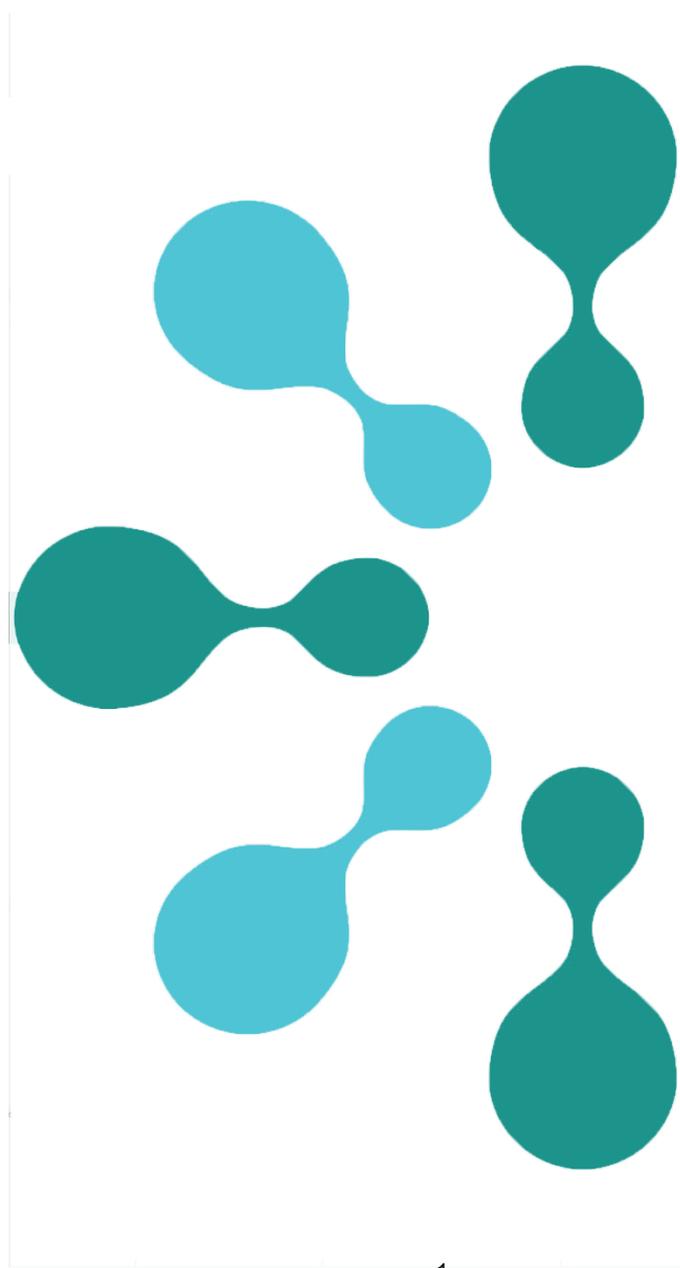




# Knowledge Exchange Concordat Review: Evaluation Report



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# Introduction

The Knowledge Exchange Concordat (KE Concordat) seeks to enhance knowledge exchange (KE) within universities and other higher education (HE) providers through the identification and exchange of good practice by highlighting what already exists, and acting as a catalyst for collaboration between HE providers and external partners. The KE Concordat enables HE providers to promote the many different forms of KE by giving clear indicators of their chosen approaches to continuous performance improvement, and providing clarity of mission and support for the KE activities they perform.

The development of the KE Concordat has been led by Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE, in partnership with Research England, the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) and PraxisAuril, as well as other funders and key stakeholders.

HE providers across the UK were invited to sign up to the principles of the KE Concordat in October 2020 and to participate in a voluntary development year over the following 12 months. A total of 136 HE providers signed up,<sup>1</sup> 112 of which chose to participate in the development year.

## Development year

Those HE providers that chose to participate in the development year were asked to carry out a detailed self-evaluation and gap analysis of KE against the eight principles of the KE Concordat and to generate an action plan. The action plan outlined the top five priority actions, plans for improvement and examples of innovative practice. Action plans were submitted and reviewed by an evaluator cohort between July and October 2021. Feedback was released to participating HE providers at the end of October 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> For information about the signatories of the KE Concordat, see [www.keconcordat.ac.uk](http://www.keconcordat.ac.uk)

## Submission process

Participating HE providers were given written guidance, produced by the KE Concordat Operational Group,<sup>2</sup> which outlined the information to include in the HE provider action plan. Guidance was given on each section of the action plan and an accompanying template was published to support HE providers in drafting their plans. Several important questions and themes were raised during the evaluator training sessions that would further support the action-planning process for HE providers, leading the Operational Group to issue supplementary guidance in June 2021. This supplementary guidance allowed for clarity on previous areas of guidance, while also inviting HE providers to include contextual information and a short paragraph on the resources available to support KE.

Action plans were submitted through an online portal created by NCUB, known as NCUB Apply. The site gave access to a single contact for each participating HE provider, known as the HE provider's 'named contact'.<sup>3</sup>

During the development year, the Operational Group hosted online engagement sessions to provide clarity in the process and to engage named contacts, evaluators and others from within and outside the higher education sector in focused discussions. Four webinars were hosted, including a consultative session on the development of the evaluation process, as well as six deep dives into the principles of the KE Concordat, prior to the submission deadline. The sessions attracted on average 175 participants, and were supported by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, and representatives from various HE providers who took an active role in delivering parts of the deep dives.

The Operational Group remained on hand during the submission process to support named contacts. UUK offered an introductory meeting to every named contact to discuss their HE provider's approach to drafting the action plan. This was immediately available to HE providers on choosing to participate in the development year, while discussions also took place with a handful of HE providers as and when requested by named contacts. KE Concordat partners, including GuildHE, also held support sessions using one-

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<sup>2</sup> The KE Concordat Operational Group consists of representatives from Universities UK, GuildHE, Research England, NCUB and PraxisAuril. The Operational Group oversees the implementation of the KE Concordat in England, reporting to the Strategic Group as appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'named contact' refers to the individual who submitted the HE provider's action plan. This does not necessarily mean that the contact was leading on the action plan, nor was the sole author.

to-one conversations and action-planning workshops with smaller and specialist HE providers.

## Evaluation process

The evaluation process was led by Dr Phil Clare (Director of Innovation & Engagement, University of Oxford), as Chair of the KE Concordat Evaluation Panel. The process was intended to support individual HE providers by offering advice, guidance and suggestions on submitted action plans. The panel consisted of a diverse selection of volunteer evaluators from within and outside the higher education sector.

An open call for volunteer evaluators was released in December 2020 and applications were submitted as either self-nominations or nominations from an organisation. A total of 156 applications were submitted. The Operational Group and Evaluation Chair reviewed all applications, and 106 were invited to join the evaluator cohort. From March to June 2021, evaluators participated in training to understand how they could review and evaluate action plans from a variety of HE providers. Evaluators were given exemplar draft action plans to review and discussed their approach to evaluation with other evaluators during the training sessions.

During the evaluation process, evaluators were allocated to 24 sub-panels based on their strategic and operational KE experiences, organisation, discipline or industry background and the relevant Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) cluster for their affiliated HE provider, if applicable. Evaluators from outside the sector, such as from research consultancies, the UK Parliament and the National Trust, were also represented in the evaluator cohort. This promoted a diverse representation of evaluators who could provide feedback from different perspectives. Of the 106 evaluators, 15 were from outside the higher education sector.

As the process was designed to be a developmental exercise for HE providers, it was not intended to be competitive or comparative. Therefore, evaluators were instructed to review action plans in the specific context of each HE provider and their strategy for KE.

The evaluation process aimed to ensure value for the HE provider by offering clear, coherent and constructive feedback that was tailored to the HE provider's strategic objectives for KE. Evaluators commented on whether there was a distinctive commitment to continuous improvement, the ambition

and clarity of the submission, and the extent to which actions and plans for improvement were appropriately considered and were relevant to the HE provider's institutional strategic objectives for KE.

Following the completion of evaluations, evaluators met in their sub-panels to discuss their feedback with a representative of the Operational Group acting as sub-panel chair. Issues relating to an evaluator's feedback were discussed, and evaluators were invited to amend errors or add clarity to their comments.

Additionally, feedback letters were sent to the heads of HE providers. These outlined strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for implementation based on HE providers' submitted action plans. All evaluators were asked to provide input to the letters at their sub-panel meeting; however, the letters were not intended to summarise the evaluators' written feedback, but rather provide additional feedback to support the HE provider in taking the action plan forward. Named contacts also received their feedback letter.

All feedback was approved and moderated by the Operational Group and Evaluation Panel Chair before being released to participating HE providers, and was anonymised.

## Aims of this report

In November 2021, UUK asked evaluators and named contacts to complete a survey on their overall experience of the development year, as part of a review of the KE Concordat development year commissioned by the Operational Group.

The findings from this survey are explored in this report as follows:

- overall views of the KE Concordat
- impact of the KE Concordat on HE providers
- support and engagement
- submission process
- evaluation process

This report concludes with recommendations for the KE Concordat stemming from an analysis of the survey results. The recommendations have been produced by UUK, in consultation with the Operational Group.

## Methodology

A survey was sent to all 112 named contacts and the 106 evaluators involved in the KE Concordat development year.<sup>4</sup> The survey consisted of both quantitative data and qualitative data drawn from free-text questions exploring a participant's view on the processes involved in:

- submitting information
- the evaluation process
- the impact on HE providers
- overall views, including opportunities to suggest improvements

In total, 122 respondents completed the survey, representing 60% of the named contacts and 64% of evaluators (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Number of survey responses, by role**

Role	Number
KEC evaluator	55
Named contact for KEC at a given HE provider	54
Both a named contact and an evaluator	13

In England, HE providers were grouped into clusters for the KEF,<sup>5</sup> based on their capabilities and resources for KE activity. While this is specific to the KEF and is not part of, or related to the KE Concordat, KEF clusters were used throughout the evaluation to group together findings relating to HE providers that share similar characteristics (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>

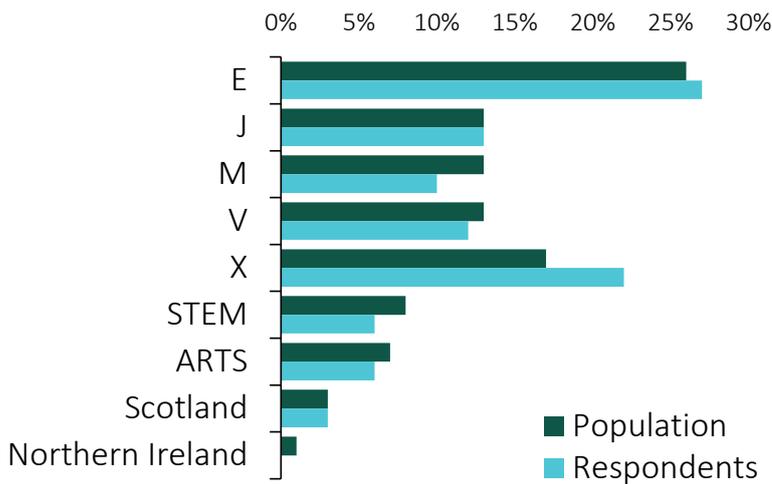
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<sup>4</sup> Some individuals involved in the development year acted as both named contacts and evaluators.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://re.ukri.org/knowledge-exchange/knowledge-exchange-framework/>

<sup>6</sup> More information about the KEF clusters, including the methodology, can be found at <https://kef.ac.uk/notes>

**Figure 1: Response rates, by role and KEF cluster**



Population: All named contacts (112); Named contact respondents (67)

Respondents were broadly representative of the total number of participants involved in the development year. For named contacts, the proportion of respondents from HE providers in each KEF cluster was similar to the proportion of participants in the development year (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Number of survey responses, by KEF cluster**

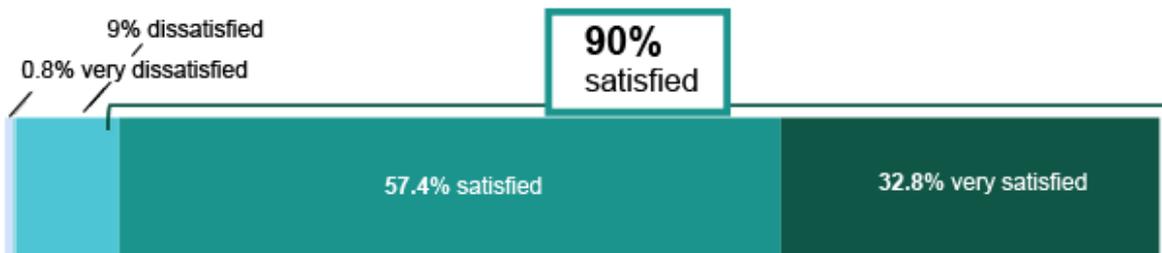
<b>KEF cluster</b>	<b>Number of HE providers in cluster</b>	<b>Number of HE providers in KEC development year</b>	<b>Number of named contacts responding to survey</b>
<b>Cluster E</b>	29	28	18
<b>Cluster J</b>	17	14	9
<b>Cluster M</b>	18	14	7
<b>Cluster V</b>	17	15	8
<b>Cluster X</b>	20	19	15
<b>STEM specialists</b>	12	9	4
<b>Arts specialists</b>	21	8	4
<b>HE providers not involved in the KEF</b>	–	4	2

# Overall views of the KE Concordat

When asked for overall views, 90% of named contacts and evaluators were positive about their involvement in the development year of the KE Concordat. Although there were suggestions for improvements, in general there was high satisfaction and positive comments about its administration and impact.

Overall, out of those involved in the development year of the KE Concordat, nine in ten (90%) were satisfied with their involvement. Evaluators were slightly more satisfied with their involvement – 94% of evaluators were satisfied compared with 85% of named contacts (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Overall satisfaction with involvement in the development year**



evaluators

Base: All respondents (112); Named contact (67); Evaluators (68)

Qualitative comments were also positive. Evaluators noted that it was a well-managed process and that it was helpful to be involved from the beginning, which allowed their input to help shape the development of the process:

As someone who has worked in the sector for a number of years, this is the greatest focus on KE I have experienced, and not focused on just one area (such as commercialisation or public engagement) but which included all aspects of KE. In addition, as it involved the most senior staff in the university, it elevated KE to a broader range of staff.

#### **EVALUATOR**

Other comments focused on the time commitment required to produce an action plan, particularly as it coincided with a busy reporting period for KE practitioners. A couple of respondents suggested that evaluators, who were volunteers during the development year, could be compensated for their time, particularly those who were not working in HE providers.

Named contacts also highlighted the workload of their involvement, although many respondents acknowledged that the effort had been worthwhile.

Named contacts were also positive about the KE Concordat, which had given them the opportunity to 'reflect on, review and re-energise' their KE ambitions and had provided greater strategic focus. Named contacts were also positive about the Operational Group's administration of the process:

The KE Concordat process has been well conceived, well-designed and was communicated sufficiently in advance of being implemented to enable HE providers to prepare themselves for it. Its implementation, from guidance materials and webinars, through to evaluation and feedback, has been exemplary, and it has encouraged very positive culture change within my own institution, as well as across the sector. I have nothing but praise for the whole endeavour.

#### **NAMED CONTACT**

Respondents were asked to reflect on ways to improve the KE Concordat process. Suggestions for improvements from both the named contacts and evaluators are cited throughout this report: these feed into the recommendations on pages 31–33.

## **Impact on higher education providers**

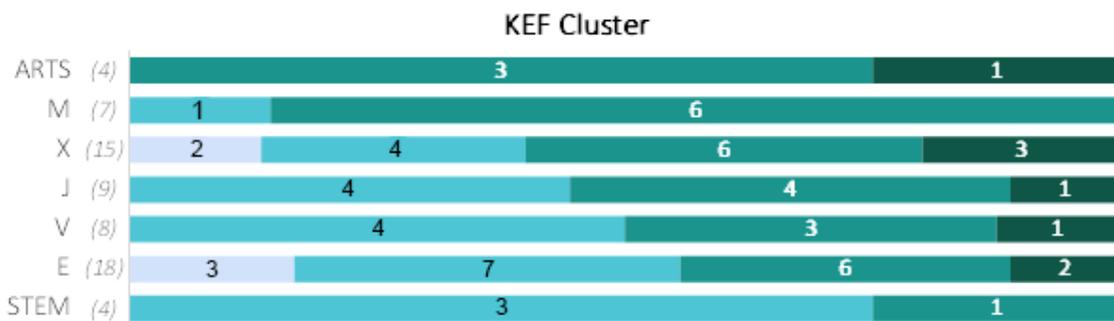
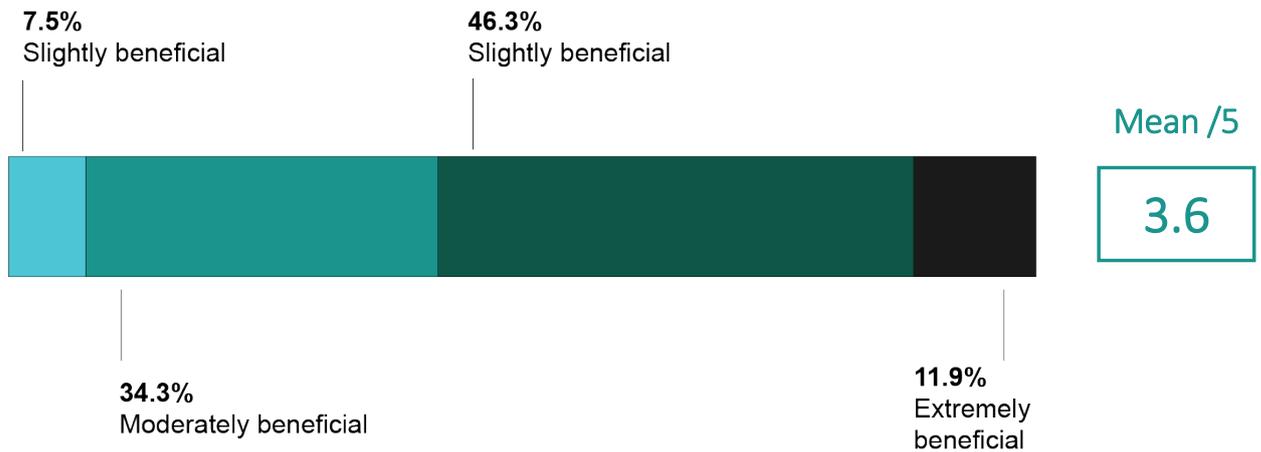
Key to the success of the KE Concordat is the impact it has had on KE activities within participating HE providers. All named contacts generally viewed their participation as in some way beneficial, with over 98% reporting having made, being in the process of making, or expecting to make other changes or improvements as a result of their involvement. All named contacts (100%) were confident that their priority actions will be implemented.

### **Benefits to the HE provider**

Named contacts were largely positive about how beneficial the development year had been to KE activities at their HE provider, with over half (58.2%) rating it as either 'extremely' or 'very' beneficial, and a third (34.3%) rating it as 'moderately' beneficial (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Views of named contacts on benefits to HE provider**

Has the KE Concordat development year process been beneficial to the development of knowledge exchange activities in your HE provider?



■ 1 - Not at all beneficial ■ 2 - Slightly beneficial ■ 3 - Moderately beneficial ■ 4 - Very beneficial ■ 5 - Extremely beneficial

Base: All named contacts (67); KEF Cluster bases as shown

While the small sample sizes make it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions, it is evident that there were some differences in how English HE providers in each KEF cluster viewed the benefits. All participants in the Arts cluster rated their involvement as 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) beneficial,<sup>7</sup> compared with around half of those in clusters E, J, V and X.

<sup>7</sup> Scores were rated out of a maximum of 5 on a 5-point scale.

In the qualitative responses, named contacts had seen benefits relating to increased clarity around staffing and resourcing, and mentioned how the KE Concordat had helped to bring clarity and ownership to their KE approach through:

- forming working groups
- giving a mandate to progress KE initiatives among staff who had not been involved
- increasing the profile among administrative functions, such as human resources departments

Many noted how involvement in the KE Concordat process had brought a more strategic focus to their KE work, allowing them to bring together different elements of KE activity into a more unified, focused approach:

While we do have in place an organising structure which brings together our various knowledge exchange functions, having to formulate an institutional response necessitated a genuinely integrated and collaborative approach that is not always possible without such an external policy impetus.

#### **NAMED CONTACT**

Respondents also mentioned the value of the gap analysis, which had allowed them to identify strengths, weaknesses and priorities in their approach to KE.

Though relatively few in number, those comments that were less positive mostly concerned the administrative burden of involvement, especially in the context of other reporting requirements, including Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) monitoring, accountability returns for funding allocations, and the requirement for KEF narrative statements. A couple of respondents felt that the process had not informed the development of any new processes within their HE provider in respect of KE.

Named contacts were asked whether their involvement had encouraged them to be more innovative in their approach to KE. Over half (58%) said that it had, highlighting that the process had given them the time and impetus to reflect on what they do and how they can do it more effectively. One

mentioned that it had reinforced their commitment to involving students in KE, while another saw it as an opportunity to look outwards and to learn from what others in the sector are doing.

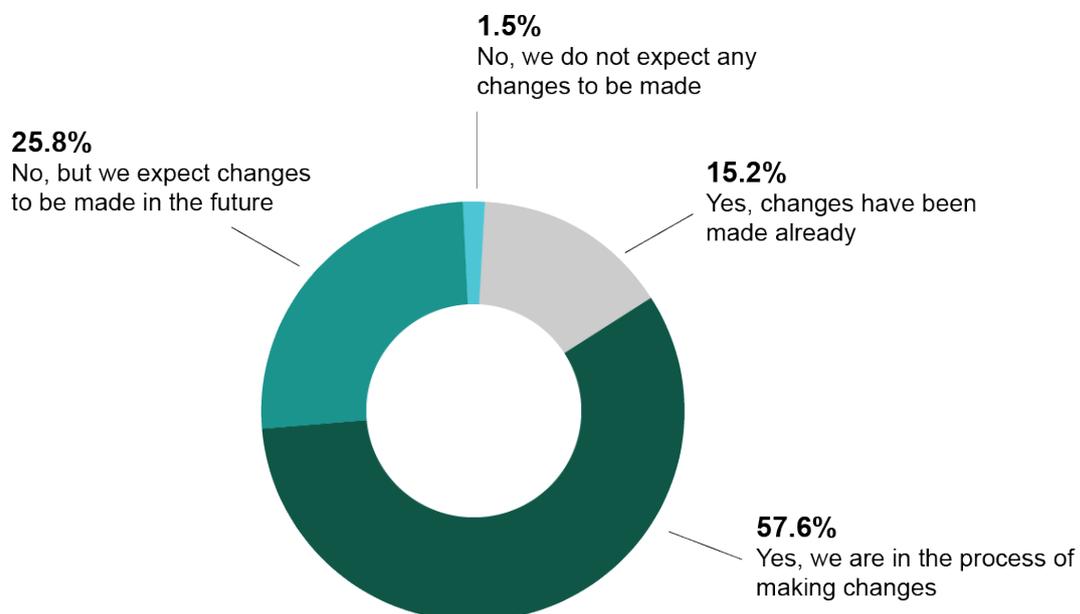
Of those who indicated that the process had not encouraged them to be more innovative, responses were mostly split into two types. The first commented on the fact that they considered the KE Concordat to be more about improving the basics of KE and that innovation would come later, especially where they felt that their approach to KE was less mature. The second type felt that their approaches to KE were already innovative and that the KE Concordat had not significantly changed their focus.

## Other changes made in HE providers

Nearly all named contacts (98.5%) had made, were in the process of making, or were expecting to make other changes or improvements as a result of their involvement in the development year. Around one-third (35.3%) had already implemented changes, over half (57.6%) were in the process of making changes, and one-quarter (25.8%) had not made changes, but were expecting to do so in the future (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Whether the KE concordat has led to changes or improvements**

Has your involvement in the KE Concordat development year led to any other changes or improvements at your HE provider?



Qualitative responses revealed that these other changes or improvements were largely focused on providing clarity of focus, better embedding of KE within broader strategies, and highlighting the value of the KE Concordat in raising the profile of KE and bringing together previously disconnected parts of the HE provider.

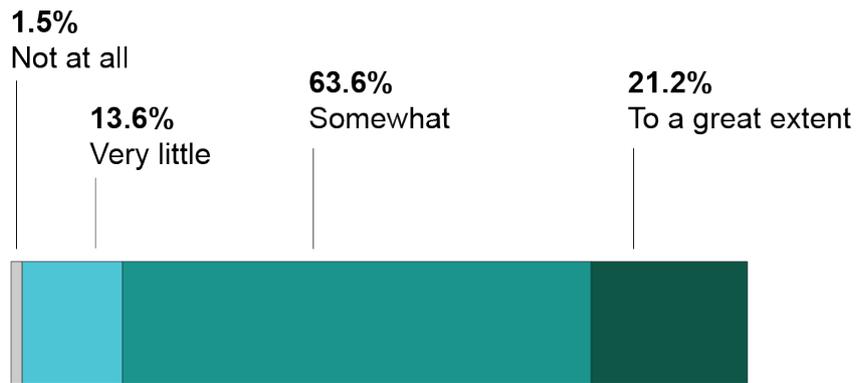
**98.5%**  
of named contacts  
have made, or  
expect to make  
other changes

## Raising the profile of knowledge exchange and engagement with partners

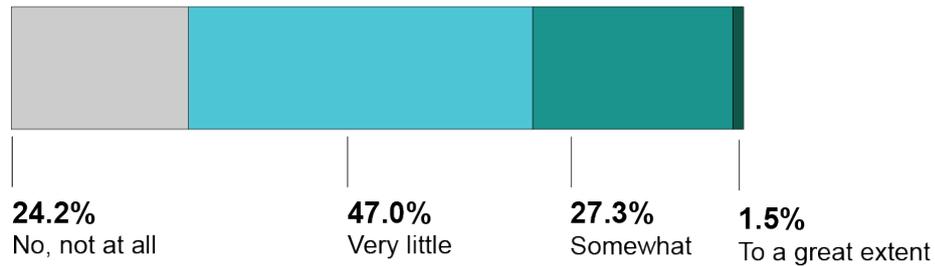
Named contacts felt that the KE Concordat had helped to raise the profile of KE within their HE provider. One in five (21.2%) felt it had done so to a great extent, and nearly two-thirds (63.6%) said that it had 'somewhat' raised the profile of KE. Respondents were less positive about the extent to which it had supported engagement with partners, with only one respondent saying it had raised engagement to a great extent and nearly a quarter (24.2%) indicating that it had not done so at all (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: The extent to which the KE Concordat has raised the profile of KE and increased engagement with partners**

To what extent has the KE Concordat process raised the profile of knowledge exchange activities in your HE provider?



To what extent has the KE Concordat process supported engagement with partners?



Base: All named contacts (67)

Respondents generally considered that the profile of KE had been raised internally with senior leaders, with others going so far as to say that it had helped to raise the profile among all levels of staff. Where comments were less positive, these mentioned it still being in the early stages, or how there were other priority areas within their HE provider. Qualitative responses on engagement with external partners tended to show that the KE Concordat has revealed where engagement with partners may be advantageous, but that engagement had not yet happened or that the process itself had not encouraged much action in this area.

## Priority actions

All named contacts who responded to the survey were confident that the priority actions would be implemented. Over two-thirds (67.2%) felt confident 'to a great extent', and the remaining one-third (32.8%) were 'somewhat' confident (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Named contacts' confidence in implementing priority actions**

To what extent are you confident that the priority actions will be implemented?



Base: All named contacts (67)

Barriers to implementing the priority actions were cited, and these related to external factors (such as the stability of funding or the business environment), or internal staff capacity:

The actions have all been approved at the strategic level, so the commitment is there. The two greatest potential challenges are capacity and funding, because there is dependence on either or both of these for implementation.

NAMED CONTACT

## Increasing the impact

When asked how the impact of the KE Concordat could be increased, the most common response was about resolving overlap and duplication with other exercises, and the reporting requirements relating to KE, namely the HE Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) survey, the KEF, and HEIF monitoring and accountability reporting (where relevant). A small number of

respondents mentioned overlapping timescales with other submissions in the sector, including the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

The burden on HE providers was a key consideration for the Operational Group when designing the development year process. To account for additional workload and noting the delay to other submissions in the sector, including REF,<sup>8</sup> the Operational Group postponed the development year, rescheduling the submission deadline for July 2021 so that it fell after the REF submission deadline of March 2021.

Other respondents commented on the frequency of possible future KE Concordat exercises, suggesting that action plan submissions could fall every three to five years to minimise the burden.

Other named contacts requested opportunities to share best practice across the sector through events and seminars, or more opportunities for HE providers to collaborate directly to provide opportunities to learn from each other. One mentioned that this had proved valuable in Scotland:

Regional groups set up to share processes and peer support are important and this has been the case in Scotland where a small group met to discuss and support as we worked through the process.

#### NAMED CONTACT

Here – and throughout – there was acknowledgement that the KE Concordat was in its development year and it was apparent that named contacts would appreciate clarity on next steps to be able to plan resourcing and collaboration opportunities.

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<sup>8</sup> For information about revisions to REF, see [www.ref.ac.uk/media/1417/guidance-on-revisions-to-ref-2021-final.pdf](http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1417/guidance-on-revisions-to-ref-2021-final.pdf)

## Suggested improvements

- Improve alignment of the KE Concordat with other reporting requirements to reduce overlap, for example by focusing on elements of KE not captured elsewhere, or adjust timescales to reduce burden.
- Explore whether the Operational Group has a role in convening sector-wide or regional opportunities to share knowledge and best practice among HE providers.
- Review the impact of the KE Concordat again when more HE providers have had the opportunity to enact change.
- Consider introducing further measures into the KE Concordat that will help to encourage greater user engagement.
- Use the KE Concordat to address some of the disconnect between the 'softer' aspects of KE (such as community and public engagement, ethics and transparency) and income-generating activity.

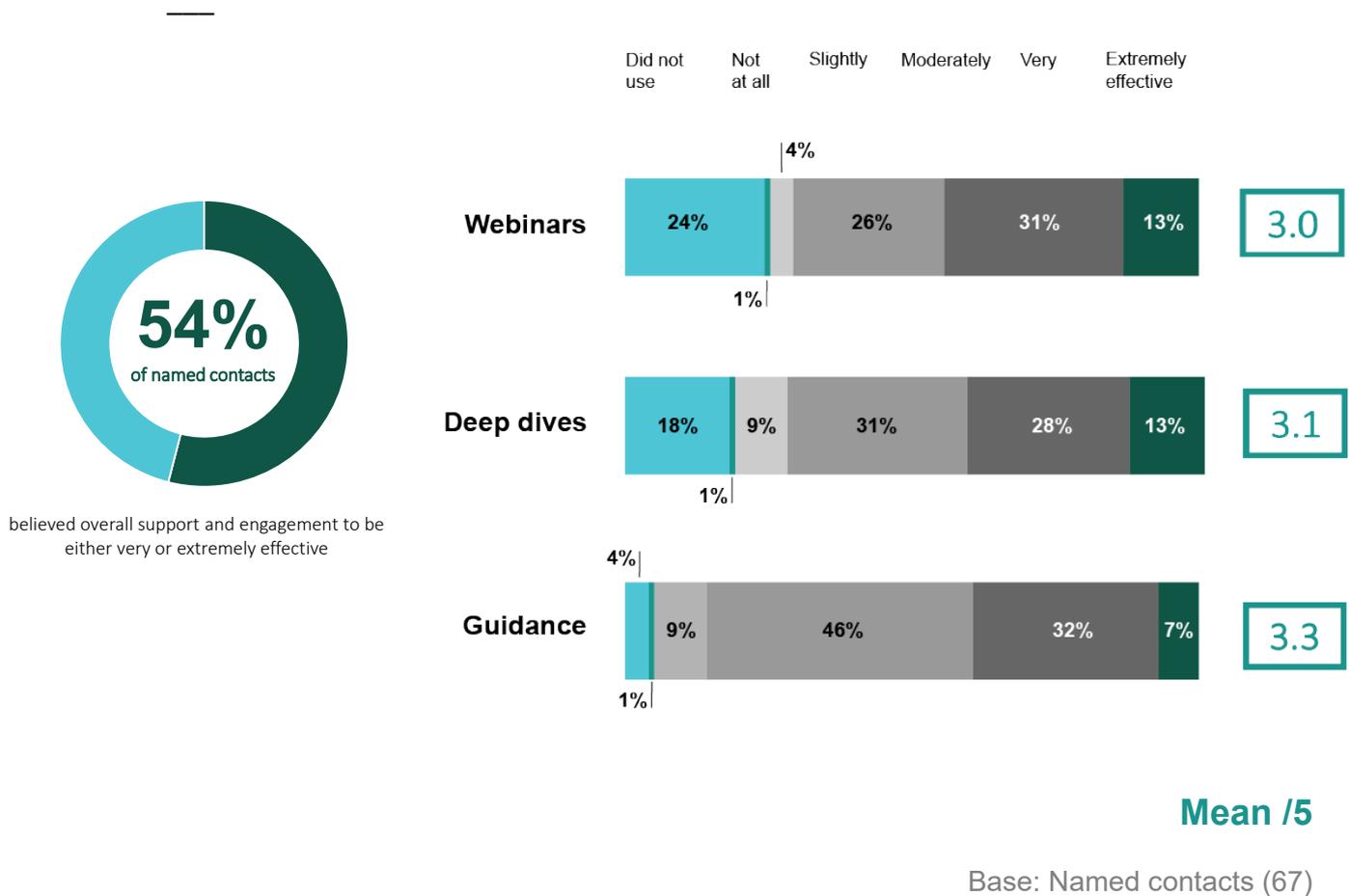
# Support and engagement

Named contacts said that they found the support and engagement activities constructive and informative, but wanted to engage with other HE providers to share approaches and good practice during the development year.

Over half (54%) of all respondents considered the overall support and engagement provided by the Operational Group to be either 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) effective. A further 37% believed this to be 'moderately' (3) effective (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Named contact view of support and engagement activities**

How would you rate the overall support and engagement received during the process from the KE Concordat *Operational Group*?



When the results are broken down by activity, the webinars were considered the most effective method of support for named contacts, with 43% rating them as either 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) effective. This is consistent with other forms of engagement, including the written guidance and online deep-dive sessions, which were also considered 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) effective by 39% and 42% of respondents respectively.

Respondents from HE providers in the Arts KEF cluster answered most positively about the deep dives, in comparison with responses from those in other KEF clusters, providing a mean score of 4 (out of 5). Respondents from cluster M HE providers gave a mean score of 2 for the deep dives, the lowest rating from all KEF clusters (see Figure 8).

However, when these results are further analysed, they indicate that 43% of respondents from cluster M HE providers did not use the deep dives as a method of support. Similarly, respondents from cluster V HE providers, who offered a mean score of 2.3 for the webinars, yet 63% of cluster V respondents had not participated in the webinars. This suggests that some named contacts had relied solely on the written guidance to support them in producing their action plan. As all support and engagement sessions were publicised to a contact list of 776,<sup>9</sup> it is suggested that the value of the webinar and deep-dive sessions is stressed in particular to named contacts for future iterations of the KE Concordat, since these expanded on the action-planning process and encouraged participating HE providers to share approaches.

Qualitative responses support the scores discussed above, specifically acknowledging that they better demonstrate the value of the webinars and deep dives. Many respondents reported that these supported the action-planning process, and that being able to access the recorded discussions after the events was beneficial:

The webinars and deep dives were very useful and having their recordings available afterwards was helpful; it would be very helpful to retain this feature for future exercises.

#### **NAMED CONTACT**

Many found these activities to be valuable; however, several named contacts requested greater breadth of KE coverage in future activities with speakers from a variety of HE provider types and from organisations outside higher education, for example focusing on 'commercialisation evaluation'. A few suggested that the action-

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<sup>9</sup> The contact list was made up of visitors to the KE Concordat portal, recipients of KE Concordat updates, named contacts and evaluators.

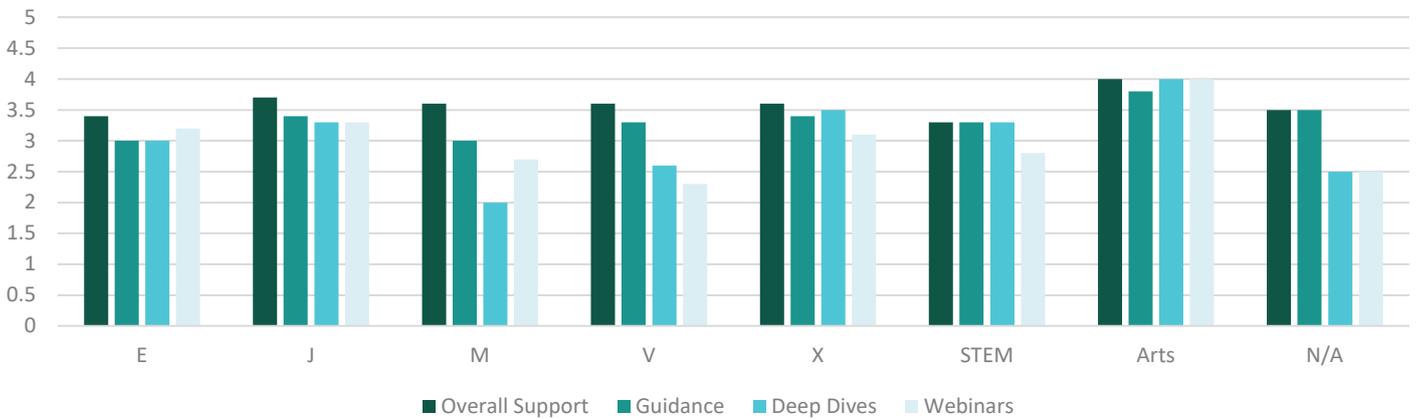
planning process be further clarified during webinars and deep dives, and that engagement between HE providers could be promoted through a greater use of break-out groups:

The deep dives and webinars were useful, but the most useful part was the break-out groups where we were encouraged to discuss our approaches. It would be helpful to include break-out sessions more to support individual thinking and enable networking across the sector with the KEC as a focus.

**NAMED CONTACT**

**Figure 8: Mean scores (out of 5) provided by named contacts for support and engagement activities, by KEF cluster**

How do you rate the following support and engagement activities?



Base: Named contacts (67)

Of the 51 participants who offered suggestions for how support and engagement could be improved, 14 commented on the Operational Group’s issue of supplementary guidance. Some named contacts saw the supplementary guidance as an obstacle to completing their action plans owing to its publication at a late stage during the process.

Others commented on the need to further clarify the guidance and outline the specific information HE providers could include in their action plans:

We felt the guidance notes could have been clearer at points especially surrounding on how best to focus on specific principles relative to the institution's development and current level.

**NAMED CONTACT**

A few respondents asked for examples of completed sample action plans to support HE providers that are not particularly advanced in their KE journey, while others asked for an interview or conversation with each HE provider by the Operational Group to assist with the action-planning process. Given the difficulties in issuing exemplar action plans in a development year that had not yet completed an evaluation cycle, this should instead be considered for future iterations. Likewise, conversations between the Operational Group and individual HE providers were offered to all signatories between October 2020 and July 2021 and should be continued in future years.

## Suggested improvements

- Clarify the guidance to ensure HE providers are aware of the information they can include in their submissions.
- Maintain online engagement via webinars and deep dives and ensure there is a broad range of KE activity represented in discussions.
- Provide a complete timeline at the beginning of the submission process to alert participants to upcoming dates and deadlines to help the action-planning process.
- Facilitate a greater number of break-out and networking sessions for HE providers to discuss their approaches and share good practice during all stages of the action-planning process.
- Continue to offer all HE providers an opportunity to discuss their action plan with other HE providers and members of the Operational Group.
- Continue to consult with the sector on how the KE Concordat develops through roundtables and other feedback mechanisms.

# Submission process

NCUB developed a bespoke portal, NCUB Apply, to facilitate the operation of the KE Concordat implementation process. The questionnaire found that 32% of all respondents were either 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) satisfied with the NCUB Apply portal, and 36% were 'moderately' (3) satisfied.

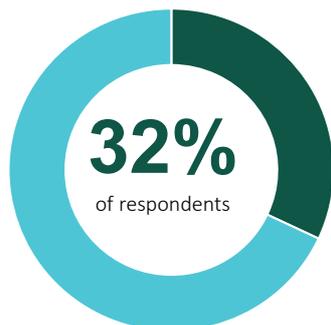
Evaluators found NCUB Apply to be generally easy to use and fit for purpose, allowing them to provide feedback in a succinct and coherent way. For named contacts, there was a request to improve its functionality, including allowing formatting of text and cumulative word counts, and to ensure consistency in the templates (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Respondents' views of the NCUB Apply portal**

How do you rate your overall experience of using the NCUB Apply portal?



Mean /5

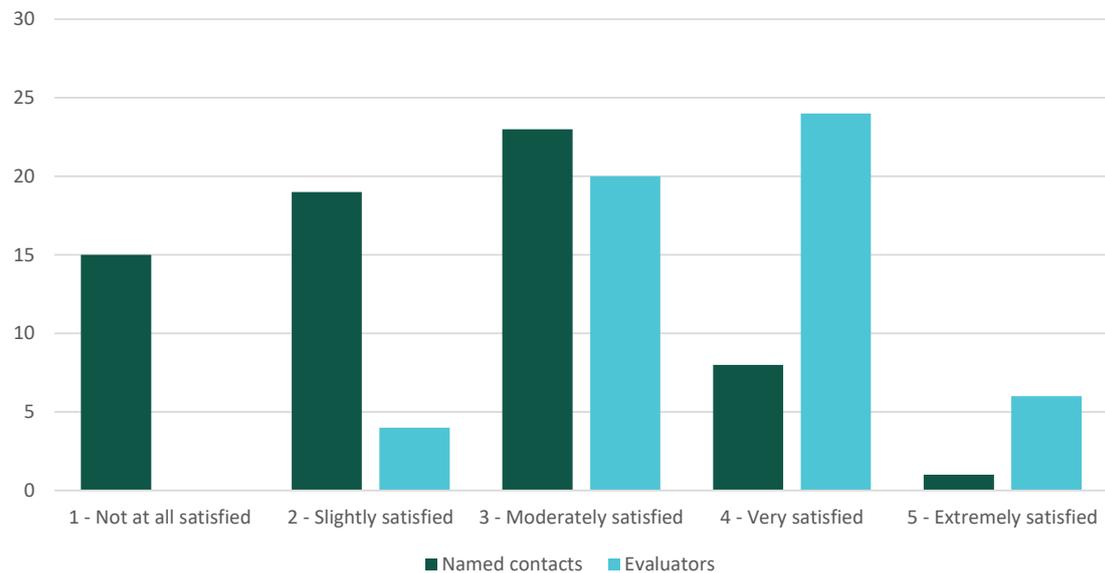


were either very or extremely satisfied with the NCUB Apply portal

Participants were asked to consider their level of satisfaction in relation to the site’s navigation, structure and ease of use. The results indicated that 35% were ‘very’ (4) or ‘extremely’ (5) satisfied with its ease of use, with 34% and 28% being ‘very’ (4) or ‘extremely’ (5) satisfied respectively with its structure and site navigation.

When the responses from named contacts are considered against those of evaluators, the experience of evaluators was far more positive (see Figure 10). Of the 54 evaluators who responded to this question, 50 rated their overall experience as 3 or above on a 5-point scale (93%). This compares with 32 out of 66 named contacts (48%). It is important to note that the named contacts and evaluators used different parts of the NCUB Apply portal for different purposes. Named contacts used an applicant function to submit their action plan, whereas evaluators used a reviewer function.

**Figure 10: Responses to overall experience of the NCUB Apply portal, by participant role**



Base: Named contacts (67); Evaluators (68)

Named contacts offered reasons for their perception of NCUB Apply, with most (33 out of 87) respondents commenting on the site’s functionality. Some

respondents noted there was limited ability to embed hyperlinks in the system and it was at times difficult to cut and paste information using similar formatting from external sources, such as drafts prepared offline. The inclusion of hyperlinks was offered for named contacts as part of sections 1 and 2 in the action plan; however, this was (intentionally) excluded for sections 3 and 4. Other respondents noted that the site's navigation was challenging because the submission template was spread across multiple pages rather than being on a single page with the ability to scroll. This reportedly made it difficult to view the entire submission and see the connections between the different sections.

A few named contacts noted the inability to collaborate with colleagues on NCUB Apply. This meant that only one person in each participating HE provider was able to access the site, and consequently the action plan, which made it difficult to work collaboratively on the submission:

It was difficult as only one person could access [NCUB Apply] and so we ended up with a very senior person uploading documents, which wasn't ideal.

#### **NAMED CONTACT**

From the 87 qualitative responses provided, 21 commented on the overall structure of NCUB Apply, and suggested including an opening section for 'vital information' for each HE provider, bringing the priority actions towards the start of the submission template, and improving navigation. It is therefore suggested that these elements of the portal should be considered in future iterations to improve the experience for named contacts.

Evaluators' perspectives were more positive. The evaluators received the action plans that were allocated to them through a reviewer function of NCUB Apply and they could view the submission and work on their review simultaneously. This made their experience of NCUB Apply markedly different. A few commented that the site was easy to use and navigate from an evaluator perspective, and others suggested that the format of the review platform, including a side-by-side format for action plans and evaluator commentary forms, was helpful. For some, there were issues with access to the site as a result of the multi-factor authenticator (a security measure that

protected privacy and access to personalised information). However, overall sentiments from the evaluators were positive:

After some initial problems accessing the submissions I was asked to review, the portal was very easy to use.

#### **EVALUATOR**

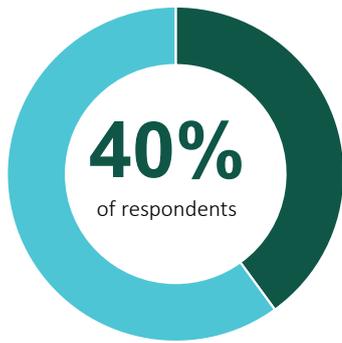
The distinction between the experiences of named contacts and evaluators demonstrates that there is scope to improve the system, with a focus on improving some aspects of the platform for use by named contacts. Allowing the submission platform to have greater functionality, reformatting the site to reduce the number of click-throughs, and improving access for multiple contacts may create a more user-friendly site for submitting action plans.

## **Submission template**

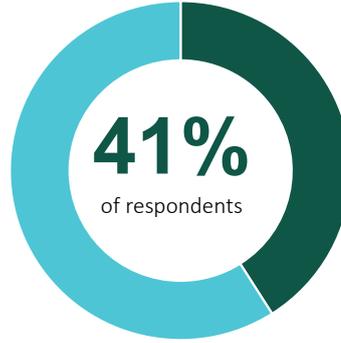
Survey participants were asked to comment on how effective the submission template was in terms of its clarity and the extent to which it enabled users to demonstrate institutional objectives and priority actions. Under half (41%) of respondents believed the template to be either 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) effective in terms of clarity, and 40% believed the template to be 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) effective regarding their ability to demonstrate institutional objectives and priority actions (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Responses to elements of the submission template**

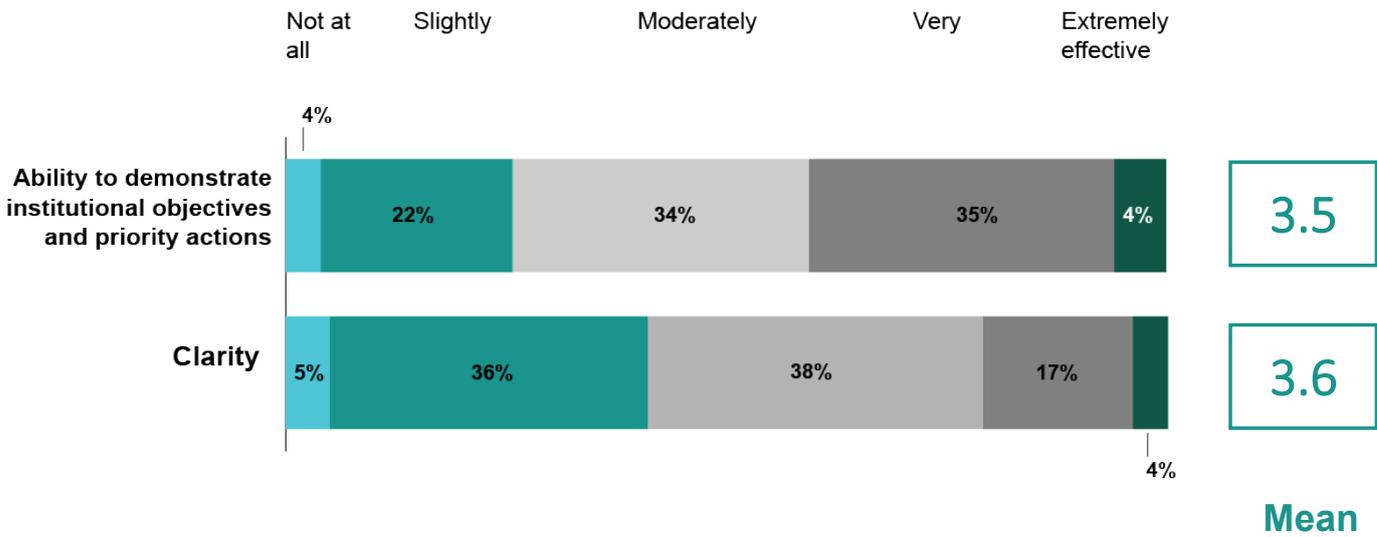
How do you rate the format of the KE Concordat submission template in terms of...?



rated the submission template as either very or extremely effective in terms of demonstrating institutional objectives and priority actions



rated the submission template as either very or extremely effective in terms of clarity



Base: Named contacts and evaluators (110)

There was again a distinction between evaluator and named contact perspectives regarding this question. Just under half (49%) of evaluators rated the template’s clarity and ability to demonstrate institutional objectives and priority actions at 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, compared with an average of only 33% of named contacts.

A recurrent issue among named contacts was an apparent disconnect between the original template produced early in the process and the structure of the template on the NCUB Apply portal. Respondents indicated that this created difficulties when uploading their action plan, as formatting was lost and it was difficult to see the overall flow of the submission. It should be noted that the portal was accessible to all named contacts from November 2020. Joining instructions for NCUB Apply were sent to all participating named contacts shortly after their HE provider had become a signatory to the KE Concordat. In future, access to the portal should be more clearly communicated by the Operational Group.

Likewise, 15 respondents commented on the word limits of the submission template. Of those, 12 (80%) named contacts suggested increasing the word limit in order to allow them, for example, to better communicate their objectives and plans. The word limit was said to present unnecessary challenges, and respondents felt unable to communicate their action plan effectively within the word limit. This response came directly as a result of evaluator feedback, in which many HE providers had been asked for additional information.

For some named contacts and evaluators, the word limit was effective in encouraging HE providers to submit relevant and concise information and they therefore said they would not increase it:

Generally, having quite a tight word limit was welcomed.

**NAMED CONTACT**

Respondents' comments suggest that the issue of word limits was often linked to the overall structure of the template and possible overlap of content in various sections. Some named contacts believed the template should be restructured to allow HE providers greater opportunity to express their strategic objectives, plans for improvement and gap analysis.

However, for evaluators, the template was considered accessible and effective in allowing HE providers to submit an action plan that suited their approach to the KE Concordat development year:

[The submission template] was complex and allowed for a diversity of approaches. Perhaps more clarity on expectations and more uniformity might be helpful when doing the evaluations.

#### **EVALUATOR**

Others requested greater flexibility in the template to accommodate the differences in approaches, stages and scale of KE and institution type:

The template needs greater flexibility for institutions to articulate their own approach to KE strategy.

#### **NAMED CONTACT**

From the responses, it is evident that the template requires further consideration before the next iteration. Consideration should be given to the word limit and structure of the template, in addition to the clarity of the guidance for named contacts to use when producing their action plan in order for them to better understand what information can be included in a submission.

## **Suggested improvements**

- Consider adding functions to the application system on the NCUB Apply portal, as requested by named contacts.
- Review an increase in the word limit of the submission.
- Consider the flexibility of the template.

# Evaluation process

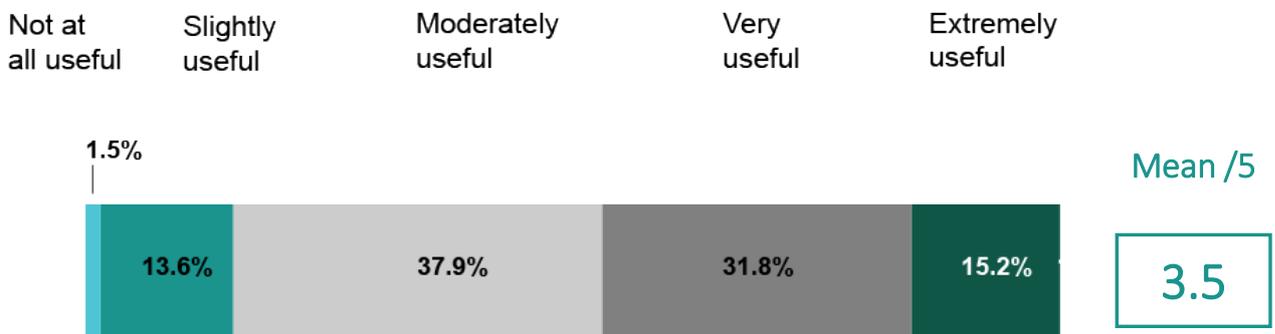
Named contacts thought that the evaluator feedback had reinforced their HE provider’s focus on KE, but felt that opportunities were lost to make feedback more consistent and targeted, a view that was echoed by the evaluators themselves.

## Views of named contacts on evaluation

Named contacts had mixed perceptions of evaluator feedback. Only one indicated that the feedback had not been useful at all, but nearly two in five of named contacts (37.9%) rated the feedback as 3 on a 5-point scale (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Usefulness of feedback to named contacts**

How do you rate the usefulness of the feedback from evaluators?



Where named contacts were asked how the feedback could be improved, some pointed to positive aspects, including how useful the feedback had been, and how it had validated some of the findings from their self-evaluation:

A lot of the feedback that we received from our evaluators reinforced what we had already discovered ourselves through the self-evaluation process. We did, however, appreciate having an independent view, which verified our findings and perspectives about Knowledge Exchange and Impact at our Institution.

### NAMED CONTACT

A few said that some of the feedback they had received was contradictory – while some found this unhelpful, others noted that this was a natural result of having multiple evaluators with a breadth of experiences. Some suggested that an output that combined the different evaluators' perspectives into a single set of recommendations could be helpful.

Some named contacts felt that evaluators may have been unaware of the mechanics of the KE Concordat submission and, as a consequence, had suggested the HE provider add more detail, which the word limits would not allow. Others felt that evaluators could have been better informed about institutional context or been given the opportunity to clarify points with the HE provider, so that feedback could be more tailored to the HE provider and reflect the maturity of its KE activity.

The feedback letters to the heads of HE providers were additional pieces of feedback rather than summaries of evaluator comments. The letters were moderated by the Operational Group and Evaluation Panel Chair, and produced in consultation with each evaluator. The role of these letters should be considered for future iterations.

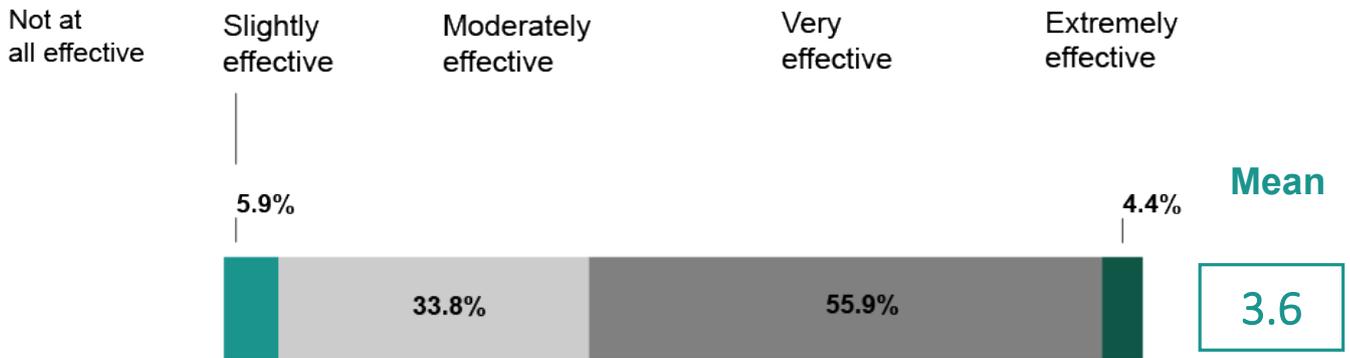
Some named contacts felt that the letters presented their KE activity in a negative light, as potential weaknesses were identified by the evaluators, and raw feedback (i.e., the full, unedited feedback from evaluators) might be misinterpreted or understood. They felt that feedback could have been refined before being presented to senior management. In a couple of cases, named contacts thought that the letter to heads of HE providers contradicted some of the feedback that they had received from the evaluators. Others felt that the letter had been one of the most useful aspects of feedback as it was more succinct.

## Views of evaluators on evaluation

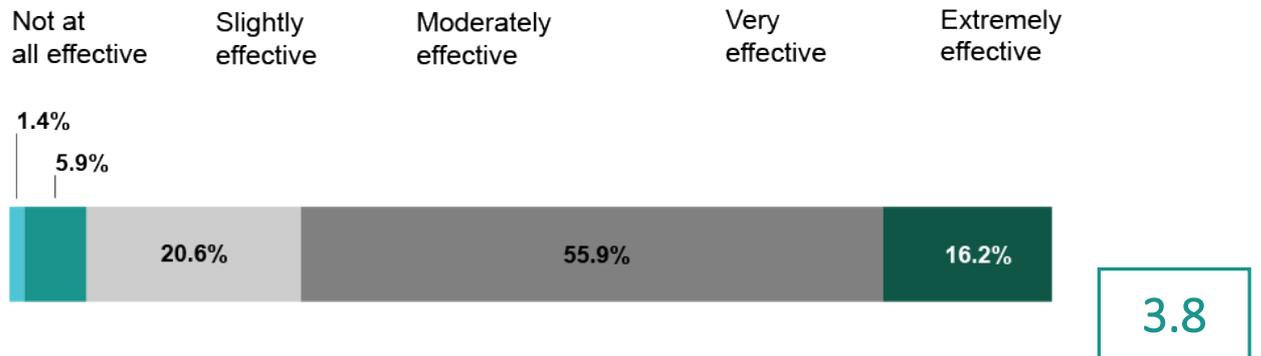
Overall, evaluators were positive about the evaluation process. The majority (60.3%) rated the approach as either 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) effective, with a large majority (72.1%) rating the moderation of feedback likewise (see Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Evaluator views on feedback and moderation**

How do you rate the approach to providing feedback to HE providers?



How do you rate the moderation of feedback, including sub-panels and moderation meetings?



Base: All evaluators

In the qualitative responses, evaluators were positive about the evaluation process, with some comparing it favourably to other, similar processes in which they had been involved. Some described how the moderation panels were a useful environment to understand and explore the feedback of others, with one describing the opportunity to discuss feedback as 'invaluable':

This was no small task to provide constructive and comprehensive feedback. I do think the outcome was a tidy process which actually ran very smoothly. Given the volume of applications, how feedback was moderated was a tremendous achievement.

#### **EVALUATOR**

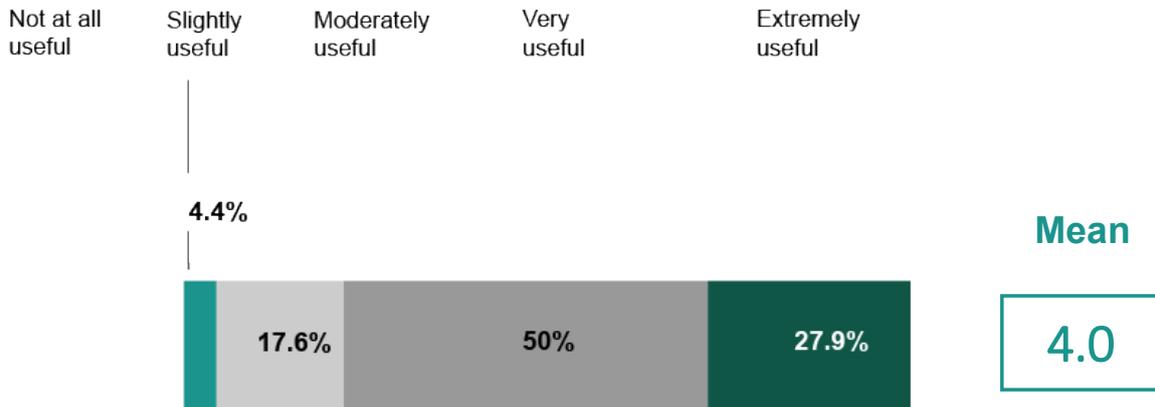
As with the named contacts, evaluators said that a meeting with the HE provider would have been useful to get more institutional context and to clarify any uncertainty, although it should be noted that the process was designed in this way to maintain anonymity. Some also thought that a 'consensus' approach to feedback might have been more helpful, with evaluators providing a single feedback document, a view that was also supported by some named contacts.

A number of evaluators mentioned the significant time commitment that the evaluation required, with a couple pointing to improving the format of the feedback template or a more focused approach to reduce this burden.

Evaluators were very positive about the usefulness of being an evaluator to their professional development – this was a particularly positive finding in the context of volunteers at various stages of their career being encouraged to take part. Over three-quarters (77.9%) rated it as 'very' (4) or 'extremely' (5) useful, with a mean score of 4 on a 5-point scale (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Evaluator views on professional development**

How useful did you find the experience of being an evaluator for your own professional development?



Base: All evaluators

Many of those who also worked in HE providers identified it as a good opportunity to reflect on their own KE activities, both to see innovative approaches to KE, and to validate their own approach:

I was able to discuss and hear current thinking about KE from all different disciplines and from across the sector. It was fascinating and collaborative and how HE should be. Professionally, I was able to inform discussions in my own [higher education institution] and understand what good practice across the different perspectives of KE could look like.

**EVALUATOR**

Some evaluators identified specific skills that they had developed through participation in the process, including those of evaluation, strategy development and collaboration, while others mentioned that the prestige of being involved in the development year would help their career progression.

## Suggested improvements

- Consider collating evaluator feedback to provide a single 'consensus' feedback document for HE providers. Using the insights from the development year would allow forms and processes to be streamlined.
- Revisit the purpose of the letter to senior management, and ensure it reflects a consensus of evaluator feedback.
- Provide evaluators with more understanding of institutional context. This could be through facilitating a short meeting with the HE provider, or through revising the template to provide a contextual snapshot.
- Continue providing opportunities for evaluators to discuss their feedback with each other.
- Provide more specific examples of evaluation feedback for guidance during the training period.
- Consider a 'feedback loop' so that evaluators can understand how useful their feedback to HE providers was.

# Conclusion

In summary, the survey results demonstrate a positive experience of those involved in the KE Concordat development year. A majority (90%) of all respondents were satisfied with their involvement, representing 94% of evaluators and 85% of named contacts.

A key aim of the KE Concordat is the advancement of KE in higher education, which has been demonstrated through the changes in KE practices in HE providers. This report has outlined that 98.5% of named contacts have either made, are in the process of making, or are expecting to make changes as a result of their involvement in the development year. All the named contacts (100%) were confident that their priority actions will be implemented. This is testament to the time and resources HE providers have invested in the development year to create an achievable action plan, and the value of the feedback received from the evaluator cohort.

The impact of the development year on HE providers has been evidenced throughout this report. Respondents revealed the clear impact the KE Concordat has had on HE providers by noting greater clarity and ownership of approaches to KE, the formation of working groups and the increase in strategic focus on KE work. Importantly, respondents commented that the KE Concordat had helped to unify the various facets of KE to create a single approach to it across their HE provider and the sector as a whole.

Evaluators' perspectives were generally positive. For many, being an evaluator provided them with skills, including those of evaluation, strategy development and collaboration. Their input has been invaluable to the success of the development year.

In other areas, however, further consideration and revision are needed to maximise the potential of the KE Concordat. Respondents were clear that the submission process was, at times, overly burdensome and complicated. This is something the Operational Group should revisit to assess how and where the process can be made more efficient and user-friendly for named contacts.

The KE Concordat development year has inspired the higher education sector to further drive forward the positive practice of KE in delivering economic, social and cultural development and growth in the future.

# Recommendations

## Impact on HE providers

- Improve the alignment of the KE Concordat with other reporting requirements to reduce overlap, for example by focusing on elements of KE not captured elsewhere, or adjusting the timescales to reduce burden.
- Explore whether the Operational Group has a role in convening sector-wide or regional opportunities to share knowledge and good practice among HE providers.
- Review the impact of the KE Concordat again once more HE providers have had the opportunity to enact change.
- Consider introducing further measures into the KE Concordat that will help to encourage greater user engagement.
- Use the KE Concordat as an opportunity to address some of the disconnect between the 'softer' aspects of KE (such as community and public engagement, ethics and transparency) and income-generating activity.

## Support and engagement

- Clarify the guidance to ensure HE providers are aware of the information they can include in their submissions.
- Maintain online engagement via webinars and deep dives and ensure there is a broad range of KE activity represented in discussions.
- Provide a complete timeline at the beginning of the submission process to alert participants to upcoming dates and deadlines to help the action-planning process.
- Facilitate a greater number of break-out and networking sessions for HE providers to discuss their approaches and share good practice during all stages of the action-planning process.

- Continue to offer all HE providers an opportunity to discuss their action plan with other HE providers and members of the Operational Group.
- Continue to consult with the sector on how the KE Concordat develops through roundtables and other feedback mechanisms.

## Submission process

- Consider adding functions to the application system on the NCUB Apply portal, as requested by named contacts.
- Review an increase in the overall word limit of the submission.
- Consider the flexibility of the template.

## Evaluation process

- Consider collating evaluator feedback to provide a single 'consensus' feedback document for HE providers. Using the insights from the development year would allow forms and processes to be streamlined.
- Revisit the purpose of the letter to senior management, and ensure it reflects a consensus of evaluator feedback.
- Provide evaluators with greater understanding of institutional context. This could be through facilitating a short meeting with the HE provider, or revising the template to provide a contextual snapshot.
- Continue providing opportunities for evaluators to discuss their feedback with each other.
- Provide more specific examples of evaluation feedback for guidance during the training period.
- Consider a 'feedback loop' so evaluators can understand how useful their feedback to HE providers was.

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