

HR Excellence in Research Award: Consultation on the Future UK Process

Executive summary

The following proposal outlines Vitae's recommendation to evolve the UK HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award process together with further enhancements. With this document, we describe the background to, rationale for, and suggested stages of transition, and invite Award-holders to share their views.

The major change for consultation is the extension of the UK HREiR process from the current two-year cycle to a new three-year cycle of review. Institutions would resubmit for the Award every three years, rather than biennially, with each review point involving external peer review (instead of every four years, as is currently the case). The initial application and first review will remain on a two-year cycle.

Additional enhancements to the process include stronger links with institutions' annual reporting activities as signatories of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, a more streamlined action plan template, and improved awardee guidance. The longer review cycle will also enable Vitae to increase the available channels for sharing best practice. Collectively, the proposed changes are intended to benefit individual Award holders, as well as the sector as a whole, by increasing the time available for substantive progress within institutions and paying more attention to identifying and sharing this progress across institutions.

Background to the consultation

The HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award was established by the European Commission (EC) in 2010 in recognition of an institution's progress made against the European 'Charter and Code'¹, a set of principles for the recruitment, employment and development of researchers. Over 650 institutions across Europe currently hold the Award, which serves as a way-marker to guide researchers towards studying and working at institutions that offer favourable working conditions, professional and career development.

Vitae has been granted the authority by the EC to issue the Award in the UK, with almost 100 institutions holding the Award nationally. In place of the Charter and Code, Vitae received permission to assess and assign the Award against the 2019 'Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers' (known as the 'Researcher Development Concordat' or 'Concordat'). In doing so, this UK process ensures that both reporting and review procedures refer specifically to the UK context whilst the Award itself is directly comparable to that held by institutions accredited by the Commission across Europe.

The high retention rate and prevalence of Award-holding institutions in the UK (96 awardees out of 657 total Award holders) highlights the broad success of the UK process. However, engagement with the Award community has highlighted opportunities for continued improvement. Over the last year, Vitae has sought feedback from both institutional Award-holders and peer reviewers through a structured consultation, a member forum, a roundtable event at Vitae Connections Week, and informally through HREiR drop-in sessions. Feedback has revealed possible areas for improvement, such as the scheduling and

¹ <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/charter-code-researchers>

administrative requirements during the submission and evaluation of action plans and reports, as well as practice sharing. It has also extended to how HREiR relates with other UK processes, such as other Concordats and the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and reporting as a Concordat signatory. In parallel, Vitae is working with Universities UK (UUK) and the Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group (RDCSG) and has also contributed to the Research Concordats and Agreements review², to encourage better alignment between the Concordat and HREiR processes from both sides.

Proposed changes

The major change for consultation is the extension of the reviewing process from a two-year cycle to a three-year cycle, with the inclusion of external peer review at each review point.

We propose assessing institutions every three years, rather than biennially, as is currently the case. Secondly, each three-year review point would involve an external peer review team, instead of alternate submission years being reviewed solely by the UK HREiR Panel. Evolving the UK process this way can afford institutions more time to implement and review their action plans between assessments, whilst increasing the frequency of the more robust two-tier peer review system and bringing the UK process more in line with the European process. The initial application and first review will remain on a two-year cycle. Further detail on the implications of these changes can be found below.

Comparison of typical HREiR review cycles

Current UK Process

UK institutions applying for or holding HREiR currently operate on a biennial review cycle, drafting an executive summary, backward-looking progress report for their previous two-year action plan, and a new two-year action plan (see Figure 1). The initial application for the HREiR Award and two-year submissions are reviewed by the UK HREiR Panel, who review all documentation and collectively decide on the review outcome. At the four-year stage, an external peer review team assesses all documentation and conducts an online interview with institutional HREiR representatives. The peer review team's recommendations are then submitted to the UK HREiR Panel for ratification, forming a two-tier peer review system. Subsequent biennial reviews alternate thereafter between panel-only and two-tiered peer reviews.

Current EC Process





















Institutions applying for HREiR through the EC process must first endorse the principles of the Charter and Code, and are then afforded a maximum of 12 months to perform a gap analysis, complete a policies self-assessment checklist, draft an action plan, and generate a 'process document'. The initial assessment made on these documents, and the interim assessment two years later, are made through a desk review by an external peer review team, as are all subsequent reviews. Following the interim assessment, institutions are reviewed three years later ('award renewal'), with the selected external peer review team also making a site visit. All further renewals are undertaken at three-year intervals, with every other assessment (every six years) involving a site visit as well.




² <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/topics/research-and-innovation/research-concordats-and-agreements>




Proposed UK Process

The proposed future UK process for HREiR would comprise elements of both the current UK and EC processes. Newly applying institutions would be assessed only by the UK HREiR Panel at the initial submission and the two-year review, and then switch thereafter to a two-tier review process, involving both a peer review team and ratification by the UK HREiR Panel, at three-year intervals.

Figure 1. Summary of current and proposed HREiR processes in the UK and for the EC.

Year	Current UK Process	Proposed UK Process	Current EC Process
-1			Endorse Charter and Code
0	Initial submission 	Initial submission 	Initial assessment 
1			
2	Two-year review 	Two-year review 	Interim assessment 
3			
4	Four-year review 		
5		Five-year review 	Five-year renewal 
6	Six-year review 		
7			
8	Eight-year review 	Eight-year review 	Eight-year renewal 
9			
10	Ten-year review 		
11		Eleven-year review 	Eleven-year renewal 
12	Twelve-year review 		
13			
14	Fourteen-year review 	Fourteen-year review 	Fourteen-year renewal 

 Grey, UK Process panel-only phase
 Blue, three-yearly reviews/renewals carried out with external peer review
 UK HREiR Panel only

 UK: external peer review and UK panel
 EC: external peer review, no site visit
 EC: external peer review, with site visit

Benefits of an extended three-year cycle with additional peer review

Increasing the time between HREiR reviews for established Award-holders enhances individual institutional opportunities to:

- implement, monitor and report on their 'three-year' action plans
- organise and convene governance
- conduct an internal review
- prepare and submit documentation in advance of their next assessments
- receive and act on external feedback.

The addition of further opportunities for peer review enhances the sector-wide benefits and integrity of the Award, including:

- heightened scrutiny, maintaining standards expected of the Award
- better alignment with the EC process
- fostering an enhanced community of practice amongst those responsible for managing and/or delivering efforts towards meeting the principles of the Concordat
- necessary increased capacity of the peer reviewer pool provides routes for external recognition and training
- the pool of peer reviewers has recently been doubled to increase capacity and there will be another call for registering interest later in the year.

For Researcher Development Concordat signatories, annual internal reporting will provide regular opportunity to revise action plans between HREiR reviews and maintain institutional focus and awareness of the Concordat principles. Closer alignment between these reporting requirements is discussed as part of the 'additional enhancements' below.

Strategy for transitioning institutions to a three-year review cycle

Individual institutions' review timings are currently spread across a two-year timescale, so adjusting the time between reviews requires careful consideration of when to move existing cohorts of institutions from biennial- to a new three-yearly assessment cycle so as to provide sufficient notice for institutions to develop their three-year actions plans (see Figure 2).

To mitigate the impact, the next review date for all current awardees will remain as planned. Cohorts will then transition onto a three-year cycle in groups, depending on the date of their next review, as follows.

If the next review date is:

- Group 1.** **Between 1 January and 30 June 2022**, cohorts 4, 12 and 15 would be reviewed next in two years (2024), before moving automatically to a three-year cycle (reviewing next in 2027).
- Group 2.** **Between 1 July and 31 August 2022**, cohorts 5, 10, 13 and 16 would be asked to choose whether they wish to schedule their next review in two (2024) or three years (2025). This is to provide sufficient time to draft an action plan that covers a three-year period. All such institutions would then be moved onto a three-year cycle, if not already, after the next scheduled review.
- Group 3.** **From 1 September 2022**, cohorts would transition to the three-year cycle automatically for their next review, providing them with six months from the end of the consultation period to adjust their forward action plan to this new timeline.

Additionally, review dates for some cohorts may be adjusted by a month or so to provide a better balance of review dates throughout the year, avoiding holiday periods, and to maintain

the cohort structure. Institutions will, at all times, be free to discuss any concerns they have when adjusting individual review cycle timeframes.

Figure 2. Strategy for transitioning HREiR awardees from a two-year to three-year cycle.

	Next review date	Subsequent review cycle	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Group 1	01.01.2022 - 30.06.2022	Two-year (automatic) (three-year thereafter)	●			●	
Group 2 <i>option 1</i>	01.07.2022 - 31.08.2022	Two-year (selected) (three-year thereafter)	●			●	
Group 2 <i>option 2</i>	01.07.2022 - 31.08.2022	Three-year (selected)		●			●
Group 3 <i>example 1</i>	01.09.2022 - 31.12.2022	Three-year (automatic)		●			●
Group 3 <i>example 2</i>	01.01.2023 - 31.12.2023	Three-year (automatic)			●		

Additional enhancements

Alongside the major changes to the length of review cycle and frequency of peer review, several additional enhancements are planned:

1. alignment with institutions' annual reporting as signatories of the Researcher Development Concordat
2. a more streamlined action plan template
3. improved awardee guidance
4. increased channels for sharing best practice.

Alignment with Researcher Development Concordat signatory reporting

UUK serves as the Secretariat to the Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group (RDCSG). Through the RDCSG, UUK and Vitae are working together to ensure that the reporting processes for the Concordat and the HREiR Award remain aligned as they evolve and ideally encompass a smaller, collective administrative burden whilst maintaining focus on and momentum in implementing the Concordat principles.

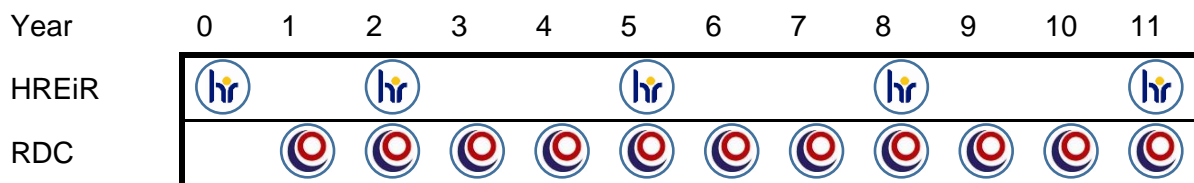
The UK HREiR Award reporting process requires awardees to produce and publish periodic reviews of their progress in implementing the principles of the Concordat through a progress report, an updated action plan showing progress to date and measures of success, and a (proposed three-year) forward-looking action plan.

The reporting obligations on Concordat signatories are to undertake a gap-analysis and publish their action plan within a year of signing, and to produce and publish an annual

report to their governing body that includes their strategic objectives, measures of success and progress against their implementation plan.

Engaging with both HREiR and Concordat processes in tandem provides institutions with a Europe-wide award and the opportunity for feedback through external peer review (HREiR), as well as a softer and more regular internal auditing and reporting to encourage engagement, implementation and enhanced governance (Concordat reporting). The requirements of both processes and similar focus on the Concordat means that signatories' annual reporting to their Councils provide complementary interim self-assessments between external HREiR peer reviews. In doing so, a strategic focus on implementation is maintained, including throughout the proposed three-year period between reviews, which allows greater emphasis on achieving real change and time to evaluate the impact of scheduled actions.

Figure 3. HREiR Award review and Researcher Development Concordat reporting timelines*.



*hypothetical example: institution signed RDC and applied for the HREiR Award.

To support the complementarity of the reporting processes, institutions have the flexibility to select their Researcher Development Concordat reporting month within the year in line with their HREiR review dates, so as to synchronize internal activities as far as possible. Please contact CDRsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk if you wish to make a small adjustment to your Concordat reporting schedule.

Further, both HREiR progress reports and institutional annual Concordat reports to their governing body require a similar high-level overview of an institution's strategic objectives relating to researchers, key measures of success, progress against their action plan and plans for the future. Therefore, the expectation is that these annual Concordat reports to Council will be amalgamated into the 'three-year' HREiR progress report in the future.

Vitae and UUK will continue to explore ways to streamline the reporting processes and minimise duplication of effort. However, we note that institutions also appreciate having the flexibility to structure their reporting to their institutional contexts.

Streamlining the action plan template

With the publication of the 2019 Concordat, a HREiR action plan template was introduced to reflect the new principles and the four stakeholder groups. Awardees are broadly satisfied with the information required in the template, and both peer reviewers and the UK HREiR Panel appreciate the consistency of presentation. Institutions also valued the flexibility to tailor their action plans to their strategic priorities and institutional contexts

However, institutions highlighted challenges relating to the thematic division of obligations by stakeholder group within the template. Feedback suggests this spatially separates like-minded actions across the template that share a similar goal but are aimed at different stakeholders, which can result in duplication of actions and confusion over appropriate measures of success. We therefore intend to evolve the template to cluster similar

obligations and help institutions map actions more effectively across stakeholder groups and demonstrate a more cohesive strategy for meeting the principles of the Concordat.

Improving awardee guidance

The HREiR Award encompasses a soft process delivering hard cultural change at institutions. The aim is to provide a light-touch enhancement process that aligns with and supports the achievement of institutional strategic priorities. As such, though structured templates are requested of institutional applicants and awardees, they are not intended to be prescriptive and institutions are free to define their own actions, monitoring mechanisms and measures of success. Through this flexibility, the HREiR review process allows institutions to define their general strategy and action plans in line with their own institutional context, rendering it more relevant, achievable and attracting greater engagement internally.

Vitae provides general guidance for applying for the Award, undertaking the review process, and submitting documentation. Furthermore, institutions benefit from being able to provide draft documentation to Vitae for feedback prior to submission, receiving comments and suggestions specific to their organisation and action plans. Feedback from institutions who take up the offer of feedback on their draft documentation suggests that this is highly valued, and there is a general correlation between those who do and the subsequent successful outcome of their reviews.

Both institutions' and peer reviewers' feedback suggest, however, that awardees would benefit from more guidance on (1) structuring a clear and engaging summary report and (2) developing an action plan that can deliver measurable impact for researchers. In particular, institutions would value more guidance on how to identify SMART success measures that measure the impact of their actions on specific stakeholder groups. We will therefore update the information already available online and include specific examples of good practice to further support institutions undertaking the HREiR UK process.

Increasing the channels for sharing best practice

To emphasise the enhancement value of the HREiR review process, we will also look to increase the breadth and extent of both existing and new platforms for sharing practice. Presently, institutions are able to share their own experiences within institutional cohorts, through membership events, and informally through personal correspondence.

We propose the following initiatives to enhance practice sharing and build a deeper community of practice around HREiR in the UK:

- a) Concordat Platform of Practice (*new channel*)
- b) more frequent cohort drop-ins (*deepening an existing channel*)
- c) matchmaking events and clinics (*new channel*)
- d) more frequent peer review with proposed three-year review cycle (*deepening an existing channel*).

Concordat Platform of Practice

The platform is a website database hosting examples of good practice in implementing the principles of the Concordat, and we encourage contributions from HREiR awardees. Institutions submitting case examples can use the platform to showcase their success and gain recognition for their researcher development work, whilst the sector benefits by sharing widely what has worked well locally. Case examples can be filtered by principle, stakeholder groups involved or target beneficiaries, and describe the need for change, action

undertaken, success measures used and the impact achieved. The website is now live³ and we are accepting additional contributions⁴.

More frequent cohort drop-ins

Institutional cohorts are set up based on when cohort members first applied for the HREiR Award. Cohort drop-ins are still considered valuable events and provide institutions with a regular opportunity to seek advice from Vitae and share practice with other awardees at a similar stage in the HREiR process. We therefore aim to increase the frequency of cohort drop-in calls, to provide further opportunity for support during the potential three-year cycle.

Matchmaking events and clinics

The diversity of institutions holding the Award means that a given cohort may not serve as a universal platform that answers all questions awardees may have. We therefore plan to supplement cohort drop-ins with additional opportunities to connect HREiR Award-holding institutions along dimensions that matter most to them and enable mutually beneficial practice sharing. This could include matchmaking events and thematic clinics where awardees can join specific workshops or forums concerning, for example, specific principles, obligations or stakeholder groups, certain aspects of the Award process or different institutional contexts.

More frequent peer review

The key proposal of moving from two- to three-yearly HREiR reviews is accompanied by peer review of each submission (every three years), rather than alternate submissions (every four years) in the current process. This is a 33% increase in external peer review activity overall and provides a greater opportunity for feedback from peer reviewers, themselves responsible for managing and delivering HREiR action plans at their own institutions. Increasing these touch points maintains the rigour of the Award whilst ensuring awardees receive constructive feedback to enhance their researcher development activities and implementation of the Concordat principles.

³ <https://concordatplatformofpractice.vitae.ac.uk/>

⁴ <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/impact-and-evaluation/platform-of-practice/concordat-platform-of-practice-submissions>