

A UK position statement on behalf of the Concordat Strategy Group in response to the European Commission consultation on a proposed new certification mechanism for genuinely good Human Resources (HR) management in the public research sector in Europe

July 2013

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This statement is set out on behalf of the Concordat Strategy Group in response to the consultation being undertaken by Technopolis ‘Consultation of a proposed new certification mechanism for genuinely good HR management in the public research sector in Europe’¹ for the European Commission.
- 1.2 It is noted that the feasibility study focuses on the best ways of implementing an accreditation mechanism, rather than exploring the potential value of an accreditation mechanism. The UK stakeholders would like to see clear evidence on why this is the most effective mechanism to achieve the desired outcomes and alternative approaches.
- 1.3 This statement of the UK position has been developed by Vitae with the Concordat Executive Group². It has been developed on behalf of the Concordat Strategy Group with input from BIS, the Quality Assurance Agency and the International Unit at Universities UK. Consultation on the UK position has also taken place via workshops at the Universities HR conference in May, at the Vitae ‘HR Strategies for researchers: future directions and good practice across Europe’ consultation event on 24 May, and via an online survey³.
- 1.4 On behalf of the UK stakeholders represented on the Concordat Strategy Group **we set out a set of principles** in response to the wide-ranging feasibility study being undertaken by Technopolis. These principles aim to set out broad common views on behalf of key UK organisations with an interest in this area.

¹ http://www.technopolis-group.com/cms.cgi/site/group/uk_group/1797.htm

² The Concordat Executive Group (CEG) acts on behalf of the Concordat Strategy Group. The CEG members include representation from the Equality Challenge Unit, the Institute of Physics, RCUK, the Russell Group, UCEA, the UK HE funding bodies, Universities UK, Vitae, the Wellcome Trust and the 1994 Group.

³ 29 responses were received; all ‘agreed with the UK position statement’

2. UK position statement

2.1 The **UK strongly supports the institutional autonomy of its universities** and is of the view that avoiding unnecessary or overregulation of HR practice is critical to achieving excellence and success in a competitive global market. We support the Commission's objectives for high quality HR management of researchers, but question whether an approach based on formal certification would respect this autonomy, or is the most effective mechanism for achieving desired outcomes.

The UK support the view set out by the European Commissions that 'universities should have the freedom and the responsibility to set their own missions, priorities and programmes in research, education and innovation; to decide on their own organisation and on the bodies necessary for their internal management and the representation of society's interests'⁴

2.2 The **UK is a strong advocate of excellent HR management for researchers**, evidenced through a series of UK-wide initiatives which include the UK Quality Code for higher education (Quality Code)⁵, the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers⁶ and the Vitae programme⁷. Indeed we have seen significant improvements as a result of the Concordat evidenced in a major three-year review of progress⁸, and the UK has the majority of the HR Excellence in Research Awards in Europe⁹. **Any new mechanism should only be introduced based on evidence that a new mechanism is necessary and will add value, and should build on and recognise what has already been achieved.**

2.3 While the UK supports incentivisation of excellent HR practices for researchers, **we do not support access to European funding for research being conditional upon holding an accreditation**. There is a danger that this could become simply a 'tick box' process. **We are also concerned that, given the current range of HR practices across European institutions, a certification that was genuinely aspirational for the current highest performers in this area and aimed to genuinely drive excellence, would be unattainable for those with least developed practice** and widen the divide with respect to successful access to competitive research funding.

2.4 **The UK recommends that any new process focuses on enhancing standards in HR management of researchers works within the existing HR Excellence in Research process**¹⁰ rather than setting up an alternative system or seeking to use other Awards/processes as proxies. We already understand the challenges for institutions across Europe in applying for and meeting the existing HR Excellence in Research Award criteria. The primary focus should be working with and supporting these

⁴ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-06-190_en.htm?locale=fr

⁵ www.qaa.ac.uk/ASSURINGSTANDARDSANDQUALITY/QUALITY-CODE/Pages/default.aspx

⁶ www.vitae.ac.uk/concordat

⁷ www.vitae.ac.uk

⁸ <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Vitae-Concordat-three-year-review-report-April-2012.pdf>

⁹ At 7 June, the UK has 81 organisations with the Award compared to 61 in the rest of Europe

<http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/rights/strategy4ResearcherOrgs>

¹⁰ The HR Excellence in Research initiative has already gained significant support, including, for example from funders. The Scottish Funding Council are encouraging all Scottish institutions to gain the award

institutions, rather than creating additional mechanisms. We therefore recommend that the HR Excellence in Research Award remains as an important step for organisations to set out plans for improvements. Once this process becomes embedded organisations should be given the opportunity to progress within an overarching 'HR Excellence in Research' framework. This has the advantage of being a system within which ALL research organisations across Europe can engage at a level appropriate to the level of their HR practice.

- 2.5 The UK strongly recommends that **any process should focus on the HEI providing evidence of how they were assuring internally the good HR management of researchers**¹¹. This would include evidence of how the institutional strategy and key performance indicators which contribute to enhancing HR processes for researchers are monitored by senior management.
- 2.6 The UK recommends that **any future process should be proportionate and minimise the burden to institutions** and, where possible, **recognise elements or data from other recognition and award processes that relate to HR practice**¹². While none of these other Awards/processes appear to address fully all the elements of the EC HR Strategy for Researchers, we would recommend that consistency of evidence should be required.
- 2.7 The UK strongly recommends that **any process should be progressive and drive genuinely excellent and high quality HR practice**. Our experience suggests that the real measure of good HR management is the actual experiences of researchers on the ground. In order to achieve this there needs to be a breadth of policy covering all areas of the organisation and a depth of reach of the implementation of those policies through the various staff groups in order to ensure consistency of experience. **Evidence of both breadth and depth of implementation should be reviewed as part of any future accreditation mechanism**. Opinions from researchers themselves should be used as key evidence of the translation of policy into practice.
- 2.8 The UK advocates a range of focused support for those with less developed structures and practice as a potentially more effective strategy to improving HR management than an EC-wide accreditation process. The UK experience suggests that with appropriate funding¹³, focussed activities, dedicated specialist support¹⁴, and clearly articulated expectations from funders¹⁵ real change can be implemented through a transformative approach which is relevant and adaptable to the local research environment, rather than a blanket approach that risks benefitting least those that need most support.

¹¹ This would follow the model of institutional audit in place by the Quality Assurance Agency

¹² In the UK, these include, Investors in People (IIP), the Athena Swan Awards, Stonewall Diversity Champions etc

¹³ The UK government invested approx. £120m over 8 years in improving skills and career development for researchers

¹⁴ Vitae (and previously the UK GRAD Programme) was funded to support the sector transform their practice. Vitae provided networks, leadership, resources and momentum

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<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/researchcareers/researcherdevelopment/Pages/StatementofExpectations.aspx>
<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/Pages/Diversity.aspx>



HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH



The Concordat
to Support the Career Development of Researchers



vitae
realising
the potential
of researchers

This statement has been put together on behalf of the Concordat Strategy Group¹⁶ which includes the following organisations:

Association of Medical Research Charities
British Academy
British Heart Foundation
Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland
Equality Challenge Unit
Guild HE
Higher Education Funding Council for England
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Institute of Physics
National Institute for Health Research
Research Councils UK
Royal Academy of Engineering
Royal Society
Russell Group
Scottish Funding Council
Scottish Government
UK Research Staff Association
Universities and Colleges Employers Association
Universities HR
Universities UK
Vitae
Wellcome Trust
1994 Group

And:

Department of Business, Innovation and Skills
Quality Assurance Agency
International Unit, UUK

The Concordat Executive Group works on behalf of the Concordat Strategy Group. Full membership is available here: <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/513081/Strategy-Group-membership-.html>

¹⁶ The Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) were also consulted

Annex – further information on the UK context

1. Background and context

1.1 In 2005 the European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for their Recruitment was launched and was the subject of a conference in London as part of the UK Presidency. Since then, the European Commission and Member States have been seeking to support the implementation of the Charter and Code. A UK-level gap analysis was undertaken in 2006 which mapped UK legislation, policy and practice against the Charter and Code.

1.2 In 2008 the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers¹⁷ was launched as an agreement between funders and employers of researchers in the UK. This, combined with the Quality Assurance Agency Higher Education Review¹⁸, effectively transposes the Charter and Code principles into the UK context.

1.3 In 2010, Vitae agreed with the European Commission a UK-wide process which enables UK higher education institutions (HEIs) to gain the European Commission's HR Excellence in Research Award. This acknowledges institutions' alignment with the principles of the European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for their Recruitment. The UK process incorporates both the QAA Quality Code Chapter B11 research degrees¹⁹ and the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers to enable institutions that have published Concordat implementation plans to gain the HR Excellence in Research Award. The UK approach includes on-going national evaluation and benchmarking.

2. Current status

2.1 Since 2010 Vitae has been managing the process for UK institutions to gain the HR Excellence in Research Award and has set up a UK panel which reviews submissions for the award. The panel includes representation from the European Commission. There are submission deadlines each year for UK organisations.

2.2 The high-level Concordat Strategy Group has provided annual reports to the Funders Forum on progress of the implementation of the Concordat principles and a major three year review of progress has been published²⁰. Resources for implementation have been made available by the Research Councils and UK higher education funding bodies. Vitae has invested significant resource in supporting the Concordat implementation and enabling UK institutions to gain the HR Excellence in Research Award.

2.3 At July 2013, the UK has 80 institutions and one research funder with the award. These include the majority of Russell Group and 1994 Group institutions.

2.4 Institutions with the award need to undertake an internal review every two years and an external review every four years.

¹⁷ www.vitae.ac.uk/concordat

¹⁸ www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/higher-education-review/Pages/default.aspx

¹⁹ www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B11.aspx

²⁰ www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Vitae-Concordat-three-year-review-report-April-2012.pdf



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2.5 The first twenty one universities with the Award have submitted their internal review information which includes their identified 'indicators of success' against which they will review progress in 2014

2.6 Vitae have been consulting with staff in UK HEIs to gather views as to what the external evaluation process could most usefully look like. At European level a peer review process is being piloted. Workshops at the Vitae Policy Forum (April 2012 and January 2013) and Annual Conference (Sept 2012) explored the issues, and the Research Staff Development Advisory Group and the Impact and Evaluation Group have also considered the emerging issues. Vitae set out the process for the external review at the Vitae conference in September 2013. The external review is due for the first ten UK institutions in September 2014.

2.7 Vitae have recently undertaken a major review of the HR Excellence published implementation plans across European organisations. The review aimed to compare the UK and non-UK approaches, identify progress and gaps and provide an evidence based framework of common activities which might underpin the internal and/or external review processes. This report was published at a key event run 'HR strategies for researchers: future directions and good practice across Europe' by Vitae in London on 24 May²¹.

²¹ <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Vitae-HR-Strategies-for-researchers-Report-2013.pdf>