

Review of the UK implementation of the HR Excellence in Research Awards process, benefits to institutions and next steps

June 2012

1. Background and context

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.

In 2008 the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers¹ was launched as an agreement between funders and employers of researchers in the UK. This, combined with the Quality Assurance Agency audit of doctoral programmes, effectively transposes the Charter and Code principles into the UK context.

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 Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes² 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.

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 a Commission representative. There are three submission deadlines a year for UK organisations.

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 just been published³. 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.

At May 2012, the UK had 57 institutions and one research funder with the award. These include 16 Russell Group and 13 1994 Group institutions.

Institutions with the award need to undertake an [internal review every two years](#) and an external review every four years. The format and detail of the external review is still to be agreed for UK institutions.

¹ www.vitae.ac.uk/concordat

² Currently being updated

³ www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Vitae-Concordat-three-year-review-report-April-2012.pdf

2. Review of perceived benefits to UK organisations of the HR Excellence in Research Award

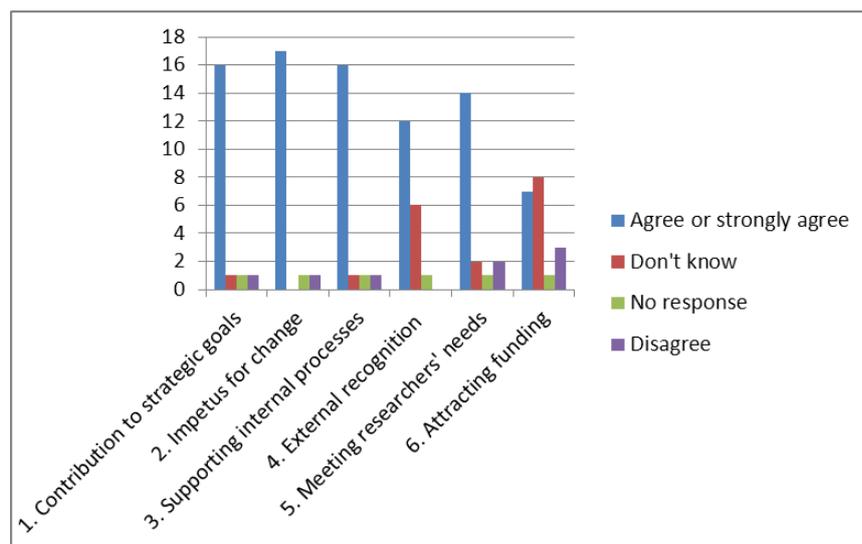
The UK currently has the highest number of institutions with the award of all Member States. As part of the work of the Steering Group for Human Resources and Mobility working group on Human Resource issues, an initial review was undertaken by Vitae, based on the publicly available information from four institutions (and a funding body committed to gaining the award), which outlines the benefits of gaining the award. These views were supplemented with information from two additional institutions in an open call for further feedback, by email in February. Six major themes emerged as a result:

- Contribution to strategic goals
- Impetus for change
- Supporting internal processes
- Raising the status of researcher development
- Meeting researchers' needs
- Attracting funding

Vitae were interested to explore whether the perceived benefits identified were common across the wider group of institutions with the award. Therefore all 50⁴ UK institutions with the award were asked to provide feedback as to whether they agreed with the benefits identified and to provide examples and additional information.

There were 19 responses to the survey (which included two responses from one institution, one relating to the Concordat and one relating to the HR Excellence in Research Award). The responses included four Russell Group and five 1994 Group institutions⁵. Institutions were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with six major themes.

Responses are below:



⁴ This did not include the latest eight organisations to gain the award in May 2012

⁵ Some responses were anonymous

At least 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that gaining the HR Excellence in Research Award had:

- **contributed to strategic goals (84%)**, including improving the quality and impact of research, contributing to institutional strategies to appoint, develop and retain the best staff to pursue research excellence, and the preparation of researchers for wide employability and economic contribution

“Preparing our submission gave us a further opportunity to check that we were ‘joining up’ related initiatives”

“We have set up a Concordat Steering Group, with membership of research staff and PIs from each of our four colleges... A number of key research-staff-related issues now have a formal forum for airing. The issues discussed are wide-ranging – from appointment and induction to issues around equality and diversity, the types of research/other contributions research staff make, as well as issues around redundancy and redeployment and support to identify their skills and motivations and career opportunities.”

“It’s too early to say whether the HR Excellence Award has had any direct impact on strategic objectives but certainly the action plan is aligned to the research strategy.”

- **provided an impetus for change (90%)**, including driving the set-up of steering and implementation groups, supporting culture change internally, and ‘concentrating minds’ at senior level

“Certainly the process of attaining the award and implementing its aims and the Concordat has made senior management take the ‘Roberts’ agenda, as far as research staff are concerned, far more seriously. It has allowed us to re-invigorate our Research Staff Advisory Group, both in terms of senior staff being members and giving a steer to implementation and of gaining more input from RS representatives.”

“At the stage we had reached in implementing the Concordat, when we prepared our application for the kite-mark, the particular benefit was in re-affirming the progress already made, rather than in initiating new activity. It is essential, within the UK, that the UK Concordat and EC HR work continue to be dovetailed”

- **supported internal processes to embed and enhance researcher development (84%)**, including the focus on developing an action plan which led to useful conversations about process, implementation, representation, timescales and evaluation. It also included an opportunity to recognise what is done well, identify good practice and refine, enhance and improve existing provision across the university

“Our Concordat Action Plan has set out clear timelines and allocated responsibilities for implementation. Our first review against our targets will take place in early 2013.”

“We have reviewed the action plan several times and now have both an academic and support function version enabling us to work and review progress upon the appropriate actions in more detail.”

“... this has affected practice in all areas across the university and will be embedded in processes such as appraisals and staff development”

- **met researchers' needs (74%)**, including delivering what 'younger' researchers have asked for and improving researchers abilities to supervise, make funding bids, manage budgets and research groups etc.

“We have been trying to meet early career researchers' needs independently of the HR Recognition award, providing them opportunities for training in finding funding, managing projects, creating impact etc.”

“...the EC HR kite-mark acknowledges progress made in implementing the Concordat”

Twelve out of 19 responses (63%) reported that there was a benefit of **external recognition to raise the status of researcher development**, including external recognition which raised the profile of the work internally, status and kudos for the work, and a perception that this marked the institution out as being 'one of the best’.

“Our institution is already known as world leading. For us, the particular value of the kite-mark is in strengthening the European Research Area.”

Over a third of responses highlighted that the award was beneficial in **attracting funding (37%)**, including being perceived as useful in applications for funding (particularly on a European level)’. However over 40% of respondents said they didn't know if this was a benefit, or highlighted that there was not currently sufficient evidence of this.

“Some evidence at European level that the Award is useful – and this is confirmed through participation in FP7 evaluations.”

“We are mentioning the award in funding applications.”

“I do not have any evidence of this yet though it might be happening and I will explore this angle.”

“We are trying to encourage researchers and academics to make connections between the HR Award and Athena Swan submissions.”

In summary, the range of benefits identified resonated with the 18 institutions that responded to the survey.

3. Future strategy: next steps

We are at a critical point. [Ninety four⁶ institutions/organisations](#) across Europe have the award. The external review process is currently being defined for UK institutions. At European level, a peer review process is being piloted.

Vitae welcomes further input from all stakeholders in order to define a workable and useful external review process for the UK and Europe. Please input your views/comments to Ellen Pearce, Vitae, ellen.pearce@vitae.ac.uk

⁶ As at 6 June 2012