

# Concordat to Support Research Integrity

Signatories annual statement 2021

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# Foreword

This report provides a summary of activities from the Research Integrity Concordat Signatories Group for 2021.

The Concordat to Support Research Integrity, otherwise known as the Research Integrity Concordat, seeks to provide a national framework for good research conduct and its governance.

Signatories to the concordat are committed to:

1. upholding the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research
2. ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards
3. supporting a research environment that is underpinned by a culture of integrity and based on good governance, best practice, and support for the development of researchers
4. using transparent, timely, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise
5. working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to review progress regularly and openly

The ways in which researchers, employers of researchers and funders of research are expected to meet these commitments are set out in relevant sections of the concordat.

In 2018, the [Science and Technology Committee](#) recommended the concordat could be enhanced. Firstly, it needed to make the requirements of stakeholders clearer. Secondly, there needed to be a process for the sector to demonstrate full take up of the concordat. On this basis, and following a sector-wide consultation, the concordat was updated in 2019.

Oversight of the concordat is provided by the Research Integrity Concordat Signatories Group. As noted in the concordat, signatories will publish an annual statement outlining what we, as a sector, have been doing to further strengthen the integrity of UK research. Representatives of the signatories to the Concordat will also convene an annual research integrity stakeholder forum to provide a focus for debates on research integrity. This report provides a summary of these activities in 2021, on behalf of the signatories group.

If you would like to discuss the Research Integrity Concordat, or share examples of how your organisation has been implementing its principles, please contact [RIsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:RIsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk).

## **Signatories to the concordat**

Cancer Research UK

Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

National Institute for Health Research

Scottish Funding Council

The British Academy

UK Research and Innovation

Universities UK

Wellcome Trust

GuildHE Research

# Updates from signatories

This section contains short updates from concordat signatories on activities relating to research integrity.

## Cancer Research UK

In 2021, Cancer Research UK (CRUK) became a signatory to the concordat to strengthen its commitment to research integrity. It participated in a sub-group of the signatories group working on continual improvement.

CRUK collaborated in a new project with UKRI and GuildHE to explore what indicators of research integrity exist, or could be proposed, that are valid, reliable, ethical and practical. The project will also open a national and international discussion on next steps.

CRUK published its own [annual narrative statement](#) in 2021 summarising the actions and activities undertaken as a research funder to promote good research practice and to foster a culture of research integrity. Actions included:

- Review of CRUK's policy and approach to promoting research integrity by CRUK Trustees and the Scientific Executive Board.
- Updates to CRUK's policy on [Research Integrity: Guidelines for Research Conduct](#) published, which forms part of CRUK's Grant Conditions.
- Case study published on dedicated research integrity advisors at CRUK core-funded Institutes who help instil integrity principles throughout the whole research cycle and uphold standards.
- An informal network formed with research integrity advisors at CRUK core-funded Institutes to share good practice and updates and to discuss sector-wide integrity issues.
- Initiatives to encourage positive research culture undertaken.

## Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland

The Department for the Economy conducted a self- assessment of its compliance with the funders' commitments as set out in the concordat. As a result, the department has:

- updated the [departmental website](#) to raise the profile of the concordat.
- strengthened the wording in its annual funding letters of offer to higher education institutions, to stipulate that compliance with the concordat is a condition of research funding
- reviewed and strengthened the relevant section on concordat appliance in the annual assurance statements higher education institutions send.

Analysis has identified that further work is required to implement a process to deal with allegations of research misconduct received from higher education institutions and work is being taken forward on this issue.

The Department has worked to raise the profile of the concordat, promoting compliance through increased engagement with both internal and external stakeholders, including promotion of the [UK Research Integrity Office \(UKRIO\) self-assessment checklist](#). Higher education institutions in Northern Ireland comply or have provided assurance that they will comply with the following requirements of the concordat for 2021:

- Identify a named person who will act as a first point of contact for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity, and ensure that contact details for this person are kept up to date and are publicly available on the institution's website.
- Provide a named point of contact or recognise an appropriate third party to act as confidential liaison for whistleblowers or any other person wishing to raise concerns about the integrity of research being conducted under their care.
- Publish an annual statement on how they are meeting the requirements of the revised concordat.

## GuildHE Research

GuildHE Research is the research consortium for smaller and specialist universities and colleges. Its members are 30 institutions across England and Wales working in diverse research areas, from agricultural sciences to creative and performing arts.

The organisation supports member institutions to conduct excellent research and support positive research environments through:

- the provision of shared services, including a shared research outputs repository;
- policy intelligence and influence;
- doctoral student support;
- and peer support for research leads (those in director of research and pro vice-chancellor research roles).

The consortium has prioritised supporting institutions in research integrity in the organisations' strategic actions. In 2020–21, this was enacted through successfully becoming a signatory of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity. Along with Universities UK, it has extended direct engagement with the concordat across the full diversity of higher education institutions in the UK.

Consortium representatives have engaged with colleagues in key bodies, including UKRI and UKRIO, on research integrity matters, helping to make clear the challenges and opportunities that exist in institutions with a specialist focus or a smaller research environment. GuildHE Research continued to respond to member needs for support with understanding policies and processes relating to integrity matters.

In the year ahead GuildHE Research will strengthen its role as a signatory. It will engage institutions of all types, and researchers from the full spectrum of disciplines and approaches to research (practice, translational and applied, alongside blue sky) in the principles of the concordat, focussing on how the principles are applied in these varied spaces.

## **Higher Education Funding Council for Wales**

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) remains fully committed to supporting the implementation of the Concordat to support Research Integrity. As part of HEFCW's terms and conditions of funding, it requires all its funded institutions to confirm that they are compliant with the concordat in their annual assurance statements. For academic year 2020–21, all funded institutions confirmed they were compliant with the concordat.

HEFCW recently (Q4 2021) conducted an internal review of its policies relating to research integrity, drawing on the expert advice of the UKRIO, and found them to be proportionate and representative of best practice for a national funding body.

HEFCW continue to engage strategically on research integrity and related issues with its institutions, with the other members of the Research Integrity Concordat Signatories Group, and with UKRI on the establishment of the UK Committee on Research Integrity.

## National Institute for Health Research

In 2021, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) focused on transparency and made significant progress on open research, contributing to commitment 1: ‘maintaining the highest standards of research integrity’.

In November 2021, NIHR announced a new Open Access policy requiring all peer-reviewed research articles arising from NIHR-funded research studies to be made immediately open access under an open licence. The change was made to ensure the peer-reviewed research of NIHR funded researchers has the widest possible and immediate impact. To support the change NIHR also committed to paying reasonable fees so researchers can comply with the policy as well as looking to develop guidance and supporting tools in collaboration with the research community.

NIHR also launched ‘NIHR Open Research’ in 2021 which operates alongside the existing Journals Library to ensure all findings from its funded research are publicly available.

## Scottish Funding Council

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is a committed signatory of the concordat. Through the annual outcome agreement process, under the key priority ‘research sustainability’, SFC sets expectations that all Scottish higher education institutions implement the concordat. All Scottish higher education institutions are required to report against their outcome agreement key priorities each year.

In June 2021, SFC published its final review report, Coherent Provision and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research. A key recommendation from the review includes SFC’s recommendation to ‘work with the sector to develop a blueprint for establishing a positive research culture in Scotland and instigate a broader debate that explores and defines good practice’. This will inform and guide its future work in research integrity over the next few years.

## The British Academy

Throughout the first year of being a formal signatory of the concordat the British Academy has worked across the UK research sector and internationally to inform the development of strategies and reviews impacting the environment for research and researchers. It has collaborated with other funders and partners to create new opportunities for researchers to develop their skills and engage in discussions about their research and the wider research environment. For example by establishing the [British Academy Early Career Researcher Network](#).

The British Academy's [Code of Practice](#), published on its website, sets out the standards by which it assesses and administers applications for research awards. The terms and conditions of its research awards, together with its scheme notes for applicants, set out the expectations and standards researchers and their employing institutions must follow when conducting research. The British Academy has a process to investigate accusations of research misconduct and takes proportionate action which might include terminating or suspending a research award. It hasn't had to take any formal action during the past year. It will continue to review and develop these documents and our processes.

As a funder of research in the humanities and social sciences the British Academy regularly reviews its assessment processes to ensure it upholds the highest standards. During the past year and coming year it is taking forward recommendations made by its Research Funding Working Group on equality, diversity and inclusion which will improve the data it collects, the ways data is used within its processes, and how it engages with and supports a more diverse community of researchers.

## UK Research and Innovation

During 2020–21 UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) promoted research integrity and the implementation of the concordat in several ways. Much attention has been given to consulting the research sector on the best way to establish a new UK Committee on Research Integrity (UK CORI), as recommended by the 2018 Science and Technology Committee inquiry report. This engagement has been led both by UKRI and by the interim chair of UK CORI, Dr Helen Munn OBE, and has informed the design of a committee with strong leadership, convening and evidence roles. The committee will work closely with the concordat signatories, UKRIO and bodies such as the UK Reproducibility Network. Recruitment to UK CORI began in 2021, with a view to a first meeting in the first half of 2022.

In addition, UKRI initiated several strands of work in 2020–21 that directly support high levels of research integrity, or that contribute to improving the culture and

environment in which high integrity research takes place. The former included a revision of UKRI's expectations as set out in our Governance of Good Research Practice policy, set for release in 2022. UKRI also updated its Principles of Assessment and Decision Making, to make explicit reference to the concordat and to its underpinning values. The latter work, promoting a positive culture and environment, included the [concordats and agreements project](#) with Universities UK and Wellcome Trust, piloting the narrative 'Resumé for Research and Innovation' CV format in grant applications, and setting up the Forum for Tackling Bullying and Harassment in Research and Innovation.

During 2021–22 UKRI expects to launch UK CORI, and pursue work, in partnership with others, on indicators for research integrity, and on improving information sharing between funders, research organisations and publishers.

## Universities UK

As the secretariat of the Research Integrity Concordat Signatories Group, UUK develops the agenda and papers for the group's discussions. Through these discussions, UUK hopes to support the sector with implementing the concordat. UUK also undertook an analysis of the concordat's annual statements, a summary of which is included in this report. Further, UUK supported the development of, and presented at, the Annual Research Integrity Forum, which is also discussed in this report.

To promote the importance of research integrity, the [2021 UUK Research and Innovation Conference](#) included several sessions on research culture, such as 'Implementing the People and Culture Strategy', 'Research integrity, culture and environment' and "The concordats, agreements and initiatives landscape". UUK is keen to continue these discussions with the sector. Separately, with its members, UUK has been feeding into the [Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy](#), which will help to refocus bureaucracy into promoting a culture of transparency and research integrity.

UUK also worked with UKRI and Wellcome Trust on a [project to gather evidence](#) on the adoption and impact of various concordats and agreements currently in place in the research sector. The project aims to inform conversations about how the initiatives can best promote a more inclusive and welcoming research culture while minimising bureaucracy. The review was published in March 2022.

UUK is committed to working with the sector to support the implementation of the Research and Development People and Culture Strategy.

## Wellcome Trust

Wellcome launched its new strategy and schemes during 2020–21. As part of the refresh, Wellcome carried out the following:

- Reviewed the expectations it has of organisations it funds. For example,
  - the organisation must commit to facilitating 10 days/year training;
  - for the intermediate level award where the salary of the PI is paid, the organisation must undertake a formal review of progress part way through the award and;
  - Wellcome has adopted the core of the Resume for Researchers narrative cv.
- Wellcome has increased the emphasis on assessing the research environment during the application process and provided researchers space to highlight the work they have done to maintain and improve research integrity.

Wellcome ran a virtual Research Culture festival in March 2021 to stimulate actions in the community. This followed on from the survey into research culture, published in January 2020, and a series of in person and virtual, pandemic impacted, ‘town halls’ to explore the issues.

In collaboration with UUK and UKRI Wellcome supported a review of concordats and agreements within the UK (see UUK entry).

On an operational level, Wellcome has

1. worked on the ground with organisations handling cases to ensure a proportionate and appropriate response to cases reported to them;
2. reviewed and aligned its policies on research misconduct and bullying and harassment and;
3. begun discussions with other funders and regulatory bodies to address concerns on data management during and after investigations into bullying and harassment.

# Monitoring statement

The revised Concordat to Support Research Integrity was published in October 2019 in line with recommendations set out by the Science and Technology Committee in 2018. It was agreed by the signatories there should be a 12-month period of implementation. Therefore, employers of researchers, such as universities, were contacted in September 2020 by the signatories account, hosted by UUK on behalf of the signatories, to demonstrate their commitment to the new concordat by 25 October 2020.

Three points of information were requested for the reporting requirements. Firstly, a named point of contact for research integrity matters. Secondly, a contact to act as confidential liaison for whistleblowers or any other person wishing to raise concerns about the integrity of research. Finally, a published annual statement on how they are meeting the requirements of the revised concordat.

## Content analysis of 2018–19 and 2019–20 reports

Employers of researchers, such as universities, were contacted in September 2020 by the [Research Integrity Signatories account](#) (hosted by UUK on behalf of the signatories) to demonstrate their commitment to the new concordat by 25 October 2020. Following this call, content analysis was carried out by UUK in January 2020 on 43 randomly selected statements to gauge the quality of the content and any notable patterns. The conclusions of this analysis are highlighted in this report, and were presented at the 2021 UKRIO conference, to provide guidance on good practice in the area. Please note that this analysis only represents a sample of previous annual statements and does not reflect the information provided by organisations for the 2020–21 statements.

## Reporting requirement logistics

Covid-19 made the reporting period exceptionally challenging for research organisations. This was recognised in correspondence with research integrity leads and the signatories anticipated that research organisations might struggle to meet the set deadline for this call for information. Members were encouraged to still respond and either request an extension or provide an update on implementation.

Many initially requested an extension with the reason that annual statements still needed to be seen and approved by a governing body. Going forward, the deadline

for reporting requirements should consider if this is an obstacle continually faced by organisations and if alternative arrangements could be put in place to help.

Related to this was the variety in the period that was covered within the updated annual statement. Ten statements covered the academic year 2018–19 whilst two organisations covered the calendar year of 2019. While this is not a large percentage of statements there could be remaining research organisations who did not respond to the call following this time period. It would be interesting to clarify the reasoning behind this. If the period covered should be the most recent academic year this should be made clearer to institutions.

Those statements that followed the calendar year had more focus around summer activity, eg policy review during the summer, how postgraduate researchers were receiving training in the summer period. Those covering the academic year 2019–20 provided a picture of activity running throughout the academic year such as conferences or training events.

## **Content of statements**

Statements provided an insight into the variety and vast amount of work organisations are undertaking to promote, integrate and embed the concordat into their organisations. Evidence of events, conferences, assigned research integrity champions and thorough reviews of ethical procedures to align with the concordat were greatly welcomed.

Content in some statements focused heavily on signposting relevant policies related to concordat commitments. Other statements also included more updated activity. Some statements differentiated how research integrity activity impacts certain groups differently, such as the impact on postgraduates, PhD students and lecturers.

Although statements should focus on providing an update on research integrity activity during the period covered, it was very useful and welcomed to read statements that included future plans.

It was helpful to see actions being undertaken to strengthen the role of integrity across the institution. This was a particular strength in the statements because it demonstrated the impact that policy or events were having on researchers operating in different roles. It also highlighted the autonomy of institutions, in terms of how they integrated research integrity across the organisation, or how they identified and addressed different themes eg through training. For example, it was great to see the presence of research integrity champions or offices being introduced, and there were different instances of events, eg research integrity consortiums, forums and ad hoc events that covered a range of topics. There was also information on training,

including how it had developed into mandatory training, who was running the sessions, how many attended and how it was evaluated.

## **Structure and format of statements**

There were a variety of structures presented in statements. Two structures were particularly common:

1. Following the commitments of the concordat and how the institution continues to meet those.
2. Followed the requirements of the statement as outlined in commitment five.

Statements which followed the second structure moved beyond organisational policy and provided more depth on key points such as institutional reflection on misconduct investigations or how the institution embeds a comfortable research environment so that staff and students feel able to come forward in cases of misconduct. The majority of organisations followed this second approach. Similarly, it worked well when the structure of the statement reiterated the requirements discussed within each section, providing a more accessible format.

A few institutions wrote the statements as part of their research integrity webpage or as a separate webpage accessible from the main page. Most statements were PDF or Word files accessible on members' research integrity webpages, which provided clarity on how the institution had been building on its commitments compared to previous years.

Statement length varied from less than a page to over 10 pages. Longer statements were more likely to provide details on the finer points of the concordat and how the organisation met the requirements of the concordat. For example, even if no misconduct investigations have been carried out there are further points established in the 2019 concordat to be discussed, such as how organisations embed a research environment that is comfortable for staff and students to report instances.

## **Impact of Covid-19**

Statements that mentioned the pandemic discussed a range of topics in terms of how this was impacting organisations ethical procedures. Generally, activity included moving ethical applications, advice, support and training online. Guidance was issued on the safety and ethical practices of research specifically for any research continuing onsite. Constraints and challenges were highlighted, and numerous, including the need to swiftly move many postgraduate researcher projects to online research.

There were some positive examples from organisations who highlighted that Covid-19 had offered a unique opportunity to strengthen more collective work across the organisation with those overseeing ethics. Some organisations stated that they would provide an overview in their next annual statements.

## **Misconduct contacts**

In many cases it was difficult to find the confidential liaison – whistleblower contact. Often instead of a ‘named contact’, a policy relating to misconduct was identified.

On some websites, the named contact was present and obvious on the webpage and within the statement. It would be useful for all institutions to be as clear with this information, and state that the queries or issues raised will be treated confidentially.

There were instances of institutions providing two different contacts for the confidential liaison. There were also instances where the named contact and whistleblower contact were the same contact. Giving two different contacts may encourage individuals to feel more comfortable than only providing one as some mentioned there may be conflict of interest in contacting certain people, which could be discouraging.

Misconduct investigations were reported on in several ways such as large tables providing data on which type of misconduct was being investigated. Even when there were no investigations to report this was stated by institutions. How much follow up information was given on investigations varied. Though the particulars of a case may not always be relevant, as is outlined in commitment five, more detailed information was useful when organisations were reflecting on how a case was handled and what had been learned.

A particularly strong inclusion from a non-UUK member discussed their training and workshop activity on workplace harassment and bullying, and mental wellbeing. This was reported in the section on how the organisation makes staff and students feel comfortable to report misconduct. It was a good opportunity for members to consider how research integrity and wellbeing are interrelated.

## **Recommendations for future annual statements**

We recommend the following for future annual statements:

1. As with the other concordats, the signatories should include an expectation that the annual statement is signed off by the governing body of the research organisation.

2. Statements should clearly note when the governing body approved the statement or include this in the email when reporting to the signatories.
3. Content should aim to provide an update on activity rather than repeat policies that are already in place. Updates on policies that have been changed or are under review are encouraged.
4. If the annual statement is written in the form of a webpage, it would be useful to have a copy of previous annuals statements to demonstrate how updated material has been used to meet the commitments of the concordat.
5. Statements should be openly accessible and the design of research integrity webpages should be clear. Where possible, institutions should provide links to previous annual statements as points of reference for past activity and changes over time.
6. The two contacts required by the concordat should be posted very clearly. Given the purpose of these contacts, institutions should make them as accessible as possible.

We would like to thank organisations who have submitted their annual statements for 2021. Desk research in early 2022 has identified that more than 80% of UUK members have published an annual research integrity statement for 2019–20 or 2020–21. In 2022, in response to this analysis, the Research Integrity Concordat Signatories Group will provide further guidance to help signatories develop their annual statements.

# Research Integrity Forum

In May 2021, the annual Research Integrity Forum was held at the [UK Research Integrity Office \(UKRIO\) annual conference](#). The forum is an opportunity to bring colleagues from across the research community together, discuss some of the developments or challenges relating to research integrity, and share examples of good practice. The agenda for the forum was as follows:

1. **Welcome and introduction to the session and panel.**
2. **Update on the concordat, including its revision.** This provided a summary of how the 2019 version of the concordat was developed, following a sector consultation. It also covered plans to develop a continuous improvement cycle, whereby signatories will share good practice and lessons elsewhere, adopt good practice locally, and reflect on progress.
3. **Summary analysis of annual narrative statements.** This provided a summary of UUK analysis of narrative statements, as outlined in the previous section.
4. **Perspectives from signatory organisations on how they are addressing research incentives to improve integrity.** This provided examples from The British Academy and UKRI on activities relating to research integrity.
5. **Panel question and answer session.** The panel discussed several questions from the audience, including training requirements, the impact of the concordat, opportunities for the sector to engage, monitoring requirements, the complexity of the concordats landscape, and operationalising the concordat.

A recording of the forum is available on the [UKRIO website](#).

We are thankful to colleagues who attended the forum, and to UKRIO for providing the platform to host it. The next forum will be held as a standalone event in spring 2022. If there are any items that you would like the next forum to cover, please contact [RIsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:RIsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk)

# Forward look

In 2022, the Research Integrity Concordat Signatories Group is committed to supporting the sector with the concordat's implementation. This can be achieved in the following ways:

- The Signatories Group look forward to working with the new [UK Committee on Research Integrity](#) on developing, identifying and sharing good practice. The committee will be responsible for developing and sharing evidence about research integrity across the UK, providing expertise and promoting UK research nationally and internationally to influence discussions about research integrity globally.
- The Research and Development People and Culture Strategy outlines the importance of an inclusive and supportive research culture. The Signatories Group welcome the strategy and are keen to work with the research community to support its implementation.
- The signatories group are keen to support the research sector on identifying lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic. We welcome views from colleagues on this, which we can share at the 2022 annual forum.
- The signatories group will develop further guidance to support signatories when developing their annual narrative statements and will analyse these statements to identify good practice.
- The signatories group plan to hold a dedicated annual forum to share good practice in research integrity.
- The signatories group look forward to supporting the next steps of the [Concordats and agreements review](#), commissioned by UKRI, Universities UK and Wellcome Trust.

Universities UK is the collective voice of 140 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world; maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally.

Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.



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