

Scottish Funding Council six year review

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) was awarded the HR Excellence in Research Award in May 2012. Recipients of this award are required to undertake an internal evaluation at the six year review point. This report summarises progress against the 2012 and subsequent versions of SFC's HR Excellence in Research Action Plan, the most recent of which was published in 2016.

Background and process undertaken for the review

The SFC is the national, strategic body that is responsible for funding teaching and learning provision, research and other activities in Scotland's 25 colleges and 19 universities and higher education institutions. Our funding decisions support our strategic priorities and the Scottish Government's national priorities.

Our statutory duty is to secure coherent, high quality further and higher learning provision by colleges and universities in Scotland, and the undertaking of research. We do this by investing in the development of a coherent college and university system which, through enhanced learning, research and knowledge exchange, leads to improved economic, educational, social, civic and cultural outcomes for the people of Scotland. Our funding contributes to the costs of teaching, research and other activities - including costs related to staff, infrastructure, buildings and equipment.

Since we submitted our 2016 HR Excellence in Research Action Plan, the following developments in Scottish Higher Education have had a particular impact on national researcher development policy:

- The publication of SFC's Research Strategy (AY2017-18¹) that sets out our ambitions for researcher development and delivering the SFC's Strategic Plan 2015-18 that states that *Scotland will nurture, develop and train the international research leaders and Nobel Laureates of tomorrow.*²
- Ministerial advice to SFC in March 2017 on the Outcome Agreement³ process and its intensification. This has created an opportunity for future actions to reflect the capacity of the Outcome Agreement process to be used more effectively as a lever for delivering support for researchers and monitoring progress across Scottish HEIs.
- The 2016 launch of the SFC's Gender Action Plan (GAP) for colleges and universities in Scotland in line with Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy, our Letter of guidance and the Scottish Government's Economic Strategy. Aim 14 of the GAP is to enhance the career progression for female staff in colleges and universities.

¹ SFC's Research Strategy AY2017-18:

http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/ResearchInnovation/Research_strategy_post-RKEC.pdf

The SFC's strategic statement on researcher development and training was developed in consultation with the sector through SFC's engagement with Universities Scotland's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee and Universities Scotland's Research Training Sub-Committee.

² SFC Strategic Plan 2015-18:

http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Corporate_publications_SFCCP022015_ScottishFundingCouncilStrategicPlan2015/SFCCP022015_SFC_Strategic_Plan_2015-18.pdf

³ Outcome Agreements set out what colleges and universities in Scotland will do in return for their funding from SFC. The SFC works with each institution to develop their Outcome Agreement.

- The publication of the findings of an independent review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in July 2016 and recommendations on its future operation, including the need to introduce measures as part of REF2021 to recognise the effect that individuals circumstances have on research productivity.

In conducting this review, we followed a similar process to the external review. We compared our Action Plan with the recommendations from the latest edition of the following surveys: Principal Investigators and Research Leaders (PIRLS) and Careers in Research Online (CROS). The findings from these surveys along with our continued engagement with the Concordat Executive and Strategy Group also helped to inform the Action Plan. Further advice was gained through discussions with members of SFC's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RKEC)⁴ and with members of Universities Scotland's Research Training Sub-Committee (US RTSC).⁵

Our updated Action Plan demonstrates our progress against the 2016 Action Plan and sets out planned activities for AY2018-20. It recognises the important role that the Outcome Agreement process will play in driving forward support for researchers and monitoring improvement. The key purpose of an Outcome Agreement is to demonstrate each institution's distinct contribution to Scottish Government's priority outcomes and impact for public investment. We will use the Outcome Agreement process to set out our expectations for the sector and engage in dialogue at an institutional and national level to enhance support for researchers. In addition to measuring the impact of our approach through the Outcome Agreement process and the results of PIRLS and CROS, we will use our membership of US RTSC to engage with research staff, consider priority issues and identify methods of addressing these through partnership working.

Responsibility for implementing the Action Plan lies with the Chief Executive although authority is delegated to the Director of Research and Innovation. We will continue to seek input from SFC RKEC where necessary and work in partnership with the sector through the Outcome Agreement process and in collaboration with key stakeholders, including US RTSC, to progress the activities detailed in our Action Plan and understand the difference they are making.

Key achievements and the progress against the strategy, indicators and actions identified in the original Action Plan, 2014 Action Plan and 2016 Action Plan

Our updated Action Plan shows the progress we have made against the principles of the Concordat. Our key achievements are detailed below:

⁴ The RKEC responds to, recommends and advises the Council on research and knowledge exchange strategy, policy and funding issues relevant to Scottish universities and colleges. It is chaired by a member of the SFC Board and its membership is drawn from academic and research management in university and college sectors as well as from business, with observers from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Government and UK Government.

⁵ On behalf of the Universities Scotland Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, the RTSC maintains a watching brief on, and facilitates a collaborative approach to researcher development matters across US member institutions. The Sub-Committee informs and advises the parent committee on current and emergent training, development and capacity-building needs of those engaged in research and knowledge exchange activities.

- The SFC remains committed to supporting researcher development through the allocation of the Research Excellence Grant (REG). An underpinning principle of the Grant is a commitment to supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers. SFC provided £231.8M through the REG in AY2017-18. (Principle 1)
- The SFC has continued to provide funding to universities through the Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG) to invest in the environment for high quality research training and development. SFC provided £34.5M through the RPG in AY2017-18. (Principle 1)
- The Outcome Agreement process has been used to set out our expectations in relation to researcher development and support, including our expectation that HEIs will build on the progress made during REF2014 in respect to equality and diversity in staff selection. (Principles 1,2 and 6)
- SFC has continued to provide funding in support of the research pooling initiative. Funding has been targeted at the maintenance of shared people resource, provided graduate training and supported knowledge exchange activity. (Principles 1-5)
- SFC has continued to provide support for the Scottish Graduate School for the Social Sciences and the Scottish Graduate School for the Arts and Humanities; the pan-Scotland Graduate Schools that provide training and opportunities to researchers across Scotland. (Principles 3 and 4)
- SFC has continued to fund Advance HE (previously known as the Equality Challenge Unit) to deliver a programme of equality and diversity related activity relevant to Scotland's universities and colleges and encourage HEIs to take up the Athena Swan and Race Equality Charter Mark through the Outcome Agreement process. (Principles 2, 4 and 6)
- The SFC allocated strategic funding in support of the forum convened by US RTSC in June 2018, Supporting and Enhancing Researcher Wellbeing in Scotland. (Principle 1, 3 and 6)
- The number of Scottish HEIs awarded the HR Excellence in Research Award has increased from 11 to 13. (Principle 1-7)

Next steps and the focus of the strategy for the next two years, including success measures

As set out in our Strategic Plan, our ambition is that Scotland will be the best place in the world to learn, to educate, to research, and to innovate. Researchers are central to delivering this ambition. The SFC – in its leadership capacity - will continue to encourage institutions to play their full role in creating a supportive research environment that has the power to attract staff from across the world. We are seeking to retain the HR Excellence in Research Award in recognition of this.

Over the next two years we will focus on the following actions to influence our HE sector in Scotland to nurture, develop and train the international research leaders and Nobel Laureates of tomorrow:

- Ensure that SFC's next Strategic Plan reflects our continuing commitment to supporting research students and staff.
- Use the Outcome Agreement process to advance the development and training of researchers, placing greater emphasis on the submission of qualitative evidence in support of ambitions.

- Aligned with SFC's ambitions for equality and diversity, enhance the evidence base used to inform Outcome Agreement negotiations by collating data and establishing baselines relevant to researcher development and career progression.
- Use an independent review of the Research Pool programme in AY2018-19 to identify opportunities to examine the provision of training and development opportunities for researchers and identify areas for future focus.
- Use our membership of the REF steering group and the Equality and Diversity Advisory panel to ensure equality and diversity is embedded in REF2021 preparations and procedures.
- Work with key stakeholders to consider and support the implementation of recommendations arising from the independent review of Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

As detailed above, individual Outcome Agreements continue to be the key mechanisms around which we build our relationship with each institution. Revised Outcome Agreement guidance will be published by October 2018 and will cover the next three year cycle. Along with supporting other Scottish Government and SFC priorities, the Outcome Agreement process has the potential to set high ambitions for Scotland's research base. Therefore, we continue to work with the sector to ensure the revision process is used to drive the shift in research culture needed to ensure that every individual with the potential and desire to be an excellent researcher is recognised and adequately supported to realise that potential.

We will know when we are successful when:

- There is a year on year increase in the number of Scottish institutions holding the HR Excellence in Research Award;
- There is a year on year increase in the number of awards held by Scottish institutions and departments securing/advancing the Athena Swan and Race Equality Charters;
- Outcome Agreements provide evidence of ambition and progress in relation to helping to deliver positive equality and diversity outcomes related to research staff in Scottish institutions and also multi-institutional collaboration as strength of the research environment; and
- Results from Career Research Online Survey (CROS) and Principal Investigators Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS) demonstrate evidence of Scottish HE sectoral progress/improvement when compared with previous years.