

UK universities compliance with the Concordat to Support Research Integrity: findings from cross-sectional time-series

Elizabeth Wager ^{Corresp. 1}

¹ Sideview, Princes Risborough, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author: Elizabeth Wager
Email address: liz@sideview.demon.co.uk

Background. The *Concordat to Support Research Integrity* published in 2012 recommends that UK research institutions should provide a named point of contact to receive concerns about research integrity (RI). The Concordat also requires institutions to publish annual RI statements.

Objective. To see whether contact information for a staff member responsible for RI was readily available from UK university websites and to see how many universities published annual RI statements.

Methods. UK university websites were searched in mid-2012, mid-2014 and mid-2018. The availability of contact details for RI inquiries, other information about RI and, specifically, an annual RI statement, was recorded.

Results. The proportion of UK universities publishing an email address for RI inquiries rose from 23% in 2012 (31/134) to 55% in 2018. The same proportion (55%) published at least one annual RI statement in 2018, but only 3 provided statements for all years from 2012/13. There was great variation in the titles used for the staff member with responsibility for RI which made searching difficult.

Conclusion. Over 6 years after the publication of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, nearly half of UK universities are not complying with all its recommendations and do not provide contact details for a staff member with responsibility for RI or an annual statement.

1 **UK universities compliance with the Concordat to Support Research**
2 **Integrity: findings from cross-sectional time-series**
3

4 Elizabeth Wager
5 Sideview, Princes Risborough, UK
6
7 19 Station Road, Princes Risborough, HP27 9DE
8

9 **Corresponding author:**
10 Dr Elizabeth Wager
11 liz@sideview.demon.co.uk
12
13
14

15 **Abstract**
16

17 **Background.** The *Concordat to Support Research Integrity* published in 2012 recommends that
18 UK research institutions should provide a named point of contact to receive concerns about
19 research integrity (RI). The Concordat also requires institutions to publish annual RI statements.
20

21 **Objective.** To see whether contact information for a staff member responsible for RI was readily
22 available from UK university websites and to see how many universities published annual RI
23 statements.
24

25 **Methods.** UK university websites were searched in mid-2012, mid-2014 and mid-2018. The
26 availability of contact details for RI inquiries, other information about RI and, specifically, an
27 annual RI statement, was recorded.
28

29 **Results.** The proportion of UK universities publishing an email address for RI inquiries rose
30 from 23% in 2012 (31/134) to 55% in 2018. The same proportion (55%) published at least one
31 annual RI statement in 2018, but only 3 provided statements for all years from 2012/13. There
32 was great variation in the titles used for the staff member with responsibility from RI which made
33 searching difficult.
34

35 **Conclusion.** Over 6 years after the publication of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity,
36 nearly half of UK universities are not complying with all its recommendations and do not provide
37 contact details for a staff member with responsibility for RI or an annual statement.

38 Introduction

39 The *Concordat to Support Research Integrity* was published by Universities UK (UUK) in July
40 2012 and endorsed by the government's Department for Employment & Learning and major
41 funders including Research Councils UK, the National Institute for Health Research, and the
42 Wellcome Trust.¹ The Concordat includes commitments to 'using transparent, robust and fair
43 processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct' and 'to strengthen the integrity of
44 research'. The document addresses researchers, research institutions, and funders.

45

46 The Concordat notes that 'employers of researchers have the primary responsibility for
47 investigating allegations of research misconduct' and recommends that they should 'identify a
48 senior member of staff to oversee research integrity and to act as a first point of contact for
49 anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity'. It also recommends that
50 institutions should 'provide a named point of contact .. to act as a confidential liaison for
51 whistleblowers or any other person wishing to raise concerns about the integrity of research'.

52

53 This recommendation reflects earlier guidance from the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO):
54 their 2009 *Code of Practice for Research*² recommends that institutions should 'identify and
55 make known one or more members of staff... whom researchers and external organizations...can
56 contact with any concerns about the conduct of research.' Similarly, the Committee on
57 Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines on cooperation between journals and institutions
58 (published in March 2012)³ state that institutions 'should have a research integrity officer...and
59 publish their contact details prominently'. The COPE guidelines, in particular, were prompted by
60 reports from journal editors of difficulties in contacting institutions.⁴

61

62 Another theme of the Concordat is the need for signatories to ‘work together to strengthen the
63 integrity of research and to review progress regularly and openly’ and to ‘be able to account for
64 our efforts in an open and transparent way’. While it notes that institutions may already have
65 ‘processes in place to deal with misconduct’ and be taking steps ‘to ensure that their environment
66 promotes and nurtures a commitment to research integrity’ it states that these should be
67 ‘communicated more effectively’. The Concordat ‘therefore recommends that employers of
68 researchers should present a short annual statement to their own governing body that ... provides
69 a high-level statement on any formal investigations of research misconduct’ and that ‘this
70 statement should be made publicly available’.

71

72 While many aspects of research culture and integrity are difficult both to implement and to
73 assess, compliance with recommendations about institutions having a named point of contact and
74 publishing annual statements can be readily checked and may reflect awareness of the Concordat
75 and compliance with its other recommendations.

76

77 **Study objective:** To see whether contact information for a staff member responsible for research
78 integrity (RI) was available from UK university websites and to see how many universities
79 published annual RI statements.

80

81 **Methods**

82 The websites of all universities listed by Universities UK were searched using pre-defined search
83 terms (developed using an iterative process and piloted) entered directly into the website’s
84 ‘search’ function. The presence of contact details for a named person was recorded and also the
85 presence of specific information (e.g. a dedicated web page) on RI and the availability of an
86 annual RI statement. Contact details (email, phone or postal address) were considered to be

87 available if they were on the same page as information about RI or provided as a direct link (e.g.
88 an email link) from such a page. Contact details obtained by directly searching a university
89 directory, staff information, or a general ‘Contact Us’ page were not counted (as this route
90 usually requires prior knowledge of an individual’s name or job title). The number of ‘clicks’
91 required to obtain contact details for a named person was also recorded as a secondary measure
92 of ease of searching the website.

93

94 The first search was done in August 2012, a few weeks after the Concordat was published, to
95 provide a baseline. This search was repeated in Summer 2014. In Summer 2018, websites were
96 searched again, using the same search terms as before but without counting the number of
97 ‘clicks’ required. The searches were made by a research assistant (AG in 2012, CL in 2014) or
98 the author (in 2018) and samples were checked by the author and any discrepancies resolved by
99 discussion. The search terms developed in August 2012 by the research assistant in discussion
100 with the author were re-used for subsequent searches to ensure consistency.

101

102 **Results:**

103 In 2012, UUK listed 134 UK universities, and this list was used for the first searches. However
104 the number of universities changed due to some mergers and closures, so by 2018 only 129
105 universities were included. The main findings are summarized in Table 1.

106

107 **2012 findings (baseline/ pre-Concordat)**

108 Of the 134 websites <25% provided contact information in the form of: an email address (31),
109 phone number (27), or postal address (5). Three clicks was the median needed to obtain this
110 contact information using the search terms ‘misconduct’ (range 1-5), ‘whistleblowing’ (range 1-
111 4), and ‘research integrity’ (range 2-6). There was great variation in the helpfulness of

112 information provided. The best websites had a dedicated page, but many searches ended in
113 documents of university regulations (some over 100 pages long). Some websites appeared to
114 include no information on misconduct or research integrity. Titles of responsible individuals and
115 departments were also variable, making searching difficult.

116

117 **2014**

118 By mid-2014 (two years after the publication of the Concordat) the situation appeared almost
119 unchanged. Only 18% of UK universities included details of a named contact person for RI on
120 their website and only 21% gave an email address.

121

122 **2018**

123 By mid-2018, the proportion of UK universities giving details of a named contact person for RI
124 enquiries had risen to 55%. A further 7 university websites provided an email address although
125 they did not name the individual to contact. The proportion providing postal addresses remained
126 low (17%). However, 71% did include some information about RI on their website.

127

128 **Research integrity annual statements**

129 Just over half the universities (55%) published an annual RI statement on their website in mid-
130 2018 but only 3 provided reports for all years from 2012/13. Of the 70 websites that included at
131 least one report, 29 provided only the 2016/17 report (i.e. the most recent full academic year), 8
132 provided only the 2015/16 report, 6 provided reports for all years from 2015/16, 9 provided
133 reports for all years from 2014/15, and 14 provided reports for all years from 2013/14 (see Table
134 2).

135

136 **Discussion:** Despite being recommended by the *Concordat to Support Research Integrity* (and
137 other guidelines), almost half of UK universities failed to provide details of a contact person with
138 responsibility for RI on their website in 2018 and the same proportion had not published an
139 annual RI statement. Information about research integrity (and misconduct) on university
140 websites has increased and improved since 2012 but cannot be said to be uniformly available.
141 While it is possible that universities are complying with other sections of the Concordat, these
142 relatively simple requirements, which are important both for research integrity and for
143 transparency, do not appear to be being followed.

144

145 It is possible that we could not find, and therefore overlooked, some RI information or contact
146 details on websites. However, the study was designed to measure ease of access. We developed
147 and tested several search terms which we thought might be used by researchers or journal editors
148 when looking for material on research integrity. On the best websites, these retrieved the relevant
149 information after only a few ‘clicks’, in some cases going directly to a dedicated Research
150 Integrity page. However, even some of these dedicated pages failed to provide contact details for
151 a named individual with responsibility for research integrity.

152

153 The Concordat does not specify the nature of contact details required, but we included postal
154 addresses as this method of contact offers the highest level of anonymity to whistleblowers. We
155 searched for named individuals rather than job titles, since it may be important to know who will
156 handle an enquiry in cases where there may be conflicts of interest. There was great variability in
157 the title and in the seniority of the person named, ranging from the Vice-Chancellor to research or
158 human resources administrators. Other titles included Registrar, Secretary, Clerk, Pro-Vice
159 Chancellor, Rector, Dean, Complaints Officer and Governance Director. The lack of a uniform
160 title for this role increases the difficulty of searching and makes it almost impossible to search via

161 general university registers or staff pages. Even if the title is known, such contact pages
162 sometimes require a log-in and may therefore be inaccessible to people outside the university
163 such as journal editors or people from other institutions. One reason for the great variability in
164 job titles is that many UK universities do not have a full-time research integrity officer and
165 therefore the role of RI contact person is not reflected in the person's job title. While this is
166 understandable, universities and website designers should ensure that this is not a barrier to
167 identifying the right person to receive RI concerns.

168

169 Our findings are consistent with those reported in the Progress Report on the Concordat
170 published in 2016 by Universities UK⁵. This report (based on a survey of university websites
171 carried out in June 2016) noted that only 35 annual statements could be identified (representing
172 just 26% of UK universities) and that 'half of institutional websites lacked easy-to-find
173 information on research integrity and the concordat'. At this time only 37% of universities had 'a
174 named member of staff with contact details listed for research integrity inquiries'. The report also
175 noted that there was 'a lack of consensus on what implementation really involves'.

176

177 While the need for institutions to publish contact details for a person responsible for research
178 integrity would appear uncontroversial, it is understandable that institutions may be reluctant to
179 publish details about misconduct cases for fear of adverse publicity. This may explain why the
180 Concordat Progress Report included the observation that none of the institutions that had
181 published annual statements on their websites 'appears to have been adversely affected by the
182 inclusion of such information'⁵. If universities are concerned about 'league tables' of misconduct
183 cases, or attention from investigative journalists, it is vital that clear guidelines are available
184 about what can and should be reported. Uniform definitions of terms such as 'inquiry',
185 'investigation' and 'case' would also be helpful.

186

187 When the initial survey findings were presented (to a UKRIO meeting and at the World Congress
188 on Research Integrity in 2013) we did an informal comparison with the top US and Australian
189 universities. Of these 20 institutions, all (100%) published the email address for a research
190 integrity contact person, all but one provided a telephone number, and half provided a postal
191 address. The median number of clicks to obtain this information was 1 for the US and 1.5 for
192 Australia (compared with 3 for the UK websites). Although this was a small survey and did not
193 attempt to include all institutions, the findings in 2013 were markedly different from those for
194 UK universities.

195

196 It appears that, 6 years after the publication of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, about
197 half of UK universities are not complying with all its recommendations. A revised version of the
198 Concordat is due to be published shortly and, if it is to have an impact, the signatories should
199 investigate reasons for non-compliance and work with universities to diminish them.

200

201 **References**

202 1 The concordat to support research integrity. Universities UK (July 2012)

203 <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2012/>

204 [TheConcordatToSupportResearchIntegrity.pdf](#)

205

206 2 UKRIO Code of Practice

207 <http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/>

208

209 3 Wager E & Kleinert S, on behalf of COPE Council. Cooperation between research
210 institutions and journals on research integrity cases: guidance from COPE. (March 2012)

211 http://publicationethics.org/files/Research_institutions_guidelines_final.pdf

212

213 4 Wager E. Coping with scientific misconduct. *BMJ* 2011; **343**:d6586

214

215 5 The concordat to support research integrity: a progress report. Universities UK

216 (November 2016) [https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/concordat-](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/concordat-research-integrity-progress-report.aspx)

217 [research-integrity-progress-report.aspx](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/concordat-research-integrity-progress-report.aspx)

218

220 **Acknowledgments**

221 Thanks to my research assistants, Alexander Grigg and Charles Lambert, for their work and to

222 James Parry, Marc Taylor and Michael Farthing from UKRIO for support and helpful

223 discussions.

224

225

226

Table 1 (on next page)

Availability of contact details for a named person with responsibility for research integrity from UK university websites 2012-18

Table 1

Availability of contact details for a named person with responsibility for research integrity
from UK university websites 2012-18

Date accessed	2012	2014	2018
Universities included	134	130	129
Named contact person	23 (17%)	24 (18%)	71 (55%)
Email	30 (22%)	27 (21%)	78 (60%)
Phone number	26 (19%)	15 (11%)	41 (32%)
Postal address	4 (3%)	13 (10%)	22 (17%)
Website includes specific information on research integrity		-	92 (71%)
Annual statement on research integrity available		-	71 (55%)

Table 2

Availability of annual research integrity statements on UK university websites (assessed in Summer 2018)

Annual research integrity statement(s) available on website	Number of universities (% of total)
None	58 (45%)
2016/17 only	30 (23%)
2015/16 only	8 (6%)
All reports from 2015/16 to 2016/17	6 (5%)
All reports from 2014/15 to 2016/17	9 (7%)
All reports from 2013/14 to 2016/17	14 (11%)
All reports from 2012/13 to 2016/17	3 (2%)