

## **Annual report on progress and planning in relation to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, 2022**

### **University of Kent**

#### Context

The University of Kent is a dual intensive university seeking excellence across both its learning and teaching and research and innovation portfolios. In 2019-20, the University began a major institutional restructuring exercise, Organising for Success (O4S), which involved both the consolidation of twenty-three academic Schools into six multi-disciplinary Divisions and the re-negotiation of responsibilities across the University informed by the principle of devolving greater autonomy and resource from central units to academic Divisions. Implementation of this took place alongside the impact of Covid on the sector, with some operational and cultural elements of this process therefore continuing into 2021-22. Work relating to the further development of research culture and environment within these new structures also extended into 2021-22 as a result of the prior need to focus institutional resource on the rescheduled submission for REF2021. Alongside the O4S process, the University has also given greater focus to priority areas of research (currently three 'Signature Research Themes' and three research Institutes) whilst remaining committed to providing a supportive and inclusive research environment for all individual research staff. To provide a clear institutional focus to this commitment, and delivery of the principles of the Concordat, the University introduced a new Enhancing our R&I Culture strategy in spring 2022. In autumn 2022, a new University Research Culture and Environment Steering Group, including all staff with relevant central and Divisional leadership roles, was created to ensure effective development and delivery of this strategy. Objectives and activities summarised in this report should be understood in this context of institutional change and strategic development.

#### Strategic objectives for the reporting period July 2021-November 2022

1. To ensure that principles and practices set out in the Concordat are embedded into business as usual within the new academic Divisions, with a particular focus on: a) ensuring effective annual reviews for discussion of staff research activities and career development; b) provision of relevant information within Divisions through handbooks or other collated online information; c) the development of Divisional training activities to support the development of researchers, and d) continued attention to issues of equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to the career development of research staff.
2. To ensure that principles and practices set out in the Concordat are fully integrated into University-wide strategies and processes with a particular focus on: a) addressing risks to researchers' mental health and well-being; b) promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to the career development of researchers; c) ensuring that Concordat principles are clearly understood by researchers and those with responsibility for research leadership and management; d) promoting career stability for researchers wherever possible; e) ensuring effective management of workload for researchers; and f) embedding core principles of the Concordat into the institutional leadership culture.
3. To strengthen resources to support the development of research leaders and managers and to ensure effective wider research and career development for staff in line with Concordat principles through the work of its Graduate and Researcher College in collaboration with Divisions and other relevant central units.

### Activities implemented to meet strategic objectives

During the past 17 months, the following actions have been undertaken in relation to these three key objectives:

1. (a) Divisions have re-established annual reviews for staff, following significant disruption to this process during academic years affected by Covid lockdowns with their associated increase on staff workload and additional demands for staff with caring responsibilities. These have taken the form of the annual Reflect, Plan, Develop (RPD) review, which staff take to reflect on their overall professional development, and an Individual Research Planning exercise (IRP) focused specifically on their work as a researcher. Together, these reviews provide an opportunity for staff to reflect on their career development, identify ways in which they can make use of the 10 days' provision for career development appropriate to their needs, and be made aware of relevant resources to support their research.  
(b) Divisions have provided relevant information on support for research staff through Research Handbooks or other collated material available to staff online.  
(c) Divisions have developed their own portfolio of training activities for their staff, with relevant discipline-specific emphases. Content delivered through these activities has covered issues such as EDI in relation to research cultures, specific research skills, and planning for professional development at different career stages. Whilst Divisions have prioritised different areas within their training portfolios, the completion of training activities in 2021-22 has provided an opportunity for collective reflection and the sharing of good practice among Divisional staff. A popular form of support for researcher well-being in some Divisions has been the development of different forms of writing retreat in which staff engage in research writing in a context of mutual support.
  
2. (a) The new Research Culture and Environment Steering Group has been established to ensure that Concordat principles can be effectively reflected upon, implemented and monitored across the University. This has replaced the Researcher Development Advisory Group which previously over-saw the development of work relating to the Concordat, with the new Steering Group including a wider membership of institutional leads and research managers able to identify and act on key initiatives;  
(b) In recognition of the fact that researcher well-being can often be challenged by aspects of their work not directly related to research, the University has undertaken a How We Work review to identify ways in which processes and procedures affecting staff working can be simplified. It has also invested in addressing challenges arising from the introduction of a new internal online records and management system (KentVision), which had inadvertently added significant pressures to the workload of some staff. A Redundancy Avoidance Agreement has been reached by the University, UCU and staff representatives with the intention of reducing stress for staff whilst promoting financial sustainability for the institution.  
(c) The University has formally recognised that the principle of 10 days' professional development will be embedded into Workload Allocation Models for staff, and work is continuing on the development of a new University-wide Workload Allocation Model to ensure a consistent approach to staff time for undertaking research activities.  
(d) A new online induction module has been introduced for new academic and research staff which introduces the key principles of the Concordat and the wider national policy context for understanding key principles of researcher development, and signposts relevant support and resources.  
(e) The University Workforce Profile Project has been undertaken to ensure that the University minimises the use of non-substantive and fixed-term contracts for staff (other than where the funding on which a research position is based is time-limited).

(f) The University has continued to embed the use of its Academic Career Map (which identifies appropriate markers of professional development and practice at different career stages, including specific markers relating to research and innovation) into its reward and recognition processes, including promotion and additional salary awards, as well as making it a key reference point in its Research Grant and Contract Income action plan.

(g) The University has introduced an Antiracism Strategy and is developing an application for a Race Equality Charter Mark. A specific action plan for research and innovation in relation to the Antiracism Strategy is currently under consultation for implementation from 2022-23 onwards.

3. In addition to continuing to serve as the central unit responsible for promoting understanding and delivery of the Concordat across the University, the Graduate and Researcher College has also:

(a) Created a substantial online resource for staff which brings together a range of University and external resources relevant to researcher career development, and organised in relevant to key themes within the Concordat.

(b) Extended its career coaching programme beyond doctoral students to include post-doctoral research fellows and other academic research staff.

(c) Continued to deliver a staff development training programme designed to complement training offered at Divisional level.

#### Measures of success and learning from progress

An important indicator of quality in terms of strategic thinking and support in relation to research career development has been provided by the University's REF2021 results. Seven of our Units of Assessment were judged to have at least 75% 4\* environment profiles, with three of these (History; Arts; and Social Work and Social Policy) graded at 100% 4\*. Research England feedback on our other submissions tended to indicate that lower grade profiles were not associated with the quality of planning and support in relation to staff career development. The process of developing these REF submissions was valuable in terms of identifying different forms of good practice across the institution and the Research Culture and Environment Steering Group, and other cross-University initiatives, will be an important means of ensuring that we share this across all of our Divisions. Evidence of successful support for early career researchers was also evidenced in the award of three UKRI Future Leaders Fellows awards to members of our staff in 2022.

Given that a number of the major actions listed above were completed in 2022, we are at too early a stage to undertake meaningful measurements of success for many of them. We also welcome the emphasis in the Tickell Review on simplification, harmonization and proportionality in relation to monitoring activities. With this in mind, the University's Research Culture and Environment Steering Group has been tasked with identifying proportionate approaches to monitoring our research culture to support internal planning and external reporting. This will be informed by outcomes from the UKRI Phase 2 review of Concordats and other initiatives, so that we can ensure that we undertake this monitoring work in ways that provide us with key information, avoid unnecessary bureaucracy and meet the needs of different external reporting requirements. We will also benefit from the introduction of new EDI-related data sets by the University which will allow greater inter-sectional analysis in relation to our research staff.

We are at an important stage in the process of developing our support for the career development of researchers and further building a positive research culture within the institution. Whilst feedback from REF2021 and other national funders indicates that there are already clear strengths in our work, the new structures and working arrangements arising from O4S present a new set of

opportunities and challenges for us to address. The past year has seen important steps forward in the development of wider institutional strategies as well as greater capacity within academic Divisions, following two years of Covid-related disruption, to develop their own resources and ways of working relevant to their particular staff groups. The coming year will be an important next step in moving forward with further implementation of these initiatives, as well as building on the University's very recently introduced HR People and Culture Strategy, and forthcoming new EDI Strategy.

#### Proposals for improvement and forward look to actions for the coming 12 months

We recognise that building on these developments will require continued adjustment to post-O4S structures and working practices across the University, and that we both learn from developments arising organically within Divisions as well as maintain a coherent and consistent set of aims and standards across the University. We also understand the need for an appropriate balance to be reached between targeted support for key strategic areas of research and maintaining an inclusive research environment in which a wide range of staff research can be supported. This work will take place in the context of a sustained University strategy for long-term financial sustainability, but we will take care to ensure that relevant external funding is targeted at initiatives that will create a supportive and development environment for researchers.

Specific actions that are planned for the coming academic year are:

1. To maintain a full annual round of RPD and IRP reviews with academic research staff in Divisions, with reporting and planning for professional development integrated into these with the Concordat's 10-day guideline in mind, and that staff are made aware through these of relevant career development resources.
2. To continue to build communication between Divisions and the Graduate and Researcher College on how their respective training portfolios might best be developed to address relevant staff needs at all career stages, with the Graduate and Researcher College specifically working collaboratively with Divisions in developing training events relating to a positive, supportive and inclusive research culture, enhancing the work of research leaders and managers and providing additional targeted training for early career researchers.
3. For the Research Culture and Environment Steering Group to agree further key initiatives to be developed in relation to staff development and positive research culture, identify specific actions that should be undertaken in relation to these and to establish effective and proportionate approaches to monitoring progress.
4. To complete the University-level review of the Workload Allocation Model within the coming 12 months to introduce a consistent approach to supporting staff time for research across the institution.
5. To complete consultation on, and initiate delivery of, the research and innovation action plan relating to the University Antiracism Strategy in areas including leadership commitment to taking responsibility for antiracism strategies, building inclusive research cultures in which critical attention is paid to issues of inequality and exclusion, continually reviewing relevant EDI training offered across the University and learning from experiences of black and minority ethnic colleagues.
6. To build on the forthcoming University EDI Strategy and new data dashboard to develop more intersectional approaches to thinking about the support and development of research staff, identifying other data as needed, and agreeing specific actions based on this data to promote an inclusive research culture and support for staff from under-represented groups.

7. To distribute the University's Enhancing Research Culture QR income (£350k for 2022/23) to support specific central and Divisional initiatives focused on the development of research careers and a positive wider research culture.
8. For the Graduate and Researcher College to work with the University's Research Ethics Advisory Group to explore further ways of developing staff understanding and working practices in relation to research integrity, recognising the distinct forms this may take in different disciplines.

#### Approval process and institutional sign-off

Drafting of this report was led by the Graduate and Researcher College, with an initial draft circulated to the Research Culture and Enhancement Steering Group and revised in the light of feedback from members. The report was then provisionally agreed by the DVC-Research, Professor Shane Weller, before being passed on to the University Council for final approval.