

Annual statement on research integrity, session 2023-24

Section 1: Key contact information

Question	Response
1A. Name of organisation	University of Aberdeen
1B. Type of organisation: higher education institution/industry/independent research performing organisation/other (please state)	Higher Education Institution
1C. Date statement approved by governing body (DD/MM/YY)	19/11/24 (University Court)
1D. Web address of organisation's research integrity page (if applicable)	https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/research-governance-10644.php
1E. Named senior member of staff to oversee research integrity	Name: Professor Nicholas Forsyth, Vice Principal (Research)
	Email address: nicholas.forsyth@abdn.ac.uk
1F. Named member of staff who will act as a first point of contact for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity	Name: Mrs Dawn Foster, Research Policy & Governance Officer, Research & Innovation
	Email address: dawn.foster@abdn.ac.uk

Section 2: Promoting high standards of research integrity and positive research culture.

Description of actions and activities undertaken

2A. Description of current systems and culture

The University of Aberdeen continues to seek to achieve the highest standards in its research governance arrangements, recognising both the importance and centrality of rigour and integrity to high quality research performance. The University recognises that research integrity is a primary concern of all those involved with research, and that it is vital to have appropriate training and support available for our research community, complemented by robust and effective processes for dealing with any allegations of research misconduct.

Policies and Systems

Research Integrity is a central aspect of the University's Research Governance Framework, as summarised in our Research Governance Handbook (RGH). Research integrity is also underpinned by the following policies relating to responsible research practice:

- *Code of Practice on Conflicts of Interest in Research & Knowledge Exchange Activities*
- *Data Protection Policy*
- *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy*
- *Information Security Policy*
- *Policy and Guidelines on Good Research Conduct & Statement on Handling Allegations of Research Misconduct (currently under review)*
- *Records Management Policy*
- *Research Data Management Policy & Guidance*
- *Research Involving the Use of Animals – University Position Statement*
- *University Guidelines on Keeping of Research Records*
- *Risk Assessment Policy*
- *Policy and Procedure on Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblowing)*
- *Code of Practice – Safeguarding in Research & Innovation*
- *Copyright Policy*
- *Ethics Appeals Policy*
- *Statement of Compliance on Trusted Research*

Guidance on research ethics and requirements for ethical approval are provided to our researcher community via the Research Governance Handbook. Further guidance and documentation specific to Ethics Boards' requirements is available on

our Research Ethics webpages, including template participant information sheets and consent forms, which are reviewed on at least an annual basis to ensure these continue to reflect current requirements for good research practice, including research data management and data sharing.

The **University Research Committee (URC)** is chaired by the Vice Principal (Research) and has overall responsibility for matters relating to research integrity. The URC membership is comprised of representatives from all Schools (normally the School Director of Research), representatives from the relevant Professional Services teams, and representatives from the Early Career Researcher (ECR) and Postgraduate Research Student (PGR) cohorts.

Oversight of research integrity issues at an operational level is devolved to the Ethics Advisory Group (EAG), a sub-group of URC. The EAG is responsible for the ongoing oversight of research ethics and governance issues; developing and reviewing institutional policy on research ethics and governance; and receiving reports from our internal Ethics Boards and Committees. Responsibility for facilitating ethical approval for research projects and the promotion of good practice in research is devolved to six discipline-based ethics boards and committees which support non-clinical research and also research that does not require a licence under Home Office regulations. The Chairs of these boards and committees are members of the EAG, providing a direct connection with the work of the individual ethics boards and committees.

In addition, teams of Professional Services staff across the University provide support, guidance and training to our researcher community. These include the Postgraduate Research College and Researcher Development, which have specific responsibility for supporting our postgraduate research students and early career researcher community; also staff based in the Directorate of Research and Innovation, and further supported by colleagues in the Library, Data Protection and Digital Research teams.

The University manages an ongoing programme of continuous improvement of its research governance arrangements. These are informed by a combination of initiatives such as the University's strategic plan for research (in support of the University's Aberdeen 2040 Strategy); the institutional Risk Register and Risk Framework which identifies and mitigates research governance risks; learning from internal audits and funders' assurance requirements; voluntary instruments; and codes of practice. Substantive developments during academic session 2023-24 are discussed below.

Communications and Engagement

The expected standards of research integrity are summarised in our Policy and Guidelines on Good Research Conduct contained within our Research Governance Handbook (RGH).

The RGH is available online and promoted to all research staff and research students during local induction procedures. Annual revisions to the handbook are approved by the URC and thereafter published on our webpages and reported to the Schools via the School Directors of Research.

Regular training opportunities are organised and advertised to staff and post graduate research students by Research & Innovation and the Postgraduate Research College on topics such as research ethics, research integrity, safeguarding, reproducibility and good research practice. This is in addition to discipline-based training provided within the Schools and supplements the mandatory online training Research Integrity for all researchers, and the mandatory online training in Research Ethics & Governance for applicants for ethical approval. In addition, Research & Innovation staff are routinely invited to School meetings and to participate in other School fora to present on these topics, in addition to topics such as developing research networks, building relationships with funders, and connecting with industry.

Culture, Development and Leadership

The University of Aberdeen promotes the highest standards of research and strives to provide a working environment that supports and rewards a positive research culture.

In session 2023-24, the roles and responsibilities of the roles of Research Deans were revised, and a Research Dean was appointed with specific responsibility for People, Culture and Environment. The Dean's remit includes leading on the development and implementation of a series of measures to enhance the way the University supports and promotes a positive research culture for all. This includes responsibility for research integrity and reproducibility, implementation of DORA (San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment) and acting as academic lead on a number of concordats, including research integrity, open research data, and supporting the career development of researchers.

To date, the Dean has led a series of engagement events with Schools, to capture good practice in research culture and uncover areas of common challenge. This consultation has fed directly into the development of the University's research

culture strategy, currently being finalised. This strategy places integrity at its core, as part of a strand of work which focuses on shared standards of excellence across the University. This work will include the establishment of a Research Culture Steering Group, with representation from key areas across the University including Research & Innovation, HR, and the Library, to interrogate and oversee developments in research integrity from their various perspectives, and to ensure a coherent approach.

The Dean has also endorsed the adoption of the Research Culture Framework (Vitae), which will assist in identifying gaps in existing university activities around research culture and prioritising future initiatives to enhance research culture at the University of Aberdeen. This will include development opportunities for Inclusive Leadership which will centre integrity in research as a core pillar and strengthen our support for Research Fellows and PIs as part of our commitment to the Researcher Development Concordat.

Monitoring and Reporting

All queries, allegations and investigations into potential research misconduct by members of staff continue to be managed via the Research Strategy and Policy team, supported by colleagues in HR, in line with our 'Statement on Handling Allegations of Unacceptable Research Conduct'.

Allegations and investigations into student research misconduct are managed by Academic Affairs, in line with the requirements of the University's Code of Practice on Student Discipline (Academic). Investigations relating to funded research projects are reported to the relevant funding body in line with their requirements.

2B. Changes and developments during the period under review

Research Governance Handbook

The expectations around research integrity are set out in the institutional Research Governance Handbook (RGH). The RGH encompasses integrity in research practice, including how we share, assess, apply or commercialise research and how we engage with stakeholders and research users.

It is reviewed annually and in the light of external policy developments and research practice at the University. The current version was approved by URC and then published in March 2024. Updates to the handbook included further clarification on

the requirements for ethical review of research (including information on the Worktribe Ethics review process, following the implementation of this software during the previous academic session); revisions to the sections on openness in research (involving the use of third-party research data repositories, and data availability statements) and revisions to the University definition of unacceptable research conduct. The RGH also now includes an organogram which reflects the institutional arrangements for research ethics and governance and the various reporting lines to the URC.

Worktribe Ethics

Following the initial rollout of the Worktribe Ethics application process in session 2022-23, further work has been undertaken to support our applicants and reviewers. A series of guidance notes have been developed on how we expect applicants to address the various questions within the system under the headings 'Scope', 'Methodology', 'Human Participants' and 'Data Management', and training sessions on the Worktribe Ethics application process were added to the roster of regular training available via the University's 'Research Bites' (an internal programme of focussed training on research-related topics). In addition, the Policy & Strategy team continue to respond to requests to provide bespoke inputs to Schools on research ethics, governance and integrity issues.

In addition, a policy on appeals for ethics applications submitted to the Worktribe Ethics review process was approved by the URC, modelled on best practice from other UK universities. The policy outlines the process to be followed should an applicant wish to appeal against an 'Unfavourable Opinion', whereby the Ethics Committee has decided that the project is in contravention of the University's research governance framework and associated policies and procedures on ethical conduct in research. Appeals will be submitted and managed via an asynchronous online process, with the aim of ensuring a prompt resolution to the issues raised within the appeal.

Statement of Compliance on Trusted Research

URC approved the adoption of a Statement of Compliance on Trusted Research, involving a range of initiatives related to ensuring the security of our international research collaborations, and to protect it from theft, misuse or exploitation of personal or research data or intellectual property by hostile state actors (as required by the National Security and Investment Act 2021 (NSIA)). These initiatives have included the development of a due diligence checklist and a suite of training materials which were delivered to the Schools of Engineering, Natural & Computing Sciences and Geosciences. Presentations were given to School Research Committees, and a general training session was made available to all staff via the

University's 'ResearchBites' programme. In addition, the University has registered with the Higher Education Export Control Association (HEECA), and relevant members of staff have undertaken HEECA training on the topic of Export Controls. Furthermore, the University is participating in the Scottish network on Trusted Research, aimed at supporting practitioners across Scottish universities and enabling the sharing of technical guidance, training materials and other resource. Also, the University have engaged with the UK government's Research Collaboration Advice Team (RCAT), who have provided a number of information sessions for University staff.

Working Group – Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

The University retained the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2023, which measures progress made within the institution against the obligations of the Concordat. A 'Code of Practice for Researchers and their Managers' and 'Guidance on Career Development for Research Fellows' have been developed and approved. Both documents aim to clarify and promote wider awareness of the University's expectations in support of the concordat. These included the promotion of best practice in areas such as induction, training and professional development opportunities for research fellows, with the aim of creating a research culture in which all Research Fellows can both contribute to and thrive within it. These documents are currently under review to reflect emerging culture strategy and to incorporate PORTAL, our researcher and career development tool. PORTAL is currently in development

Copyright Policy

The University is committed to promoting the responsible and ethical use of copyright works in all its activities. In support of this commitment, in session 2023-24 the University approved a new copyright policy, which has been informed by best practice and is aligned with similar policies in the higher education sector. The policy provides further clarity on the creation and appropriate use of copyright material by streamlining the process of making copyright-related decisions and reducing the risk of copyright infringement or breaching the licensing terms and conditions.

Ethics Advisory Group

During session 2023-24, the Group received and approved a series of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for each of the six internal ethics boards, based on a template devised by the EAG during the previous session. The adoption of the SOPs (which are published on the University website) provides greater clarity and

transparency on the operating practices of the individual boards.

The Group also developed a new Ethics Appeals policy for ethics applications submitted to the Worktribe Ethics review process (see previous reference within this statement), and also a set of guidance notes for applicants to the Worktribe Ethics process regarding how to address question sets under the headings of 'Scope', 'Methodology', 'Human Participants' and 'Data Management' (also referenced earlier in this statement). Both items were approved and implemented during session 2023-24.

A lay member was appointed to the EAG during session 2023-24 and will serve on the group for three years. The involvement of an external member aims to ensure that an external perspective and oversight is brought to the work of the group, and to stimulate new and different ways of thinking about the ethical issues considered by the group.

Participation in the UKRIO Research Integrity Pilot Training Course

The University agreed to participate in the UK Research Integrity Organisation's (UKRIO) pilot online training programme in research integrity. A number of research staff, professional services and technical staff, and postgraduate research students have registered on the course and will provide feedback on the training to UKRIO. The pilot is due to end in March 2025, and the outcomes from the pilot will be considered in due course in relation to the University's existing online training provision in research integrity.

2C. Reflections on progress and plans for future developments

Training in Safeguarding for Researchers

Following the University Court's approval of a new Code of Practice in Safeguarding in Research & Innovation in session 2022-23, initial training was provided for researchers during 2023-24, with individual guidance being provided to researchers specific to their projects. Further training for designated safeguarding School contacts is planned for 2024-25.

Future Developments - Ethics Advisory Group

The group have prepared a draft recruitment and appointment procedure for the Chairs of our internal Ethics Boards and Committees, which will be submitted for

URC approval during session 2024-25. The draft procedure aims to standardise the appointment procedure adopted for these roles (and the associated term of office) and will improve the transparency of the appointment procedure by ensuring that these posts are advertised and appointments made following a competitive interview process.

The group have also drafted a guidance note on research involving illegal activities, designed to help researchers navigate the complex issues that can arise from this type of research. Once finalised, the draft guidance will be submitted to the URC for approval.

Future Developments – Scottish Research Cultures Collaboration Manager

Funding has been secured for an (initial) two-year appointment to the role of Scottish Research Cultures Collaboration Manager. The University of Aberdeen will be hosting this pivotal role, dedicated to advancing research cultures at a national level across Scotland. The role focuses on enhancing research competitiveness and addressing national priorities through collaboration, resource sharing, and the dissemination of best practice, and will be a highly visible advocate for positive research cultures in and beyond Scotland. The role has dual reporting lines with the University of Aberdeen and the funder (Scottish Funding Council) and will work in collaboration with Universities Scotland’s Researcher Development and Culture Committee (RDCC).

PORTAL

The University is currently preparing for the implementation of PORTAL, a hub for resources and information related to research training and career development. Designed to empower researchers at every stage of their journey, PORTAL will provide essential tools, resources, and guidance. PORTAL will offer a structured and dynamic approach to support personal and professional growth. With tailored development pathways, individuals will be able to navigate specific needs, explore opportunities aligned with their role or career stage, and gain confidence in future career directions. PORTAL will also provide a structured format through which academic line managers can discuss and explore career aspirations with staff members and make a plan for supporting and implementing them. The development themes are 1. Research Development and Delivery, 2. Research Practice and Integrity, 3. Impact, Innovation and Engagement, 4. Leadership, Orientation and Career Development. The themes will allow individuals to target specific skill sets or areas of expertise and to easily access the relevant training and tools to meet specific development needs. By focusing on thematic areas, researchers can take a strategic approach to learning that aligns with current and future needs. Career stages and research specific roles come with distinct

development needs, and PORTAL will organise resources to help find the right resources at the right time. The structured development pathways are designed to guide progress in key areas of personal and professional development. These pathways will offer stepwise guidance to help navigate through more complex or long-term learning goals, such as transitioning into leadership roles. The pathways will provide a clear, structured approach to thinking about and planning for future career aspirations, building the right combination of skills, knowledge, and experience over time.

What is unique about PORTAL is that it will bring together teams from across the Professional Services remit who are involved in supporting the research process thus preventing overlaps and enabling any gaps in provision to be highlighted. It will also streamline information for researchers by enabling information to be accessed from a single place. It will also promote cross team working and collaboration in a way that doesn't easily happen naturally.

Section 3: Addressing research misconduct

3A. Statement on processes that the organisation has in place for dealing with allegations of misconduct

As a signatory to the Universities UK's Concordat to Support Research Integrity, we are committed to the ongoing development of a research culture that supports open and transparent investigation of potential research misconduct, ensuring that all members of our research community have confidence in our procedures and are supported throughout the process. Our current research misconduct processes are outlined in our 'Statement on Handling Allegations of Unacceptable Research Conduct', which is embedded in our Research Governance Handbook (section 4.2) and publicly available on our website. This is complemented by a series of associated policies (listed under Section 2A) designed to provide our research community with a supportive environment in which they are encouraged to raise any concerns in this area.

Support for ongoing training and ensuring widespread awareness of research ethics is central to our efforts, and work is ongoing within the University to enhance researcher awareness of these issues. The adoption of the Worktribe Ethics application process has enhanced researcher awareness of a number of key aspects of ethical behaviour in research activity.

Review of Research Misconduct Investigation Process

As part of the regular review of associated policies, and in light of the publication of UKRIO's revised 'Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research' procedure (2023), work has commenced on a comprehensive review of the university's Statement on Handling Allegations of Unacceptable Research Conduct. This review will be concluded in session 2024-25 with the development of a new research misconduct policy and procedure. This will reflect the core principles outlined in the UKRIO procedure, whilst remaining cognisant of the level of resources and support available to manage the associated process.

3B. Information on investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken				
Type of allegation	Number of allegations			
	Number of allegations reported to the organisation	Number of formal investigations	Number upheld in part after formal investigation	Number upheld in full after formal investigation
Fabrication				
Falsification				
Plagiarism	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>1</i>
Failure to meet legal, ethical and professional obligations	<i>1</i>	<i>0</i>		
Misrepresentation (eg data; involvement; interests; qualification; and/or publication history)	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>1</i>
Improper dealing with allegations of misconduct				
Multiple areas of concern (when received in a single allegation)	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>Other*</i>				
Total:	4	3	0	2
*If you listed any allegations under the 'Other' category, please give a brief, high-level summary of their type here. Do not give any identifying or confidential information when responding.				
<i>Not applicable</i>				