

Mapping Institutional Commitments to External Concordats to Support Meaningful Research Culture Change

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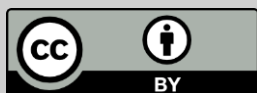
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Abstract

Over recent decades, most UK academic institutions have signed numerous concordats, charters and declarations to demonstrate their commitment to responsible practices in support of research. While these agreements provide essential accountability and direction, they also introduce administrative demands and, without coherent oversight, could lead to redundant actions that inadvertently divert resources from more meaningful research culture change.

Here we discuss a project launched at Loughborough University to map the range of actions, goals and responsibilities arising from the University's participation across multiple concordats. This project sought to streamline responses to these commitments and explore their alignment with our institution's unique research culture ambitions.

This paper presents our approach and shares key lessons we learned throughout the process to potentially help other institutions looking to simplify and coordinate their research culture commitments. Our hope is that by identifying synergies and efficiencies, the sector will be well positioned to better leverage its resources to continue to pursue even more impactful actions to enhance research cultures.

Keywords: concordats; charters; research culture; governance; administration; strategic alignment

Introduction

Concordats, charters and declarations feature prominently in the landscape of influences shaping research cultures at universities across the UK and beyond. Developed over time in response to emerging challenges and opportunities, these agreements seek to address varied issues, for example, those related to researcher development, responsible research assessment and research integrity. They also help institutions demonstrate their commitment to best practices while promoting accountability and alignment with sector-wide standards, with many universities signing up to multiple such initiatives.

However, as more concordats and agreements have emerged, institutions face concerns around managing a growing number of commitments. Without coherent oversight, responses can become fragmented, leading to the risk of duplicated efforts, excessive administrative burdens and inefficiencies that divert resources from more meaningful culture change. Institutions may also struggle to balance compliance with these frameworks against their own strategic priorities, risking a reactive rather than a proactive approach to developing their own priorities for their research cultures.

In 2024, we carried out a project at Loughborough University to map our commitments across various concordats, charters and declarations. Our goal was to identify ways to streamline our efforts in advancing the University's ambitions for its research and innovation culture and strengthen connections between different areas of work. This article outlines our approach and key findings. By sharing our experience, we hope to offer insights that support other universities in managing similar challenges and ensuring they can use these frameworks to also meaningfully benefit their own ambitions for their research cultures.

Background and Context

UK universities engage with various concordats, charters, declarations and agreements – henceforth, concordats – to uphold responsible practices and improve the cultures in which research takes place. Key examples include the Researcher Development Concordat, which sets expectations for supporting research staff; the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the agreement of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), which promote fairer approaches to evaluating research; the Research Integrity Concordat, which ensures ethical research practices; and the Technician Commitment, which recognises the vital role of technical staff. Some concordats go beyond research culture to also encompass wider academic culture, like the Athena Swan Charter

and the Race Equality Charter, which focus on promoting equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education and research institutions.

These concordats have played a crucial role in raising awareness of key issues in research culture, providing frameworks for accountability, and guiding institutions towards change. They offer clear standards, promote sector-wide alignment and demonstrate accountability to funders and policymakers. However, as most universities are signatories to multiple examples of them, balancing their numerous commitments with limited resources has become a growing challenge.

Concerns about excessive research bureaucracy have gained increasing attention in recent years. The Review of Research Bureaucracy (**Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2022**) and the Concordats and Agreements Review (**Oxentia, 2023**) both highlighted the need to reduce administrative burdens while maintaining accountability. While bureaucracy is not inherently negative, we are nevertheless seeing a growing desire to ensure that research bureaucracy serves research culture, and not vice versa. Also, without coordination, institutions risk responding to each concordat in isolation rather than integrating commitments into a cohesive strategy. This can result in a disconnected and compliance-driven approach rather than one that could deliver more meaningful cultural change.

Our Approach

In our analysis we considered 18 research and innovation-associated concordats (**Table 1 & 4**), including 17 listed in the REF 2029 People, Culture and Environment Indicators Survey conducted by Technopolis (**Technopolis, 2024**), as well as the More Than Our Rank initiative (which seeks to challenge the limitations of global university rankings and support institutions in showcasing the diverse ways they contribute to society beyond what rankings can capture). Through desk research and consultations with colleagues in the summer of 2024, we established that Loughborough University was a signatory to nine concordats and a supporter of six more, encompassing 68 commitments between them.

Table 1: Research and innovation-associated concordats, declarations and charters. (cf. Table 4)

Athena Swan Charter (2005, revised in 2015 and 2021)	Barcelona Declaration on Open Research Information (2023)	Coalition on Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) (2022)
Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research (2011)	Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice (2024)	Concordat on Open Research Data (2016)
Concordat on Openness on Animal Research (2014)	Concordat to Support Research Integrity (2012, revised in 2019)	Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2008, revised in 2019)
Guidance for Safeguarding in International Development Research (2020)	HR Excellence in Research Award (2008, revised in 2019)	Knowledge Exchange Concordat (2020)
Leiden Manifesto on Research Metrics (2015)	More Than Our Rank Initiative (2023)	NCCPE Manifesto for Public Engagement (2008)
Race Equality Charter (2016)	San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) (2013)	Technician Commitment (2017)
UKRI Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training (2024)		

To assess how these commitments were being addressed, we then reviewed eight action plans that were available at the time and each related to one or more of those concordats. These described approximately 360 actions that had either been completed during the timeframe of the current action plan or were in progress. These actions were systematically mapped against the relevant concordat commitments in a spreadsheet format, to give a comprehensive overview of our institutional activities. Information on the ownership of actions, their timelines and any key performance indicators was also recorded where they were available.

Each action was then mapped onto one or more of Loughborough's Research and Innovation (R&I) Culture Themes and Ambitions, which had been developed in a parallel strand of work following the SCOPE Framework for Research Evaluation (Himanen et al., 2024). Lastly, thematic analysis techniques, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), were then used to categorise actions into distinct types. This multi-phase, iterative process involved familiarising ourselves with the data, initially identifying and labelling (or 'coding') interesting features of the actions, searching those labels (or 'codes') for themes, reviewing those themes, and refining them into clear categories or 'action types'. This approach enabled us to identify patterns across different commitments and to look

for potential areas of duplication, as well as synergies and gaps in our institutional efforts.

Lesson Learned

This project highlighted several key insights and challenges (which we have no reason to believe are unique to Loughborough University) and which we share now in the hope they will help others undertaking similar work.

Accessing and Interpreting action plans

We found that the availability of action plans for different concordats varied greatly. Some were readily accessible online, while others required us to engage directly with colleagues to obtain the latest versions. Other concordats had to be excluded from the analysis for practical reasons, because their corresponding action plans were either under review or being redrafted during the analysis period.

The concordats themselves also varied greatly, particularly in the structure and number of commitments, sub-commitments and guiding principles they contained. This diversity was then reflected in the action plans, which displayed a range of structures too. Some were well-organised, clearly aligning with their respective concordats' commitments, and included defined key performance indicators and assigned responsibilities. In contrast, other action plans were closer to working documents without explicit connections between actions and commitments. In these instances, we often had to infer those relationships, sometimes drawing on broader documentation to interpret the intended outcomes.

Mapping Actions to R&I Culture Themes and ambitions

We found that all the identified actions aligned with at least one of Loughborough's R&I Culture Themes ('Capacity for R&I', 'Community & Collegiality', 'Equity, Diversity & Inclusion', 'Professional & Career Development', 'Research Integrity & Openness', 'Role Models & Leadership', 'Recognition & Reward' and 'Working in Partnership'). Specifically, each action was linked to an average of 2.1 Themes. This strong coverage is likely to be expected, as our R&I Culture Themes were designed to be broad in scope and encompass the full range of research culture topics.

Some themes, however, appeared more frequently than others (**Table 2**). This likely reflects both the concordats included in the analysis and the level of detail in their corresponding action plans. For example, the action plans for both Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter featured a significant number of actions planned by the University, which helps explain why 'Equity, Diversity & Inclusion' emerged as the R&I Culture Theme with the most assigned actions, exceeding 200 in total.

Table 2: Number of actions categorised by Loughborough University's Research & Innovation Culture Themes

Research & Innovation Culture Theme	Number of actions
Capacity for R&I	38
Community & Collegiality	51
Equity, Diversity & Inclusion	205
Professional & Career Development	88
Research Integrity & Openness	32
Role Models & Leadership	202
Recognition & Reward	141
Working in Partnership	11

Fewer actions directly mapped onto Loughborough University's unique R&I Culture Ambitions. However, some strong connections were evident. For example, 61 of the over 140 actions linked to the theme of 'Recognition & Reward' aligned with the specific ambition of 'enabling and rewarding a wider range of contributions from a wider range of staff'. These actions spanned multiple concordats – the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), DORA, the HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award, the Race Equality Charter and the Technician Commitment – demonstrating clear alignment between the various commitments in these concordats and the University's ambitions for its research culture.

Identifying common action types

The thematic analysis of actions taken in response to our commitments to various concordats found no evidence of unnecessary, direct duplication. However, common groups of actions did emerge, highlighting potential opportunities for greater synergy. As a result, 20 distinct action types were devised as follows (**Table 3**).

Table 3: Number of actions categorised by action type

Action Type	Number of actions
Development and Review of Resources and Policy	78
Changes to Governance, Line Management and Oversight	70
Communication and Awareness	66
Training and Skill Development	63
Consultation and Engagement	54
Internal Data Collection and Reporting	46
External-facing Research and Analysis	43
Intervention Testing and Implementation	38

Student Support and Services	38
Recruitment and Induction Practices	32
Changes to Operational Systems and Infrastructure	30
Promotion and Appraisal Processes	29
External Engagement and Advocacy (includes Knowledge Exchange, Impact and Public Engagement)	28
Pursuit of External Funding Opportunities	28
Internal Funding and Resource Allocation	20
Events and Workshops	19
Mentoring and Coaching	15
Review of Career Progression Pathways	11
Specific Wellbeing Initiatives	9
Exit, Redundancy and Redeployment Processes	6

In our analysis, the most common type of action was related to the ‘Development and Review of Resources and Policy’. Seventy-eight actions were coded as this action type, and those actions were being taken in response to commitments from seven concordats: the Athena SWAN Charter, DORA, CoARA, the HREiR Award, the Research Integrity Concordat, the Race Equality Charter and the Technician Commitment.

In contrast, the ‘Exit, Redundancy and Redeployment Processes’ category was the least common, with only six actions identified. These actions were linked to commitments from three concordats: the Athena SWAN Charter, the HREiR Award and the Race Equality Charter.

As before, the prevalence of certain action types likely reflects both the exact concordats included in the analysis and the level of detail in their corresponding action plans. The ‘Development and Review of Resources and Policy’ action type, however, might have been expected to be one of the more common, because policies and resources are often central to how institutions attempt to drive change across a wide range of areas. Similarly, ‘Exit, Redundancy and Redeployment Processes’ might be expected to be among the least common, as it pertains to a more defined set of actions and processes, specifically related to staff transitions, and is typically addressed in specific circumstances.

Using the Analysis to Support Strategy

The results of this analysis are being used in two ways to benefit the University’s work to nurture a thriving research culture, related to a strategic gap analysis and the strengthening of synergies.

Identifying gaps in current activities

Mapping actions against Loughborough's R&I Culture Ambitions allowed us to identify areas where significant activity, driven by concordat commitments, was already in progress and where there were gaps. This insight proved crucial in helping us to subsequently plan how to prioritise efforts to best deliver our institutional ambitions for research culture.

For instance, those ambitions that already had a high number of actions linked to them were recognised as areas to monitor going forward but with no immediate need to add further effort. In contrast, ambitions with fewer actions tied to them were identified as gaps in our activity. These gaps were then prioritised for future work, including the development of new initiatives and the seeking of additional support targeted to deliver on these specific ambitions. We believe this approach will help us ensure that our resources are allocated efficiently and maximise our chances of delivering meaningful change for Loughborough University.

Coordinating efforts across concordats

Although there was no direct overlap, the analysis uncovered synergies between actions. By grouping actions into broader categories or 'action types', we identified similar activities being undertaken for different concordats, often by different teams across the University. This insight enabled us to connect these individuals and inform those responsible about related actions. Again, while no immediate opportunity to reduce workload has emerged due to us not detecting any direct duplication of effort, we feel that the potential for improved coordination and collaboration is clear. Following the introductions, the teams can now more effectively share insights and best practices and distribute the responsibility of monitoring and reporting, with potential to increase efficiencies by further aligning of efforts.

Conclusion and Future Directions

By connecting colleagues working on similar actions, we aim to foster collaboration, improve efficiencies and create opportunities for sharing insights across teams. Strengthening these connections will also help colleagues prioritise actions that support multiple commitments and ensure that future planning maximises impact across different concordats.

This analysis has already proven valuable, providing a clear picture of institutional activity at a useful moment for Loughborough's research and innovation ambitions. It has helped identify where efforts are well supported and where further attention may be needed, offering insights that will inform the development of meaningful indicators and the next steps in shaping institutional research culture ambitions.

We recognise that this is a snapshot in time and that its long-term usefulness will depend on further work. As additional action plans become available, we will revisit the mapping to address any gaps. We have documented the approach to ensure it can be referred to in future, and the increased awareness among those involved in concordat-related commitments should help sustain its relevance. However, we are still considering how best to maintain and update this work in the long term, particularly in terms of resource.

While questions remain about ongoing maintenance, this project has strengthened our understanding of how research culture commitments intersect. By building on these insights, we can take a more coordinated and strategic approach to enhancing Loughborough's research culture.

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Contributions

Megan English: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing

Stuart King: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Megan English worked as a Research Culture Intern at Loughborough University in 2024, mapping and analysing activities related to concordats, charters and declarations the university had signed. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Loughborough University and is currently a Project Support Officer for NHS North West London, providing project support and stakeholder collaboration to improve urgent and emergency care programs and reduce health inequalities across the region. She has previously worked as an occupational psychologist assistant for the Ministry of Defence, conducting research and analysing workplace culture within the Army Headquarters.



Stuart King is the Research Quality and Culture Manager at Loughborough University, where he leads initiatives to enhance and monitor research and innovation quality and culture. He is also co-lead of the UK National Chapter of CoARA, supporting the reform of research assessment practices. Previously, he was Research Culture Manager at eLife, an open-access life sciences journal, and served on the Steering Committee for DORA.



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Table 4: Research and innovation-associated concordats, declarations and charters – expanded to include links.

Appendix

Table 4: Research and innovation-associated concordats, declarations and charters – expanded to include links.

Concordat	Useful Link
Athena Swan Charter (2005, revised in 2015 and 2021)	https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/athena-swan-charter
Barcelona Declaration on Open Research Information (2023)	https://www.barcelona-declaration.org
Coalition on Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) (2022)	https://www.coara.eu/
Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research (2011)	https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UKRI-151020-ConcordatforEngagingthePublicwithResearch.pdf
Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice (2024)	https://wellcome.org/who-we-are/positions-and-statements/environmental-sustainability-concordat
Concordat on Open Research Data (2016)	https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UKRI-020920-ConcordatonOpenResearchData.pdf

Concordat on Openness on Animal Research (2014)	https://concordatopenness.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Concordat-Final-Digital.pdf
Concordat to Support Research Integrity (2012, revised in 2019)	https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-08/Updated%20FINAL-the-concordat-to-support-research-integrity.pdf
Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2008, revised in 2019)	https://researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Researcher-Development-Concordat_Sept2019-1.pdf (Note: The principles of this concordat are implemented through the HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award.)
Guidance for Safeguarding in International Development Research (2020)	https://ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/170420-UKCDR-Guidance-for-Safeguarding-in-International-Development-Research.pdf
HR Excellence in Research Award (2008, revised in 2019)	https://vitae.ac.uk/hr-excellence-in-research-award-april-2024/
Knowledge Exchange Concordat (2020)	https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/knowledge-exchange-concordat.pdf
Leiden Manifesto on Research Metrics (2015)	https://www.leidenmanifesto.org
More Than Our Rank Initiative (2023)	https://inorms.net/more-than-our-rank/
NCCPE Manifesto for Public Engagement (2008)	https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/manifesto-public-engagement
Race Equality Charter (2016)	https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/race-equality-charter
San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) (2013)	https://sfdora.org
Technician Commitment (2017)	https://www.techniciancommitment.org.uk/
UKRI Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training (2024)	https://www.ukri.org/publications/statement-of-expectations-for-doctoral-training/

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