Annual Report for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

Universities and Research Institutes

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<tr>
<th>Name of Institution</th>
<th>The Open University</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting period</td>
<td>2023-24</td>
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<td>Date approved by governing body</td>
<td>[14/05/24]</td>
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<td>Date published online</td>
<td>[01/06/24]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Web address of annual report</td>
<td><a href="https://research.open.ac.uk/support/concordat">https://research.open.ac.uk/support/concordat</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Web address of institutional Researcher Development Concordat webpage</td>
<td><a href="https://www.open.ac.uk/research/support/concordat">https://www.open.ac.uk/research/support/concordat</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact for questions/concerns on researcher career development</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Clare.Warren@open.ac.uk">Clare.Warren@open.ac.uk</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Date statement sent to Researcher Development Concordat secretariat via <a href="mailto:CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk">CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk</a></td>
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Statement on how the organisation creates, maintains and embeds a research culture that upholds a positive and inclusive environment for researchers at all stages of their careers.

The Open University (OU) is a large teaching and research institution with comprehensive coverage of research fields across all four Faculties. More than 650 research staff were returned in REF2021, of whom 151 (January 2024 data) are on research-only contracts (and to whom the Concordat-related activities are targeted). Around 700 postgraduate research students are supported centrally by academic, professional services and technical staff, with a further 200 research students supported in 18 Affiliated Research Centres distributed across the world.

The OU’s mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas, delivered through our values of inclusivity, innovation and responsiveness. The 2022 “Live and Learn” Research Plan\(^1\) contains a central goal to enhance our societal impact through research, enterprise and skills development. This commits the OU to changing the way research is conducted within the institution, including broadening the range of people, including students, who contribute to decision-making processes. There is also a commitment to reducing the negative environmental impact of research - directly through reducing the carbon footprint of OU research activity, and indirectly by championing and advancing the global open research agenda, minimising the need for redundant duplication of research and maximising the use of existing research knowledge.

One of the 5 pillars of the Research Plan revolves around “Next Generation” activity\(^2\) – committing the OU to bring a broader range of perspectives and experiences into the research culture and environment. The Next Generation plan includes and embeds committed Concordat activities. Furthermore the plan commits to reducing barriers associated with engagement with research and focus resources to build the next generation of research leaders across the Faculties and in each of the four Nations. The development and maintenance of a research culture that upholds a positive and inclusive environment for researchers at all stages of their careers is therefore embedded at all levels of the institution.

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\(^1\) [https://research.open.ac.uk/governance/plan](https://research.open.ac.uk/governance/plan)

\(^2\) [https://research.open.ac.uk/governance/plan/activities/the-next-generation](https://research.open.ac.uk/governance/plan/activities/the-next-generation)
researchers) for your key stakeholder groups together with your measures for evaluating progress and success.

The Open University’s 3 year Concordat Action Plan was approved through the HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Awarded in May 2023. As of September 2023 the Concordat implementation and evaluation plans are embedded into the OU’s Research Plan “Next Generation” activities\(^3\). The Concordat action and evaluation plans for 2023-2026 are:

**Environment and Culture**

[ECI4, EI4, PCDMS] Design and present two new Researcher Career Development training sessions: “Supporting your Research Staff with their Career Development” and "EDI workshop series" in order to improve awareness of researcher career development obligations and ensure that line managers of researchers are appropriately trained in supporting such development.

Plan: Successful pilot of “supporting your research staff” training for at least 10 line managers across the four Faculties by end 2024/25.

Evaluation: Through satisfaction evaluation surveys with benchmark of 85% satisfied.

**Employment**

[EII7] Support the establishment of self-organising communities of researchers (and managers)

Plan: Encourage and support the establishment of self-organising researcher communities across all four Faculties

Evaluation: All four Faculties have active researcher communities which are open to all and have increasing participation over time, proportional to the size of the researcher community by May 2025.

[ER4] Ensure that researchers are represented on relevant OU governance committees and demonstrated that participation in the committee structure is valued and audited within the promotions processes as experience of academic citizenship, leadership or administration.

Plan: Increase the percentage representation of researchers on relevant OU governance committees over time and ensure representation across all grades/career stages. Ensure

\(^3\) https://research.open.ac.uk/support/concordat
that inclusion and participation in OU governance are recognised as part of the OU’s Career Development and Staff Appraisal process.

Evaluation: Show 10% improvement in researcher representation on formal OU Research Committees by Dec 2024.

[Ei6] Aim 1: Improved communication with fixed term researchers about their contract situation.

Plan: (i) Coordinate with People Services and research managers to ensure that conversations about contracts are held at least at 6 months into contract or at start for contracts under 12 months, or on request. (ii) Improve training for all staff with research management responsibilities (see EC section) to ensure that the mechanisms, requirements and timeframes for creating and maintaining open-ended contracts are understood and that there is parity of approach across Faculties. (iii) Provide example career pathways to share with new researchers and managers of researchers. (iv) Review and develop the OU’s researcher career development training provision and improve the signposting to training available in different parts of the institution.

Evaluation: Parity of approach across Faculties evaluated through the Faculty Academic Committee (Research) reports by Sept 2026. Development of a more consistent approach to signposting available training and development opportunities by May 2025.

Aim 2: Develop an institutional Research Strategy and funding packages that support excellent researchers to be hired on open-ended contracts.

Plan: (i) Investigate the costs and benefits of alternative management structures (workload, awards and finance) to increase individuals’ time being allocated across a range of research projects and activities, supported by a range of internal and external funding sources. (ii) Conduct a desk review of barriers to reducing contract length before permanency from 4-2 years or moving from fixed-term to fixed-funding contract model. (iii) Develop new policies that increase the use of open-ended contracts for research staff and investigate options for cross-faculty pool(s) of researchers, reduce the current presumption that researchers tend to be employed upon single-project & single source of funding. Monitor the protected characteristic demographics of researchers on different contract types. (iv) Produce and disseminate guidance for researchers on research-only contracts about opportunities for gaining experience of teaching.

Evaluation: Continued year-on-year reduction in the number of researchers employed on fixed term contracts, and a reduction in the number of years employment on fixed term contracts before open-ended contracts are offered.

**Researcher Career Development**

[PCD1, PCDR1, PCDM4] Investigate, pilot and implement an appropriate mechanism to record, monitor, and evaluate researcher’s professional development time.
Plan: Evaluate take up of professional development time of new and existing research staff using workload actuals data. Create a consistent cross-OU approach to recording researcher development time.

Evaluation: 10% Improvement of uptake and record of career development time on the OU workload management system by end 2024/25. 10% improvement in awareness of importance of development time for researchers as shown by survey data.

Summary of actions taken, and evaluation of progress made, in the current reporting period to implement your plan to support the three pillars in respect of each of your key stakeholder groups [Institution; Academic Managers of Researchers (Deans, Heads of Schools/Departments/PIs); Researchers]

| Environment and Culture (max 600 words) | In this reporting period, the Researcher Developer Concordat Steering Group has specifically worked towards ECI4 and EI4 (with overlaps across EM1 and PCDM5).

  **ECI4**: Ensure managers of researchers are effectively trained in relation to wellbeing and mental health.

  **EI4**: Provide effective line and project management training opportunities for managers of researchers, heads of department and equivalent.

  **EM1**: Managers undertake relevant training and development opportunities so that they can manage researchers effectively and fulfil their duty of care.

  **PCDM5**: Managers engage in leadership and management training to enhance their personal effectiveness, and to promote a positive attitude to professional development.

Two sessions of “Supporting your Research Staff with their Career Development” were run in 2021 and 2022, not run in 2023. The uptake of these sessions was low and participants brought very specific needs that related to their role and the people they were managing. Through discussions with early career academic staff and the Concordat steering group, a new audience for this
training was identified: researchers line-managing a (postdoctoral) researcher for the first time, e.g. after winning a major grant. A new version is planned for end January 2024 with 11 participants signed up. The feedback will be evaluated before planning the next session.

EDI workshop sessions are planned for Autumn 2024

## Employment (max 600 words)

In this reporting period, the Researcher Development Concordat Steering Group has prioritized ER4, ER7, Ei6 and EM1 (for the latter please see the Environment and Culture section).

**ER4** Ensure that researchers are represented on relevant OU governance committees and demonstrate that participation in the committee structure is valued and audited within the promotions processes as experience of academic citizenship, leadership or administration.

**E17:** Consider researchers and their managers as key stakeholders within the institution and provide them with formal opportunities to engage with relevant organisational policy and decision-making.

Research staff representatives actively contribute to the OU Research Committee, the Researcher Development Concordat Steering Group, Faculty Academic Committees (Research) and the Next Generation (Research Plan) Advisory Group. The OU REF 2029 Steering Group is, at the time of reporting, still being formed. The OU Research Plan 2022-27 is creating more opportunities for research-only representatives, including those on fixed term contracts and postgraduate researchers to be actively involved in decision-making processes.

Membership of these groups is formalised through their Terms of Reference, with Faculty Associate Deans of Research asked to communicate the available opportunities to their research staff as they arise. Each group has a communication and engagement plan that encourages regular reporting of actions and upcoming opportunities.

Active engagement governance process is rewarded as part of the OU’s promotions criteria, discussed during the annual Career Development and Staff Appraisal process and recorded in the Academic Workload Management system.
The Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) set up a new network in autumn 2023 to bring together early career and post-doctoral researchers, to learn, share, connect and collaborate. The Faculty is supporting members to decide what they need and to co-design the network with them. Activities will include skills development and the sharing research good practice, information and resources, developing connections between each other and research leaders, and facilitating mechanisms to grow inter- and multidisciplinary research.

The Faculty of Wellbeing, Education, and Language Studies has a self-organised researcher group which meets regularly and is open to everyone on research-only contracts. There are two co-leads. A senior research fellow leads and mentors on researcher promotion. A series of ‘my research future’ events is run for research staff.

The OU in Scotland launched a Research Community in May 2023 to support further development of the OU research community in Scotland, including staff and PGRs. Different events are being planned throughout the year, starting with an online Research Showcase in January 2023.

**EI6: Seek to improve job security for researchers, for example through more effective redeployment processes and greater use of open-ended contracts, and report on progress.**

At the end of October 2023 there were 145 researchers at the Open University of whom 89 (61%) were on Fixed Term Contracts (FTC). The UK sector average is 60%. This represents a steady decreasing trend in the percentage of researchers on FTC, from 77% in 2017 through 68% in 2022.

The number of researchers on FTC for 4+ years has decreased from eight at the start of 2023 to four at the end of 2023, with six researchers on a 4+ year contract being made permanent and four moving to academic contracts. 35 researchers left the university (34 FTC, 1 permanent), with 50% citing end of temporary contract as the reason, and 50% as resignation.

A major aim to improve the communication with FTC researchers about their contract situation is taking place within a review of researcher development training that is happening across the University. A paper outlining a desk review of internal provision and external benchmarking was taken to Research Board in
December 2023. External visits by the Concordat Steering Group Chair will be taking place in Spring 2024, with a view to create a central Researcher Hub on the university website containing resources a researcher might require along their career journey. These will include research-specific resources such as ethics approvals as well as examples of career pathways and guidance for about opportunities for gaining teaching experience.

A second major aim is to develop an institutional Research Strategy and funding packages that support excellent researchers to be hired on open-ended contracts. A review of external examples has been undertaken by the Human Resources team and presented to Research Board in autumn 2023. A desk review of barriers to moving from fixed-term to fixed-funding contract model is underway. Further detailed plan and options will be taken to the Vice Chancellor’s Executive in Spring 2024. These plans will include options for ways of developing alternative management structures (workload, awards and finance) to increase individuals’ time being allocated across a range of research projects and activities, supported by a range of internal and external funding sources.

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<th>Professional development (max 600 words)</th>
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<tr>
<td>In this reporting period the Researcher Developer Concordat Steering Group has prioritised PCDI1, PCDI4 and PCDM5 (for the latter, see Environment and Culture section).</td>
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**PCDI1**: Provide opportunities, structured support, encouragement and time for researchers to engage in a minimum of 10 days professional development pro rata per year, recognising that researchers will pursue careers across a wide range of employment sectors.

**PCDI4**: Provide researchers with opportunities, and time, to develop their research identity and broader leadership skills.

The CEDARs respondents particularly registered interested in more leadership training and managing others (71% in 2022 vs 61% in 2019), and this information is being incorporated into plans for future development of the RCD programme.

35 sessions were run by the Researcher Career Development (RCD) team during academic year 2022-2023, (e.g., Career Development for researchers, Getting Published for ECRs, Research Ethics & Integrity, Research Methods, Network science and Supervisor Training). 695 OU staff attended these sessions of
which 92 were from our Affiliated Research Centres (ARCs). Of the RCD training evaluated the average satisfaction rate is 93% (based upon 265 respondents).

New to the RCD Programme was the Gender Equity Workshop series (4 workshops over 5 weeks), these gained good feedback and will be run again in autumn 2024.

The Fellowship Academy, developed to “aid the development of the next generation of independent researchers and/or a future leader in their respective discipline” was launched for OU Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in 2021, with the first cohort of 17 researchers starting the programme in the 2021-22 academic year. The second cohort of 20 researchers started in Sept 2023. The programme includes academic mentoring, coaching conversations (reflection workshop plus follow up 1:1 coaching session), a series of grant funding masterclasses (including writing retreats), a buddying system, access to additional research development support and ring-fenced pump priming funds (£5K per cohort member) for external engagement and/or career development.

EDI analysis of the applicants and participants of the two cohorts indicated a slight bias towards female participants compared to the applicant pool demographic. Researchers who were returning to research after career breaks and researchers from racially minoritised groups were represented in both cohorts in numbers proportional to applications. No applicants declared a disability. Work is ongoing to compare the applicant and cohort demographics with the demography of the OU and national pools of eligible candidates, and to encourage researchers from under-represented groups to apply.

The four Faculties arranged specific activities to support their researchers. For example, the Faculty Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS) participated in a tailored “Research Career Value Chain” training programme to support academics navigate and plan their career development. This programme supports the identification of development and training needs to support researchers’ growth, log their key achievements, research themes and search terms and gain the skills to identify their own research opportunities and know who and where the support is available internally to help them to achieve this.
Comment on any lessons learned from the activities undertaken over this period and any modifications you propose to make to your action plan and measures of success as a result. (max 500 words)

The 10-year review and new 3-year action plan were submitted to UUK and Vitae in May 2023. Due to the OU governance timetable this annual report will work its way through the committees from February 2024 and therefore only reports on 6 months of activity.

A new Chair of the Concordat Steering Group was appointed in June 2023 and new members of research staff were brought onto the Steering Group in September 2023. There has therefore been some turnover of ideas and views of which actions should be prioritised.

Furthermore, the university Research Plan 2022-27 contains provision for targeted work around Early Career Researchers and research career progression through the “Next Generation” workstream. Concordat activities (which only target researchers on research-only contracts) are now incorporated into Next Generation activities (targeting all academics with research in their contracts). These wide-ranging activities are designed to improve researcher career development and research environment. No modifications have currently been made to the action plan and timetable for this reporting period but may prove necessary as we move forwards.

Pilot implementation of the CEDAR survey in late 2022 suggested that relative to the sector the OU is doing well in terms of job satisfaction, feeling valued, being supported by line managers, and providing professional development opportunities.

The Chair of the Concordat steering group would like to thank all the group members for their enthusiasm and creativity in trying to make the OU research environment inclusive and equitable for all.

Outline your key objectives in delivering your plan in the coming reporting period (max 500 words)

In the next year we will align the Concordat work with the New Generation activities in the OU Research Plan and focus on the following priorities:

**El6**: Seek to improve job security for researchers, for example through more effective redeployment processes and greater use of open-ended contracts, and report on progress.

We are working with key stakeholders in HR, Finance and the Research and Enterprise team to how the OU can develop an approach that appropriately balances fixed term contracts and open ended contracts, noting that funding constraints and alignment with priorities are critical. We will continue to review the success of these measures on a quarterly basis and identify any additional actions required. We plan to take a paper
outlining opportunities to the Vice Chancellor’s Executive in Spring 2024.

**PCDI1**: Provide opportunities, structured support, encouragement, and time for researchers to engage in a minimum of 10 days professional development pro rata per year, recognising that researchers will pursue careers across a wide range of employment sectors.

Alongside the central Researcher Career Development programme, we are continuing to encourage academic units to organize their own research-relevant training events, so that there is a greater opportunity and motivation (from both research managers and researchers themselves) to dedicate 10 days (pro rata) to researcher career development and training. We are also working to improve clarity about the kinds of activities that are covered by “professional development” above and beyond training programmes.

A second priority is to establish an appropriate mechanism, process, and procedure to use/alter/repurpose the current Academic Workload Management (AWM) and Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA) systems to allow researchers, line managers, and the OU to record, monitor, and evaluate professional development time in a systematic and data-extractable way in time for the 2023/24 actuals and 2024/25 plans. As part of this we will continue to develop ways to communicate the benefits of taking time for career development to researchers and managers within the Next Generation communications plan.

**ECI4**: Ensure managers of researchers are effectively trained in relation to wellbeing and mental health. **EI4**: Provide effective line and project management training opportunities for managers of researchers, heads of department and equivalent. **EM1**: Managers undertake relevant training and development opportunities so that they can manage researchers effectively and fulfil their duty of care. **PCDMS5**: Managers engage in leadership and management training to enhance their personal effectiveness, and to promote a positive attitude to professional development.

We will monitor uptake and evaluation of the new version Researcher manager training offered through the Researcher Career Development team in early 2024 such that we can expand our action plan against these points.

**Please provide a brief statement describing your institution’s approval process of this report prior to sign off by the governing body (max 200 words)**

The Annual Researcher Development Concordat Report was approved by Research Committee on 6 March 2024.

OU Senate approved the Report on 17 April 2024.

OU Council approved the report on 4 May 2024.
This Report will be published on the OU website in May 2024.

Signature on behalf of governing body:

Contact for queries: concordat@open.ac.uk

This annual report will be analysed by Universities UK, secretariat for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, to identify good practices, themes for development and information to improve national research culture policy and practice.

If you have any questions, or suggestions on how the reporting process could be improved, please contact the secretariat at CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk

www.researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk