

Scottish Funding Council (SFC) four year review

The Scottish Funding Council was awarded the HR Excellence in Research Award in May 2012. Recipients of this award are required to undertake an external evaluation every four years. This report summarises progress against the 2012 and 2014 HR Excellence in Research Action Plans.

Background and process undertaken for the review

The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (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 2014 HR Excellence Action Plan, the following developments in Scottish Higher Education have had a particular impact on national researcher development policy:

- We have continued to develop and enhance our relationship with the sector through Outcome Agreements. The Outcome Agreement process is intended to complement and support an institution's autonomy and strategic ambitions whilst setting out SFC's expectation for the sector.
 - For example, new for the 2015/16 round of Outcome Agreements, we asked HEIs to provide a statement of ambition in relation to equality and diversity issues identified by the REF 2014 Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) report.
- SFC together with the other UK Higher Education funding bodies and the Research Councils confirmed their commitment to fund Vitae, in principle, to 2017/18 as Vitae continues to transition to a membership model for sustainability.

In addition, SFC's strategic plan 2015-2018 was published, outlining our renewed commitment to three key outcomes: high-quality learning and teaching; world-leading research; and greater innovation in the economy. These corporate strategies and actions have been mapped against the four priorities of the Scottish Government's Economic Strategy¹ which sets out a framework for how Scotland will aim to increase competitiveness

¹ Available at <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Economy/EconomicStrategy>

and tackle inequality – themes that can also be easily translated into the researcher development arena.

In conducting this review, we followed a similar process to the internal review. We compared our action plan with the recommendations from the latest edition of the following surveys: Principal Investigators and Research Leaders (PIRLS), Careers in Research Online (CROS), and the Postgraduate Research Experience (PRES). 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 updates were gained through discussions with members of SFC’s Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RKEC)² and with members of Universities Scotland’s Research Training Sub-Committee (RTSC).³

Our updated action plan demonstrates our progress against the 2014 action plan and sets out planned activities for 2016-18. Responsibility for implementing the action plan ultimately 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 relevant and work in partnership with the sector and other stakeholders in moving forward with the activities detailed in our action plan.

Key achievements and the progress against the strategy, indicators and actions identified in the original action plan and 2014 action plan

Our updated action plan shows the progress we have made against all of the principles of the Concordat. Our key achievements are detailed below:

- Continued financial support for Scotland’s research pools, further enhancing the collaborative research environment evident in Scotland [principles 1-5];
- Completing a review of SFC’s Research Excellence Grant and ensuring one of the key principles underpinning this research funding stream implicitly spells out SFC’s and the Scottish HE sector’s commitment to supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers [principle 1];
- Continuing to ensure that our Outcome Agreement Guidance to Scottish universities included measures that would enhance the research environment. For example, setting an expectation on each Scottish HEI to build on the progress made during the REF2014 process in respect to equality and diversity in staff selection and that HEIs would use both SFC’s Research Excellence Grant (REG) and Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG) funding to take steps to address equality and diversity

² 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.

³ 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.

issues in the wider context of research and research postgraduate provision [principles 1, 2, 6];

- Maintained our investment in Innovation Centres to create further innovative opportunities for researchers and build on our strategic work to strengthen links between universities and businesses [principle 3];
- Through continuing support of two pan-Scotland graduate schools, we have increased access to training and internship opportunities for doctoral researchers across Scotland. For example, the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science has provided over 90 internships to social science doctoral students in the last 3 years and the Scottish Graduate School of Arts and Humanities launched its internship programme last October with 18 internships [principles 3, 4];
- Outlining our ambition to deepen understanding and action on equality with equality considerations to be central to policy development, decision making and delivery in order to realise the potential of staff, students and supporting equality in college and university careers in publishing SFC's Mainstreaming Equalities Report 2015 [principle 6];
- Developing a Gender Action Plan (GAP) for colleges and universities in Scotland in line with other existing Scottish Government initiatives – following this year's focus on gender imbalances at subject level among students, we have plans to look at gender equality issues more broadly in coming years [principles 3, 6].

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. Arguably researchers are an integral part of the foundation required to achieve this. Thus, SFC in its leadership role, encourages, and indeed expects, our institutions to play their full role in creating a supportive research environment that has the power to attract staff from across the world.

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:

- Good practice in collaboration: We will enhance our role in sharing the good practice that is taking place across institutions, research pools, pan-Scotland Graduate Schools, Innovation Centres and other collaborative initiatives. Where possible, we will invest strategically in collaborative research initiatives which offer exciting opportunities for Scottish researchers.
- Enhanced research environment: We recognise that researchers underpin the quality of research and indeed the reputation of our universities and so much of the value they generate for the economy. Thus we will continue to work with universities and other stakeholders to leverage increased levels of research investment in Scotland and invest in the digital infrastructure necessary to support researchers. We will develop a research strategy for Scotland's institutions that will help them deliver research excellence, ensuring appropriate emphasis is placed on the importance of researcher development in achieving this strategy. In addition we

will work with universities and other partners to further create a culture of enterprise and creativity throughout Scotland's research base, to ensure it is well prepared for the global environment.

- Equality and diversity: We will build on the progress made thus far on tackling gender inequality across the sector (see, for example, SFC's Interim Report on the Gender Action Plan⁴). In line with our Equalities Mainstreaming report, we will support, in partnership with the Equality Challenge Unit and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the work of colleges and universities to promote equality and diversity by taking forward our published equality outcomes and, in doing so, help to create a more equal society in which researchers, and others, can flourish.

Individual Outcome Agreements (OA) continue to be the key mechanisms around which we build our relationship with each institution. Over the next 6 months, we will be revising our OA guidance, which will cover the next three year cycle, to reflect the SFC's new Strategic Plan. Along with supporting other Scottish Government and SFC priorities, the OA process has the potential to set high ambitions for Scotland's research base. Therefore, we are working hard with the sector to ensure the revision process can drive the shift in research culture that is required 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 awards held by Scottish institutions and departments securing/advancing the Athena Swan and Race Equality Charters;
- There is an increase in the number of Scottish institutions holding the HR Excellence award;
- An increasing number of mentions in Outcome Agreements which evidence statements of 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 a strength of the research environment.
- 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.

⁴ <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/communications/Corporatepublications/2016/SFCCP022016.aspx>