

Scottish Funding Council (SFC) two year review

Background and process undertaken for the review

Since our receipt of the UK HR Excellence in Research Award in 2012, the following developments in Scottish Higher Education (HE) have had a particular impact on national researcher development policy.

- SFC together with the other UK Higher Education funding bodies and the Research Councils agreed to fund Vitae through its transition phase to become self-sustaining by 2015.
- The first three rounds of Outcome Agreements (OAs) between SFC and each Higher Education Institution in Scotland have been developed and published. Our publication of guidance in July 2013 further clarified SFC expectations of what should be included within an OA.
- In our initial submission for the HR Excellence in Research Award we noted that the Scottish Government had recently published their vision for the post-16 education system in Scotland: *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our ambition for Post 16 Education*¹. and identified two relevant streams of activity arising from this. In the first SFC has made significant progress working in partnership with the Enterprise agencies and the HE sector to reform the Knowledge Exchange landscape in Scotland, with significant internal resource being dedicated to that work. The other stream was around postgraduate reform. This has been led by the Scottish Government to date and awaits the outcome of a review from which further activity for SFC will arise.

In addition to the Scotland-wide changes outlined above, there has been significant change within SFC. We have a new Chair of the SFC Board and a new Chief Executive. We have restructured roles and responsibilities of staff to more effectively deliver OAs. Through the OAs, we have endeavoured to disseminate oversight of each institution's performance across all our priority aims to the relevant OA Manager. Such an approach has enabled us to have a better understanding of how each institution is performing and contributing to the Scottish Government's Purpose. Our updated action plan should be read in the context of the development of our new corporate plan, currently being developed and to be implemented from 2016.

We followed the same internal process in this review as we conducted in our original submission. Our external process was also similar as we were keen to ensure that the experiences of research staff and students were taken into account. To this end 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). These surveys together with knowledge from updates gained through the Concordat Executive and Strategy Group were compared with the action plan and helped to update it. Direct stakeholder input was

¹ Available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/15103949/15>

requested through the SFC Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RKEC)² and Universities Scotland's Research Training Sub-Committee (RTSC).³

Our updated action plan demonstrates our progress against the 2012 action plan and sets out planned activities for 2014-16. Responsibility for implementing the action plan ultimately lies with the Chief Executive although authority is delegated to the Director of Research, Innovation and Outcome Agreements. In implementing the action plan we will continue to seek guidance from SFC RKEC where required and work in partnership with the sector and other stakeholders.

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

Our updated action plan below demonstrates the progress we have made against all of the principles of the Concordat. In many areas, we have exceeded the ambitions set out in the original action plan. In some areas (specifically concerning Principle 6) the activities we identified two years ago, have been replaced by others to deliver an even greater impact.

The following are our key achievements:

- Reaching an agreeable funding solution with Vitae to ensure continuity in their support for Scottish institutions until at least March 2015.
- Much of our work over the past two years has focused on strengthening links between universities and industry. Following the Scottish Government's reform agenda of the Scottish Innovation landscape, SFC has created and continues to create new pathways for researchers which are closely connected to industry, thereby equipping researchers to be increasingly adaptable and flexible.
- Our investment in Innovation Centres has not only created innovative opportunities for researchers, enhancing their skills in partnership with business but also further enhanced the collaborative environment which was already evident in Scotland through Research Pooling and Scotland-wide Graduate Schools.
- The creation of another pan-Scotland Graduate School, this time for postgraduate students within the Arts and Humanities, has broadened the benefits of multi-institutional collaboration to yet more disciplines.
- There has been an increased focus on tackling gender inequality in Scottish HE. Alongside other developments across the UK, SFC has played a significant role in this through our strong support of the Athena Swan Charter within our Outcome Agreement discussions.
- The HR Excellence in Research Award sent a strong message of our commitment to enhance researcher careers.

² The RKEC responds to, recommends and advises the Council on research and knowledge exchange strategy, policy and funding issues relevant to Scottish higher education institutions 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 & 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.

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

Sustainability: Our action plan illustrates the wide range of investments which contribute to researcher development in some way. We need to ensure the benefits of these investments are sustained beyond our investment. We will know we have been successful when:

- The benefits of our investments are increasingly embedded into universities' core provision. This might include:
 - Collaborative training opportunities available across Scotland and funded through core resource and increasingly including industry funded graduate provision.
 - Multi-institutional collaboration increasingly mentioned as a strength of the research environment available for both students and staff.

Good practice in collaboration: We must further develop our role in sharing the good practice that is taking place across institutions, research pools and other collaborative initiatives. We will focus our efforts on those involving industry and ensure both the student experience and industry demands are met and enhanced. We will know we have been successful when:

- There is more collaborative development of courses involving multiple institutions and industry, requiring and facilitating movement of staff around the Scottish sector. For example, the Stratified Medicine Innovation Centre which has designed postgraduate provision which will be delivered by staff from the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow and Strathclyde.

Outcome Agreements: These are the key mechanism around which we are building our relationship with each institution, we need to ensure as we develop the process that researcher development is linked effectively to the outcome agreement with each institution. We will know we have been successful when:

- Researcher development activities are identified and progress reviewed across a larger number of OAs.

Equality and diversity: There has been significant activity across the sector focused on certain strands of equality, specifically tackling gender inequality. This is a key success, on which we can build in the next period. Through the review currently taking place (detail in action plan), we will develop our thinking as to how we can best ensure equality and diversity of other protected characteristics. We will know we have been successful through:

- Monitoring Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data in this area. We are currently analysing the latest data and will confirm baselines, upon which we will monitor progress. Two years is too short a time period to see a clear impact, so in the review we will also need to establish activity measures. It is anticipated that these might include Every Researcher Counts, Athena Swan, Aurora and the Race Equality Charter mark.

Leadership: PIRLS 2013 indicates that 'between a third and a half of respondents believed they would benefit from further development in these areas of leadership' (staff performance management or managing budgets and finances) and 'to raise the importance

of leadership and management....institutions should explore ways to provide recognition and reward to principal investigators in these areas'. We will continue to work with the sector to support their efforts in this area. We will know we have been successful when:

- Subject to availability, PIRLS and CROS indicate improvement.
- Increased take up of leadership development courses by senior academics, such as those developed by the Leadership Foundation, in particular Aurora.