

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE CONCORDAT:

SUMMARY OF
CONSULTATION OUTCOMES



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AIM OF CONSULTATION

In May 2019, a joint Universities UK (UUK) / Research England working group, in collaboration with GuildHE, developed a [concordat for the advancement of Knowledge Exchange in Higher Education in England](#) (herein, 'concordat'). The group, chaired by Professor Trevor McMillan, produced a draft concordat based on eight guiding principles which are supported by a range of enablers outlining policies and practices.

UUK and GuildHE held a consultation targeted towards higher education providers in England. Responses were received via submissions to an online survey with [set questions](#). The consultation closed on 1 July 2019. The analysis of the responses carried out by UUK are summarised in this paper.

At the same time, Research England have sought feedback from non-provider stakeholders including funding bodies, national academies, practitioner organisations, and other entities with interest and expertise in knowledge exchange (KE). Their feedback is summarised in the final section of this paper.

Together, this feedback will inform the work of the concordat task group including any revisions to the concordat content. UUK and GuildHE, the owners of the concordat, will work with the task and finish group and Research England to amend, clarify and outline the proposals for the implementation of the concordat.

METHODOLOGY

The survey included multiple-choice questions predominantly with Likert scale options. Further analysis of outcomes that were carried out but not included in this paper include splits by nation and region, [Knowledge Exchange Framework \(KEF\) cluster](#), and mission group members. However, due to relatively small numbers of respondents within each group, no weighting was applied along these lines.

Questions allowing free-text responses were included alongside many of the multiple-choice questions, providing detailed rationale, additional comments, queries, and suggestions. The emerging themes that were identified through analysis of the responses make up most of this paper and will be instrumental in the revision process.

RESPONSE RATE AND DEMOGRAPHIC

There were 60 respondents to the consultation with providers, including some who provided comments in letter form. Most responses were from providers in England, who were the primary target demographic, though there were a small number of responses from institutions elsewhere in the UK and other types of organisations.

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION TYPE	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	UK-WIDE	TOTAL
Higher education provider	50	2	1		53
Public sector organisation			1		1
Representative body / mission group		1	1	2	4
Other				2	2
Total	50	3	3	4	60

RESPONSE FROM HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

The overall response from the sector was positive. Respondents agreed with the approach to develop the concordat as a sector-driven initiative. Such an approach allows growth and improvement to be driven from inside the institution and recognises the value of regional and strategic differences. At the same time, there is room to incorporate valuable input from outside the sector.

Respondents agreed with the approach to develop the concordat as a sector-driven initiative.

Respondents also recognised the value in an approach that incentivises buy-in from institution leadership and encourages KE strategies to align with the institution's wider vision. While the overall approach was seen as sensible, there was less certainty around how the concordat would work alongside other initiatives to strengthen KE in the sector.

In contrast to the positive sentiment towards the approaches and content of the concordat's aims, principles, and enablers, respondents were more hesitant about agreeing with some of the practical elements of the concordat. There was uncertainty (18% of respondents), and sometimes disapproval (25% of respondents), towards some of the proposals for implementation of the concordat and outcomes of institutions signing up. This is reflected in the chart on the next page which presents the respondents' answers to multiple-choice questions across the sections, grouped by broad sentiment.

Despite this, most of the multiple-choice questions had a positive majority. The exception to this being the question of if 'Universities UK and GuildHE should commit all of their members in England to the implementation of the KE concordat.' To this, 53% of respondents said that this should not be how the concordat operates, and 21% were unsure.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO MULTIPLE-CHOICE CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

● positive
 ● neutral
 ● negative

Are these aims appropriate and valuable?



Are the principles an appropriate framework for the development of effective KE in universities?



Are these aims appropriate and valuable? (English providers only)



Is the approach to enablers appropriate?



Will these enablers support effective KE and partnership?



Do you agree with these commitments?



Do you agree with the proposed approach to implementation?



Should UUK and GuildHE commit all their members in England to the implementation of the KE concordat?



Responses of 'strongly agree', 'agree', and 'somewhat agree' have been grouped as 'positive.'

Percentage may not equal 100 due to rounding.

The comments provided by respondents reflected the supportive sentiment towards the goals and approach of the concordat, though they were expressed with some caution. Perceptions of chances of success were largely conditional on one or several aspects of its delivery. The specific questions, comments and suggestions made were highly varied, reflecting the diversity of the sector's approaches to KE. However, the concerns primarily fell into the following types.

1. Uncertainty for how the concordat, including the self-assessment process, would or could be used and whether this was appropriate, ie, whether outcomes would be valid and not incentivise undesirable behaviour.
2. Whether there were too many barriers to be addressed in its implementation as proposed, ie whether the theoretically-suitable design could be delivered in practice.
3. Less commonly, comments questioned whether the exercise itself was appropriate, displayed enough sector ownership, or was too regulatory in nature. These comments lay in contrast to those who felt it did not go far enough to facilitate improvements in KE directly, eg through good practice sharing.

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Respondents provided an array of requests for clarifications and additions to be included in all sections of the concordat. The most consistent themes from the feedback are outlined below. However, all comments and suggestions have been considered by the concordat Task and Finish Group in the redrafting process.

CLARITY OF FUNCTION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF FUNDING AND OTHER INITIATIVES

Several respondents felt that it was difficult to comment on the appropriateness of the concordat overall. Respondents also found it difficult to comment on each individual element where it was not clear what the function of the concordat would be in the medium- or long-term.

Many institutions highlighted the need for the concordat to address its relationship with other frameworks and initiatives within the space. Primarily this includes the KEF and the KE strategies English institutions submit in order to receive funding through the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) allocations and its equivalents for institutions in the devolved administrations. In addition, information on how the principles of the concordat relate to those of the Civic Universities Commission would be valued to give clarity and coherence to the project's goals and how institutions should address them.

Many respondents felt that the concordat needed to address how its commitments and the statements signed-up institutions would submit fit alongside existing statements and exercises. The HEIF and equivalent statements were of particular concern, as the potential for duplicating content is high.

IMPACT ON FLEXIBILITY AND INNOVATION

Several respondents raised concerns about the danger of enablers becoming prescriptive, despite the disclaimers within the concordat to the contrary. Similarly, there was a perception among some respondents that the concordat is either actively encouraging, or could unintentionally lead to, benchmarking and other unintended consequences. Respondents were concerned about how flexibility would be respected and fairly assessed in the evaluation process.

In addition, some felt that further emphasis should be made on institutions being free to add their own enablers, with requests for clarity on how institutions should best do this. Several responses highlighted the diversity of the sector and the danger of limiting flexibility and innovation.

Some respondents felt that the goal of establishing best practice in this field should be avoided, so as not to limit the freedom of ideas and experimentation that can lead to excellence.

Several respondents questioned the value of institutions having 'clear policies on all the types of KE' undertaken at an institution, as stated in '[Principle 2: Policies](#)'. It was felt that aspiring to have an exhaustive set of policies lead to damaging outcomes for institutions looking to explore new KE activities they have yet to undertake and for wider experimentation and innovation in KE. Somewhat conversely, some felt that the concordat could do more in providing additional clarity and guidance.

FAIRNESS AND REPRESENTATION OF A DIVERSE SECTOR

One of the most common points raised was the importance that the concordat recognises the necessity of principles and enablers developed to reflect the full range of activities carried out by institutions of all sizes, including small, specialist institutions. It was felt that the concordat could do more to recognise the limitations in capacity that some smaller institutions face, particularly those that did not reach the threshold of recurrent research funding to receive any HEIF support.

COLLABORATION AS AN AIM IN ITSELF

Several institutions were not clear on how, as one of the aims states, the concordat promotes collaboration. Others questioned whether this should be an aim at all, highlighting that collaboration would not be appropriate for some forms of KE, particularly those where institutions are offering competing services. Respondents found it unclear whether collaboration refers to working together directly on the KE activities themselves or to the sharing of good practice.

INDEPENDENT PANEL

Respondents felt cautious about the proposals around the Independent Panel. Primarily respondents wanted more information on the panel's participants – specifically, the types of individuals who would be identified as appropriate

panel members and how they would be chosen. Many emphasised that it would be essential to recruit individuals from inside and outside the sector whose expertise and personal characteristics reflect the diversity of UK KE.

There were calls for more information about the role of the panel and how it would function. This includes what their brief would be from Research England, what guidance or criteria they would be given from which to make their assessments, and how assessment outcomes would be communicated to institutions. Respondents also requested clarity for how institutions could respond to the panel's feedback.

TIMEFRAMES AND INSTITUTIONAL BURDEN

Many respondents expressed strong concern about the timing of the final step in the proposed implementation timeline in which respondents receive action plan feedback and recommendations for next steps. Scheduled for autumn 2020, this will clash directly with institutions' final preparations ahead of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) submission deadline on 27 November 2020.

Respondents also asked that the concordat address how the proposed timelines had been determined in relation to those of the KEF pilot and wider roll-out and the review of the Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA) Higher Education Business and Community Interaction survey (HE-BCI), much of which under current plans will inform the use of metrics in the KEF.

A common response to the question of whether the respondent would agree to the commitments was that it largely dependent on the burden on the institutions.

TRANSPARENCY OF DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Several respondents noted that they would find it valuable to gain an understanding for how the principles and enablers had been developed and how it would be managed.

RESPONSE FROM NON-PROVIDER STAKEHOLDERS

A range of non-provider stakeholders were asked to participate in the consultation, including research and higher education funding councils, other governmental bodies, learned societies and charities.

In general, respondents welcomed the concordat, seeing it as a clear and comprehensive vision of what institutions should commit to in KE, and as a step towards increasing the quality and quantity of KE across the sector.

In general, respondents welcomed the concordat, seeing it as a clear and comprehensive vision

The requirement of signatories to undertake assessment of their KE activities and to produce an action plan was viewed as a way for institutions to demonstrate their confidence in undertaking KE. Respondents saw this as a way of increasing awareness and engagement from academic and non-academic stakeholders, such as businesses, civic partners and the third sector. Moreover, this approach of evaluation and continuous assessment was highlighted as a way to promote consistency across the sector.

However, echoing the concerns raised by higher education institutions, some respondents requested clarity as to how the concordat would operate in practice alongside other initiatives and what role businesses would be expected to play, ie to inform the development of action plans, participation in the evaluation panel or if they would be invited to sign up to the concordat themselves.

FAIRNESS AND REPRESENTATION OF A DIVERSE SECTOR

The approach of setting out a number of principles, which are then underpinned by a list of suggested enablers, was generally welcomed, with respondents commenting that some, if not all, of these are already implemented by institutions.

Some respondents, however, questioned whether the enablers suggested were overly prescriptive, reflecting the comments raised by institutions that enablers which

highlight other forms of KE should be considered.

It was noted that the tone of some of the enablers appeared too transactional in manner. Some respondents stressed that relationships between institutions and business, charities etc are two-way and can be of mutual benefit, so the enablers should reflect the importance of understanding the needs of collaborators. Going further, it was suggested that the two-way movement of staff to provide skills beyond academic positions be recognised.

The discussion of clear and transparent policies on management and evaluation of intellectual property was generally welcomed, however it was noted that the concordat should be explicit in how these policies will benefit staff and students, as well as business stakeholders.

FAIRNESS AND REPRESENTATION OF A DIVERSE SECTOR

Echoing the points raised above, respondents that are not higher education providers agreed that it was important for the concordat to reflect the full range of activities carried out by institutions of all sizes, including small, specialist institutions, and to recognise that KE goes beyond commercial outcomes to social, cultural and economic domains.

Moreover, some respondents noted that the concordat needs to refer explicitly to equality, diversity and inclusion.

CLARITY OF FUNCTION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF FUNDING AND OTHER INITIATIVES

Again echoing the views of the institutions, several respondents felt that it was difficult to comment on the appropriateness of the concordat without clarity on its function in the medium- and long-term. If, for example, being a signatory to the concordat was to become linked to certain funding streams, it was strongly suggested that further consultation would be necessary.

Greater clarity was requested on the possible links between the concordat and initiatives such as HEIF and KEF in England, and how the concordat would work

alongside other innovation funding streams in the other devolved nations. Those devolved HEFCs also sought clarity on how it will add value to systems already in place in devolved nations.

MANAGING INSTITUTIONAL BURDEN

Many respondents commented on the need to manage the burden on institutions in producing the improvement plans, alongside things such as HEIF strategies in England and the REF submission timetable, emphasising that the concordat should enhance, not duplicate, existing mechanisms.

INDEPENDENT PANEL

Respondents wanted clarity on the membership of the Independent Panel. Supporting the comments raised by institutions, it was noted that the right balance of academic and business perspectives would need to be struck, with those business representatives having sufficient contextual understanding of the higher education sector and provider-business interface.

It was also questioned whether there would be one UK-wide panel or could a flexible approach to the assessment process be taken to accommodate or work alongside differing initiatives in operation in the devolved nations. One suggestion was to convene a series of regionally-focussed panels that could offer a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the local higher education-business landscape.

Respondents also questioned the level of power the panel would have, ie whether its role will be to suggest improvements to the action plans or if it could enforce a complete re-write of an action plan if it was deemed to not be of satisfactory quality.

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January 2020

ISBN: 978-1-84036-445-3