research community to develop, promote and sustain a supportive, stimulating and productive research culture and environment which enshrines equality, diversity and inclusivity in all its processes.

Measures of success

Progress to strengthen researcher development activities and support is monitored by [RDAG](#) which reports to the [Research & Innovation Board \(RIB\)](#), which in turn reports to Senate. RDAG ensures that the voice of researchers is heard in discussions across the

University and at the highest level. It also monitors, maintains and coordinates the renewal of Kent's [HR Excellence in Research Award \(HRER\)](#) accreditation (please see 'Implementation Plan' below).

As part of its remit, RDAG oversees guidance and support for researchers across all career stages including but not limited to: recruitment and selection, induction, appraisal/RPD/Individual Research and Innovation Planning, line management, training, support, mentoring, career and professional development and mobility, progression, promotion and wellbeing.

RDAG's oversight is reflected in many actions in the Concordat Action Plan (July 2021-June 2022), each of which is accompanied by a SMART success measure.

The group also monitors the implementation of the key deliverables listed below.

Key deliverables

The deliverables below respond to and/or incorporate content relating to the Concordat Principles. Those in bold have been judged to be of critical importance - please refer to the 'next steps' section below:

- **new central and Divisional induction processes tailored to researchers, including a mandatory researcher-specific Moodle induction course** created by the GRC and Talent & Organisational Development (T&OD)
- **expanded GRC web and SharePoint (SP) sites** as a 'one-stop shop' for information for academic and research staff, including a digital repository of and links to relevant training content, both internal and external
- **the 10-day principle of personal development enshrined across the institution and across all career stages**
- **PDF handbooks for a) research managers and b) researchers, as well as Divisional training resources, e.g. R&I handbooks**
- **RDAG embedded as the University's strategic decision-making body championing and overseeing researcher development at Kent**
- **Divisional, Human Resources (HR), Research and Innovation Services (RIS) and Equality, Diversity & Inclusivity (EDI) representatives/bodies reporting to RDAG on an annual basis** on promotions, EDI, research integrity/misconduct, representation in Divisional governance structures, the implementation of Concordat Principles, training, mentoring and RPD completion rates, communications activity, feedback from researchers and other relevant issues
- **regular feedback sought from researchers via CEDARS, interim surveys and focus groups**
- revised RPD guidance including Moodle modules and other digital content
- online case studies/career stories highlighting continuing professional development (CPD) planning and activities undertaken by staff at all career stages
- monthly bulletin for all academic and research staff including standing items on Concordat updates, the 10-day expectation and upcoming training opportunities
- webinar or all-staff webchat on the Concordat and what it means for all University staff
- a curated programme of demand-led training which includes tailoring existing provision to better support research staff across the academic lifecycle and organising forums and/or discussion events on topics related to researcher development and support such as how to establish and benefit from researcher networks

- reports on mandatory training undertaken by researchers available to relevant Divisional and PSD staff.

Implementation plan

Actions to be completed from July 2021 are specified in the Concordat Action Plan (July 2021-June 2022). This document builds on previous work to attain and retain the HRER Award. It supplements the current HRER Action Plan, which is being revised as part of the eight-year submission due in November 2021, and incorporates new initiatives mapped to the Concordat Principles.

Progress to date

A range of actions from the 2017 (HRER) Action Plan have now been completed and highlights of progress to date include the following:

- **Graduate School remit expanded:** The Graduate and Researcher College (GRC) was created in October 2020 with wider responsibility for implementing, monitoring and shaping researcher development across the institution.¹
- **dedicated staffing resources established:** A 0.6FTE Researcher Developer (Academic) was appointed from November 2020 to work with the Researcher Developer (Postgraduate) (0.1 FTE) on academic researcher development.
- **revitalised and expanded web presence:** extensive new 'Academic and Research Staff' sections of the GRC [web](#) and internal [SP](#) sites were launched in March 2021.
- **digital repository created:** the '[Resources](#)' and '[Training and Development](#)' sections of the GRC website contain or link to relevant information including Kent-specific content housed on the GRC SP site.
- **GFWG established:** The Grants Factory Working Group (GFWG) was created to coordinate and support the operation of a programme of researcher-focused events delivered by central and Divisional colleagues, as well as external experts, which is curated by the GRC.
- **communications developed and/or expanded:** the researcher communications strategy has been reviewed, relevant stakeholders identified and new internal and external channels established for a) researchers and b) PSD and Divisional staff who support them. Promotional activities include regular use of [blogposts](#), increased tweeting and new Teams channels for PDRAs, RAs and Research Associates, as well as for staff (with separate channels for 'RDAG', 'GFWG' and 'Divisional/PSD liaison').
- **mailing lists established for all research staff:** dynamic lists have been created for a) PDRAs, RAs and Research Associates, b) all research staff and c) all academic and research staff.
- **[Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey \(CEDARS\) 2021](#) undertaken for the first time:** 160 responses were recorded, constituting a response rate of 12.4% overall and 10.8% for postdocs.
- **[Future of Work survey](#) undertaken:** 41 responses from staff whose main area of work was R&I.
- **focus groups held:** three [Concordat focus groups](#) were held in May 2021 for staff at different career stages.

¹ This was part of a wider reorganisation, 'Organising for Success' (O4S), which led to the creation of six Divisions from the previous three Faculties.

- **RDAG relaunched:** formerly the Researcher Development Working Group (RWAG), [RDAG](#) was relaunched with new representative [membership](#).
- **training provided:** 11 virtual sessions were organised for 2020-21 covering topics relating to funding and innovation policies and practices, research ethics and data, copyright and open access publishing, intellectual property, knowledge exchange, professional and career development, and positive mental health and wellbeing.
- **career coaching available to postdocs:** three hours of coaching per month is available and provision can be reassessed according to demand.
- **support provided:** virtual sessions organised by the GRC have taken place including a [PDRA Pre-Christmas Update Meeting](#) and [Summer Vacation Research Competition \(SVRC\) Q&A session](#).
- **booking of training facilitated and expanded:** all academic and research staff (as well as Divisional and PSD R&I staff supporting researchers) can now enrol on GRC-organised training via [Target Connect](#), the GRC events booking system.
- **improved reporting of training:** a bespoke training report has been developed for the GRC detailing mandatory training undertaken by academic and research staff which is recorded on Staff Connect and data is also available for research staff training booked via Target Connect. Training uptake can now be monitored by RDAG and similar reporting could be made available to the Divisions.
- **RDP access expanded to all ECRs:** ECRs including postdocs can attend [Researcher Development Programme \(RDP\)](#) sessions aimed predominantly at postgraduate researchers, which are bookable via Target Connect.
- **SVRC funding secured for 2021:** funding was obtained for up to 9 different research projects, each associated with a particular Division and/or Signature Research Theme, and work is ongoing to embed the [competition](#) as an annual event, given its proven success in supporting PDRA's to gain experience of all stages of the research management process, in a 'bite-sized' package.

Take-up of many of the initiatives developed for research staff in 2020-21 has been slow. The pressures and ongoing uncertainty caused by the pandemic, including home schooling, care duties, and/or illness, have impacted on colleagues in multiple ways: many staff are struggling to keep up with the demands of their workload and have been unable to find time for training (61% of CEDARS respondents disagreed that they felt confident to take time for their professional, career and personal development.)

In addition, [O4S](#) has impacted on all academic, research and PSD staff. Hence considerable focus and effort have been required to establish new working practices, relationships and communications channels within Divisions and between PSDs, Divisions and Schools.

Consequently, there have been delays to completing some actions specified in the HRER Action Plan and/or changes in delivery owing to both external and internal factors: in some cases, implementation has been postponed, e.g. promoting sign-up to internal vacancies alerts at in-person induction sessions, whilst in others, delivery has been Divisional rather than central, e.g. briefings on promotions. Also, since the HRER Action Plan is a live document, it reflects the changing circumstances of researcher development and support at Kent, and has been updated as delivery mechanisms and indeed objectives have changed. Further information about the progress of individual actions will be included in the [backwards-looking Action Plan](#) to be submitted as part of the eight-year external review process in November 2021.

Next steps

Work is ongoing to complete outstanding items of greatest importance in the 2017 (HRER) Action Plan (please see the list of key deliverables above). The following projects and activities are judged to be of greatest potential impact on and benefit to the research community at Kent: they have been classified as 'critical' in the Concordat Action Plan (July 2021-June 2022) and are listed by deadline:

Action	Deadline
Produce a mandatory central Moodle induction, including reference to support for researchers	October 2021
Produce a mandatory Moodle induction course for researchers, incorporating references to the Concordat	January 2022
Develop new pages relating to the Concordat Principles in phase 2 of GRC web and SP work, incorporating basic information about the 10-day expectation	January 2022
Ensure that GRC communications activity covers the 10-day expectation	January 2022 or earlier
Submit paper to the Executive Group re incorporating a 10-day requirement into all new contracts and issuing contract variations for existing staff	Spring 2022
Create PDF handbooks for research managers and researchers, incorporating more detailed information than the induction module, links to internal and external content and information about the 10-day expectation	June 2022
RDAG to monitor institutional policies in relation to researchers via input from relevant teams (including HR, T&OD, RIS), EDI and the Divisions	June 2022 or earlier
Develop Divisional induction processes, including new online content where appropriate	September 2022
Develop and maintain Divisional training resources for academic and research staff, e.g. R&I handbooks	September 2022
RDAG to request annual Divisional reports which focus on people e.g. including information about communications activity, feedback from researchers, EDI, representation, the implementation of Concordat Principles, training and RPD completion rates (if available to Divisions) and other relevant topics	September 2022
RDAG to consider greater use of open-ended contracts and redeployments via annual report from HR and/or HR attendance at least once a year as an item for discussion	September 2022
Run shorter survey or focus groups in interim years targeting specific group(s) of staff or on specific issues	Ongoing/ December 2022
Seek regular feedback from researchers	Ongoing/ May 2023
Run CEDARS every two years	Next due May 2023

Conclusion

Institutional commitment to the Concordat is a significant undertaking which requires focused and coordinated action, along with dedicated support and resources to ensure its successful

implementation. Key to this process is the role of the GRC as central facilitator, information conduit and communicator, curator of researcher-specific training and portal of essential content and useful resources. The GRC relies on proactive support from staff in the Divisions and the following PSDs in order to achieve the Concordat's ambitious aims: Careers and Employability Service, HR, Information Services, RIS and T&OD. Furthermore, all activities need to uphold the highest standards in relation to EDI by engaging all staff with responsibilities in this area, including in relation to Athena Swan. The University is committed to collaborative and matrix working, and key stakeholders from all these areas are working well together in challenging times to make progress in relation to the Concordat Principles.

Our focus until now has been on establishing structures, appointing staff, reviewing existing practices in light of the revised Concordat aspirations, developing appropriate strategies and setting up relevant communications networks and committees to facilitate coordinated action to deliver our strategic priorities. A detailed gap analysis has been undertaken by the Researcher Developers in the GRC which compares Kent's current policies and practices against the Concordat Principles and the Concordat Action Plan (July 2021-June 2022) has been generated based on these identified needs. This work has resulted in a clear sense of what can be done in the next twelve months and what will require longer implementation. It has also highlighted two critical success factors:

- that the University needs to allocate staff and budgetary resources commensurate with the Concordat deliverables and aspirations. This applies particularly to the provision of dedicated GRC staff as well as to a suitable training budget to enable the delivery of bespoke training which is not available in-house.
- that successful implementation of the Concordat principles will only be achieved with buy-in from academic and research colleagues across the institution, and particularly from research managers/Principal and Co-Investigators. The culture they embody and promote regarding their own career and professional development, and that of their teams, will play *the* fundamental and decisive role in defining and shaping the research culture within which all Kent's ECRs and other researchers operate.

These factors will be central to determining how quickly and successfully Kent can implement the Concordat Principles post-pandemic/O4S.