

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY CONCORDAT IMPLEMENTATION PLAN:

8-Year Vitae Interim Review

1. BACKGROUND AND APPROACH TO EVALUATION

The Open University (OU) was first awarded the European Commission's HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award in 2013. The 8-year review follows previous reviews at the 2, 4 and 6-year marks, with the last one in 2019 to assess progress against the Concordat Implementation Plan (CIP) 2017-2020. The CIP identified actions to address perceived gaps as well as good practice in provision for the welfare and support of research staff and included Postgraduate Research Students, although from 2017 onwards the emphasis has been more on postdoctoral researchers.

In receiving the 2017 award the CIP 2017-2020 was revised to adopt a set of 18 success measures to support reporting and monitoring of the plan as a whole and to demonstrate the OU's commitment to the seven Concordat principles, working towards meeting the measures over the period 2017-2020. These measures were revisited following 2019 award. This 8-year review highlights progress made, key achievements, areas where further effort needs to be directed in the next two years to these measures and the CIP using the new Researcher Development Concordat (RDC) template. The CIP is monitored and evaluated on behalf of Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research, Enterprise, and Scholarship (PVC-RES) by the Researcher Development Concordat Steering Group (RDCSG) that meets three times a year and reports annually to Research Committee which is Chaired by the PVC-RES. Since 2019, the period covered by this report, the OU has undergone considerable governance, strategic and organisational changes and has also adapted through the Coronavirus pandemic. Where these changes have had an impact on progress against success measures, they will be highlighted in the report and/or on the backward-looking action plan.

For this report, after reviewing the CIP and the data from the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) 2019 and Principal Investigators and Researchers Survey (PIRLS) 2019, we conducted a series of researcher workshops to discuss the OU's "employment", "environment and culture", and "professional and career development" practices. As of 1st March 2021, the OU employed 154 members of staff on research only contracts. The workshops conducted in January 2021 involved gathering data from 14 research staff as part of a wider gap analysis for the "new" Researcher Development Concordat. Findings from the workshops with researchers have also fed into this review report, as well as the new forward-looking action plan.

2. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS & PROGRESS AGAINST THE CONCORDAT IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

In support of Principle 1, the CIP sets a goal to reduce the number of research staff employed on multiple fixed term contracts (FTC) to below September 2017 levels (i.e., 77%) by 2020. The OU has met this target through active management and support to faculties from People Services Business Partners (PS). PS provide quarterly reports on employment figures to RDCSG. Overall, the number of research staff who moved from one FTC to another decreased from 4 in Q1 2020/21 to 1 in Q2 2020/21 (75% reduction), when compared to 2017. See Backward-looking Action Plan A1.3.1 for further details of the data. The issue of researchers having multiple FTCs was also highlighted by the Research Staff workshops in the gap analysis studies for the new RDC. For example, several participants shared negative experiences of the implications of multiple FTCs on their mental health and wellbeing and worries on potential redundancies after a four-year FTC. Improvements in closely monitoring these figures were an achievement of the previous period CIP. PS have actively reviewed all staff on multiple FT contracts and worked with the faculties to reduce this number. RDCSG will continue to monitor the number of staff on FTC to ensure that this trend continues in alignment of the new Concordat Employment principles.

The 4-year review identified a perception among researchers of unequal promotions opportunities when compared to permanent staff. To respond to this matter, in the 6-year review RDCSG committed to undertake an annual review of the promotion data as well as the candidate's pathway to promotion from the Academic Staff Promotions Committee. In October 2020, Senate gave formal approval to a refresh of the academic promotion process; these changes took effect from 2021 and reporting will include some changes on a candidate's pathway to promotion (see Backward-looking Action Plan A1.4.1 for details of the data). Following Senate's formal approval to refresh the academic promotion process in 2021, opportunities to provide more comprehensive and detailed collection of data and provision of management information will be leveraged in the forward looking CIP.

In support of Principle 2, regular annual Researcher Career Development (RCD) trainings have taken place and the RCD team nested with the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) have used course evaluation surveys, together with the outcomes of CROS and PIRLS 2019 surveys, to inform improvements to existing sessions and to identify new sessions for 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic year. This success measure is on target with the OU continuing to review the RCD programme in each

academic year and report to RDCSG with any changes. See Backward-looking Action Plan B 2.3.1 for details of the figures and revised sessions and new sessions within the programme.

The planned RCD training programme was interrupted temporarily in March 2020 when Covid-19 required all staff and PGRs to work from home. Faculties, PS and RCD worked quickly to move all required training provision online and to ensure that facilitators and attendees were not disadvantaged by this move. Numbers of attendees at RCD online sessions have remained very high and the feedback from participants has been good (i.e., 93% satisfied on average). Training is advertised widely (e.g., [RCD website](#), social media, Faculties, [My Learning Centre \(MLC\)](#)), and all recordings and slides are available in RCD's [Virtual Learning Environment](#). MLC, a staff training portal, contains over 900 learning and training sessions that are accessible for all OU staff. Some of these sessions are stand-alone online courses, while others like those provided by IET are run several times a year on a particular date (or multiple days for longer events).

The CIP had put in place a measure to capture and assess levels of positive engagement with the RCD website and resources: The new website for RCD was delivered in August 2019 with Google web analytics feature running behind to provide data on engagement. Research staff workshops for the gap analysis (for the new Concordat) revealed that the training schedule is not always easily accessible despite the wide advertisement channels. To tackle this issue, the RCD team took initiative to specifically target those on Research contracts when advertising via email. The analytics data has been monitored and reported to RDCSG, see backward-looking action plan B 2.6.3 for the data details. The RCD also created a Concordat page on its website and has been asking people to show interest to raise awareness.

The CIP aimed to see an improvement in the CROS results relating to recognition and value for Principle 2. Compared to 2017 data, this measure is on target for recognition and value to the contributions in public engagement with research (+3%), and publications (+9%). Yet, it is not on target for teaching and lecturing (0%, remained same), due to the unique OU distance learning model, peer reviewing (-5%), supervising research students (-2%), managing budgets/resources (-17%), supervising/managing research staff (-22%), grant/funding applications (-1%), and knowledge transfer and commercial activities (-14%). In 2019, compared to the sector, OU staff feel considerably more valued for their contribution to research activities. Note that the CROS survey response rate was very low, total number of responses to the survey were 37 in 2017 (36% response rate), and 21 in 2019 (17% response rate), leading to a need for caution in use of these results. RDCSG will continue to monitor the progress with the new CEDARS survey in 2023.

An important factor in career progression of researchers is participation in the annual Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA). After the 4-year review, success measures for engagement and value of annual appraisal were added to the CIP. The CIP put a measure to monitor the engagement in annual appraisal through the maintenance or improvement in uptake of CDSA and as reported in CROS 2019 data. The OU has a good record of carrying out appraisals with reported levels in staff surveys of 89% in 2016, 96% in 2017, 89.5% in 2019, 50% in 2020, probably due to the pandemic. Following internal staff IT system replacement known as Success Factors, from 2021 the system will now track and prompt line managers to complete the annual CDSA appraisal. PS had been reporting quarterly on CDSA engagement to RDCSG. For example, research staff completion rates for CDSA as at Q2 2020/21 was 24.1% and Q1 20/21 was 24.8%. This information, however, does not measure the effectiveness of the CDSA – just the completion rate. See backward-looking action plan B2.3.2 for details of the CROS results.

In support of principles 3 and 4, the OU has continued to put resource into developing mentorship support for researchers and developed training for mentors. See backward-looking action plan C3.8.1 for details of the figures. Mentoring takes place in various contexts across the OU. A new mentoring system is being developed in the Organisational Development (OD) team (part of People Services) to ensure every staff member has access to a mentor if they want it. Online mentoring courses are also available through MLC. OD offers career development workshops and coaching sessions, although participation is relatively low. Official records may not represent the actual practice though as the recording of the different mentoring activities is not adequately recorded, apart from the formal third-party mentoring of PGRs. Thus, the OU needs a comprehensive approach to mentoring, therefore a mentoring scheme will be enabled through the OU's new Core System Replacement (CSR) system. As actioned for the OU's Athena Swan submission, "a university wide approach to mentoring will be developed and access to mentoring for all academic and research staff will be ensured".

In support of these principles CIP tasked the RCD to measure the percentage of research staff who are engaged in the RCD programme and aim to increase the number of attendees by 3%. The way RCD collect the data of attendees changed in October 2020 to include staff category data which is used for the institution Athena Swan action plan. The CSR staff training record tool is currently at least 12 months from delivery (as of May 2021), so available data is collected by individual workshop attendance, and is in some instances limited. As of August 2020, the RCD holds a researcher database which is updated monthly by PS.

Researchers are now directly contacted for RCD programme with an aim to increase effectiveness, awareness and number of attendees. RDCSG will continue to monitor the effectiveness of these initiatives and evaluate the impact of changes.

To support career development CIP sets a target of at least three HEA Fellowships through Supervision of Research Students awarded per year by 2019 via the OU accredited scheme, Applaud. On average the scheme gets three HREiR applicants per year since 2016/17 and the target has been achieved. The new Applaud scheme, launched in September 2020, now recognises Supervision of Research Students as teaching practice in the main scheme to gain an HEA Fellowship. Also, a new taught online PGCAP provision has been made available since September 2021.

Overall satisfaction rates via PRES shows the OU has been in the 5th place nationally and the rates increased from 84% (2018) to 87% (2019), which is on target. PRES action plan which was produced by the Director of Graduate School (GS) and Research Degrees Committee aimed to provide greater support to develop teaching experience for PGRs and the CIP put a measure to monitor these via PRES results. See backward-looking action plan C3.2.1 for details of the PRES results. PRES results reflect limited teaching opportunities available from PGRs with the OU teaching model, whereby most teaching is designed and produced by module teams for large-scale online delivery and subsequently taught by module teams and contracted Associate Lecturers. In contrast to other universities, running say a seminar or lecture for a PGR or researcher is less common due to the large scale that the OU operates. However, Faculties have started to pilot with small groups of PGRs who join and follow module teams while producing courses as part of their teaching and learning experience. The OU will be participating to PRES 2021 and the outcome will also be monitored by RDCSG. Moreover, the CIP put a measure to maintain annual internship engagement of 2-3 PGR students funded through the Santander scheme and explore providing additional PGR students undertaking placements across the UK. A OU's student opportunities manager is now working with the Careers and Employability Service to list internship opportunities on their Opportunity Hub platform. Currently, one PGR intern via Santander achieved in 2019/20. To date in 2020/21 all placements have been virtual and there have not been any PGR placed students due to the pandemic.

In support of Principle 5, the RDCSG put a measure to introduce RCD programme with explicit connections to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF) and evaluations of awareness to increase by at least 3% from CROS 2017 data. The RCD programme on MLC explicitly details RDF links. See backward-looking action plan D5.5.1 for details of the figures. The OU's PGR training programme is underpinned by the skills and experiences defined in the Vitae RDF. Training on RDF is provided to all PGRs as part of induction, in a stand-alone session, ("Planning your skills development" delivered for October and February intake cohorts and recorded for parity of access) and a revised information management system, PGR Manager, launched in March 2021. The outcome of these changes in relation to the increased awareness of the RDF framework will be monitored by RDCSG. It is anticipated that with the increased visibility of the new Concordat and the links to 10 days of professional development awareness amongst both researchers and wider OU staff will increase in the next reporting period.

In support of Principle 6, the CIP set a measure to work more directly to consider the impact of Concordat issues across the range of equality objectives and monitor impact of relevant Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) objectives through reporting to RDCSG. Since October 2020, there have been structural changes within the EDI team. In December 2020, the OU's first Dean for EDI was appointed to lead on EDI work for the OU. She is forming a new EDI plan for the OU, working with the Senior Managers, and drawing on work from an EDI gap analysis across the OU undertaken in August 2020. For this principle, CIP also set a measure to extend from success in Athena SWAN within STEM, with a target set for a first non-STEM Schools (Departmental) submission for a Bronze Athena SWAN Award. The institutional Athena SWAN Action Plan, developed for the OU's Bronze renewal submission in November 2020, also includes an indicative timeline for School submissions over the next four years, including those Schools from non-STEM Faculties. The first of these submissions completed by the Business School in May 2021 for a Bronze award. Central support within the EDI team is also being provided to Schools to support submissions from 'new' applicants in non-STEM schools.

Principle 7 is monitored by RDCSG that meets three times per year. Its membership includes representatives from research staff in each Faculty, the University and College Union, Faculty leadership, People Services, the Graduate School Director and senior managers from units responsible for delivering the action plan. RDCSG responsibilities include reviewing progress against the CIP; managing escalation of any non-conformances identified; reviewing results of the CROS, PIRLS, PRES and internal Research Support Surveys to consider any implications for the action plan. Concordat activities are reported to the Research Committee annually. The most recent report was March 2021. The Research Committee also provides approval for the review process and reporting in support of the HR Excellence in Research Award.

3. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STEPS

In November 2020, the OU signed a [Letter of Commitment to](#) the new Researcher Development Concordat to [support the Career Development of Researchers](#). This support is based on the principles and obligations in the new [Concordat](#). The earlier CIPs included PGRs as part of its audience but moving forward to the new Concordat, the OU will solely include researchers, those on Research T&Cs. Existing success measures in relation to Graduate School have already been met any measures relating to PGRs will not be included in the new Concordat Action Plan. The Graduate School have mechanisms for reporting on performance to the Research Degrees Committee. What action will be carried over to the new forward-looking action plan is stated on the backward-looking action plan where possible.

With regards to institutional surveys, the OU decided not to take part in CEDARS 2021 due to the pandemic but will pilot CEDARS internally in 2022. With the launch of the new Concordat in 2019, we have taken the opportunity of this HREiR renewal to ensure that our HREiR strategy is aligned with the new Concordat and is meeting the needs of our research staff within this dynamically changing research context. This new plan is informed by our gap analysis against the institution-level expectations within the 2019 Concordat, as well as progress and researcher feedback on the previous HREiR action plan. To ensure continuity from our previous plans and initiatives, we have linked this new action plan to the previous plan and the seven Principles of the 2008 Concordat. The existing CIP has acted to support and retain a focus on researcher career development during a time of change for the OU. Achievements have built on the basis of improved management of FTCs that were developed over the previous CIP. In addition, specific advances have been made in providing stronger mentoring support, developing action plans from review of survey responses, and revising and strengthening RCD programme.

Following the gap analysis, an implementation plan was approved by Research Committee on 7 July 2021. This implementation plan contains eight actions (incl. developing appropriate recording system for PD, further awareness raising, representation) addressing fifteen (eight high and seven medium) priority obligations that were not yet fully met following the gap analysis. Following feedback from Vitae, we have mapped each existing action against the 2019 Concordat and ensured new S.M.A.R.T. success measures and actions have been developed to reflect the new expectations, specifically for the fifteen priority obligations, so that this plan is progressive and supports the full transition to the 2019 Concordat. In the forward plan we have highlighted in light green colour the medium to high priority obligations that the OU/RDCSG specifically wants to focus on in the next two years. Further OU wide progress has been made since the gap analysis, including consultation with researchers on the forthcoming new OU research strategy, work on the Research Integrity Framework, Athena Swan, Safe Space reporting, and Resourcing Hub for Managers.

This report replaces the report submitted to Vitae in May 2021.