UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
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RESEARCH GOVERNANCE & INTEGRITY

ANNUAL REPORT TO COURT ACADEMIC YEAR 2021/22

Introduction

The University of Aberdeen seeks 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 in place robust and effective processes for dealing with misconduct.

The Research Policy Committee (RPC) which is chaired by the Vice Principal (Research), has oversight of research ethics and governance issues; developing and reviewing institutional policy on research ethics and governance; receiving reports from Ethics Boards and Committees; and undertaking ethics health checks within Schools. Responsibility for facilitating ethical approval for research projects and the promotion of good research practice rests with six discipline-based ethics committees and boards that support non-clinical related research and research that does not require a licence under Home Office regulations.

The RPC membership comprises of representatives from all Schools (normally the School Director of Research), representatives from the relevant Professional Services, an Early Career Researcher (ECR), a Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student and an external member from University Court. It meets four times per year.

In addition to the work of the RPC, the University implements 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, the institutional Risk Register and Risk framework to identify and mitigate research governance risks, learning from internal audits and funders' assurance requirements, voluntary instruments and codes of practice. Substantive developments and activities are discussed in turn below.

Changes to the Research Policy Committee Title, Membership and Governance Structure

In response to the recommendations arising from University effectiveness and governance reviews, as of session 2022/23 the Research Policy Committee will in future be known as the University Research Committee (URC), and will become a committee of University Senate (instead of University Court).

Reflecting these changes, the membership of URC will no longer include an independent member of Court and the URC will in future report to the University Senate.   The committee will continue to meet four times per year.

Research during the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic

In line with the gradual removal of COVID-19 restrictions across the UK (replaced by governments' guidance), coupled with the gradual return to campus for staff and students, in April 2022 the University Campus (Research) Planning Group ceased to perform an oversight role in monitoring of research activity. Responsibility for oversight of research returned to the pre-pandemic arrangements (i.e. approval of travel and fieldwork arrangements by the Head of School and ethical approval provided by the internal Ethics Review Boards).

The Campus Planning Group continue to meet if required to discuss any matters relating to increased activity on campus, and in the event of any changes to the COVID-19 situation or national guidance, will resume additional oversight of research activities if required.

Strategy

The University launched its Aberdeen 2040 Strategy in February 2020 and work continues on its implementation.

Five Interdisciplinary Research Directors were appointed in the report period to provide leadership in research development under the five Interdisciplinary Challenge areas as follows: Data & Artificial Intelligence; Environment & Biodiversity; Health, Nutrition & Wellbeing; Energy Transition; and Social Inclusion & Cultural Diversity.

These new roles will encourage and support our academic colleagues in engaging with interdisciplinary work (as per the increased focus on interdisciplinary working, endorsed by the UK Research Funding Councils) and will ensure that our research activities are impactful and enhance our reputation for world-class research.

Research Governance Framework

The University's Research Governance Handbook (explaining the standards, principles and expectations for research ethics and governance) underwent an annual review with a revised version approved by RPC in November 2021. Updates included information on mandatory online training in Research Ethics & Governance for all PGR and staff applicants for ethical approval (including exemptions for staff who have already completed the 'Good Clinical Practice' (GCP) or 'Good Research Practice' (GRP) training; reference made to the separate ethics committee established in the School of Biological Sciences; amendments made to correctly re-title references made to the **UK** GDPR (following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union); guidance on data gathering for University business (for non-research purposes); and revisions to the guidance text on inventorship; a minor revision to the stage 1 investigation process in the procedure for reporting allegations of unacceptable research conduct.

A Code of Practice for Safeguarding in Research has been developed and will be submitted to the formal review and approval process during session 2022/23.

Ethics Advisory Group

During session 2021/22, the Research Policy Committee approved the establishment of a new sub-group, the Ethics Advisory Group.

This group was created to further the overall aims of the University's ethics and governance policies and processes; to oversee the activities of individual ethics boards thereby ensuring the highest ethical standards in research practice; to protect the safety, dignity, welfare and wellbeing of research participants; to protect researchers from harm and unjust criticism; to take account of legitimate interests of individuals, groups and communities in the University's research as they relate to ethics and governance; and to provide reassurance to the public of the integrity of the University's research.

The group is comprised of the Dean for Academic Research Partnerships & Research Governance (Chair), the Chairs of the internal ethics boards (Arts, Social Science & Business; Physical Science & Engineering; Psychology; Biological Sciences; Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition; and the Rowett.

The group met for the first time in May 2022, and items of business included a review of research ethics training and the development of a centralised ethics appeal process.

The group will meet four times per year and will report to the University Research Committee under the revised research committee governance structure.

Research Ethics Project (Worktribe Ethics)

As of March 2022, the University acquired a digital solution for research ethics approval from Worktribe. The University had already adopted the research awards management system within the Worktribe package, thereby enabling integration between grant applications and post-award monitoring and the ethics approval process.

The ethics module will be implemented across the University on a rolling schedule during session 2022/23 and will be adopted by each of the six internal ethics boards in turn (Committee for Research Ethics & Governance in Arts, Social Science & Business; the Physical Sciences & Engineering Ethics Board; the School of Biological Sciences Ethics Board; the School of Psychology Ethics Board; the Rowett Ethics Board, and the School Ethics Review Board (Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition)).

The new ethics module will provide increased visibility and awareness of our ethics procedures across the University community, enhanced reporting capabilities, and a streamlined system encompassing best practice in ethical review, which will also improve the overall governance of our research activity.

Research Culture

- **Research Culture Task & Finish Group**

The work of the Research Culture Task & Finish group (originally established in 2020 to review the research culture at the University and to propose suggestions for improvement) formally concluded with a report to University Senate in May 2022.

The final report from the group proposed 22 recommendations on the key themes of developing research careers, improving the experience of working in research, supporting inclusive and respectful environments, changing how we do research. The recommendations were made with the aim of making the University a place that researchers would want to come to do their research, to develop their skills and to contribute to the ongoing success of the University.

The report received the endorsement of the University Senate, and an action plan has been developed to implement these recommendations.

- **Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers**

A Concordat Steering Group was formed in November 2021 and has produced a series of recommendations which have been agreed by University Research Committee and the Senior Management Team, and are due to be discussed by the University Senate in November 2022. These recommendations relate to early career researchers (ECRs) on research-only contracts and cover: support and time for research independence, time for professional development activities, mentoring for ECRs, clearer criteria for promotion for research-only contracts (as part of the ongoing Promotions Review Group), ringfenced internal funds for ECRs, and close alignment of this work with the ongoing work on research culture.

The new ECR development programme will also be tailored to support the development of an inclusive research culture. In order to contribute to the University-wide focus on employability, and to meet our responsibilities under the Concordat, Researcher Development will work closely with HR and with the PGR School to ensure that ECRs and PGRs are supported to develop career strategies and consider options outside academia, as part of this development piece.

A formal Concordat action plan is due for submission in February 2023 and will align strands of work across these different teams and sections where relevant, providing a supportive environment for researchers to thrive.

- **UK Reproducibility Network (UKRN)**

The University of Aberdeen was one of the first 10 UK universities to join the UKRN, a network established to improve the rigour, robustness and quality of UK academic research output. Our institutional lead continues to drive continuous improvement in our research activities.

- **San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)**

The University became a signatory to the DORA declaration in June 2020, and (following a pause in implementation activity due to the ongoing impact of Covid-19) a DORA Implementation Officer was appointed in March 2022. DORA compliance is being taken forward as part of the actions and recommendations of the University's Research Culture Task and Finish Group. This has involved developing DORA guidance for the Recruitment Toolkit and the Promotions Review Exercise. A Policy on the Responsible use of Metrics has been produced and a Statement on Responsible Research Assessment is also in development.

Animal Welfare and Ethical Review

The University of Aberdeen Ethical Review Committee (ERC) acts on behalf of the Establishment Licence Holder to ensure that the University meets its obligations under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA). The ERC discharges functions of an Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body, as required under the ASPA legislation, and has oversight of all matters related to animal welfare, care and use at the University.

At the ERC's annual meeting, the University Code of Practice for Research Involving the Use of Animals was reviewed and updated. The ERC's workload for the preceding year was reviewed and it was noted that the bimonthly ERC online meetings continued to work well. Following a recruitment exercise, a new lay ERC Convenor, was appointed and the official handover was completed following the annual meeting in February 2022. The ERC will look to make the online in-term review a regular aspect of the ERC's work, with an event to be scheduled in academic year 2022/23.

Graduate School

All PGR students are required to undertake mandatory Research Integrity training within the first six months of their start date. The purpose of the training is to underline the highest standards of academic integrity expected by the institution and to ensure that they are adhered to. Routine checks for completion are carried out at the point of the first formal review exercise at 6 months (6 Month Review exercise) within which specific reference to completion of research integrity training is contained. This process complements a formal communication at 3 months from the Graduate School about training expectations and requirements.

In academic year 2021/22 the PGR Committee approved the introduction of the mandatory submission of PGR work for assessment via text similarity checking software in order to identify any instances of academic misconduct and as a mechanism to introduce support and/or additional training for individuals. Guidance documents for PGRs and academic supervisors are available with formal investigation processes clearly outlined. In addition an academic writing adviser has been recruited (part-time) to develop additional support for PGRs in relation to integrity and the avoidance of plagiarism.

An external audit of the formal PGR review processes identified the need to improve engagement with the review exercise and recommended the exercises be tailored to the specific time point of the student journey. This has been undertaken and, subject to committee approval, the 6-month review has been revised to focus on training needs.

The Graduate School also works in partnership with the Researcher Development team and their work on research culture to ensure the institution adheres to the highest standards of academic integrity and provides an environment for researchers to thrive.

Research 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 misconduct, ensuring that all staff, researchers and students have confidence in our procedures and are supported throughout the process. As part of the ongoing review of associated policies (and as noted earlier in this report), a minor revision was approved to the procedure for reporting allegations of unacceptable research conduct. The changes confirmed that the stage 1 investigation process will ensure that, further to the initial complaint being raised, the complainant has been provided with sufficient opportunity to effectively state their complaint, which may involve offering them an interview with the stage 1 panel.

Summary of Investigations of Research Misconduct

The table below sets out the broad categories of queries, investigations and findings in relation to research misconduct during academic year 2021/22. Appropriate action was taken where allegations were upheld following further investigation.

	No. of 'near misses' (not leading to an allegation) or resolved via informal resolution	No. of allegations which resulted in an investigation	No. of allegations upheld (in whole or in part)
Research undertaken without ethical approval	1		1
Authorship	1		
Damage to research experiments			1

In order to address the learning points highlighted by the above ethics approval incidents (as both instances occurred within the same School), further engagement was undertaken with senior staff within the School, coupled with a presentation to the entire School, to ensure improved awareness and understanding of research ethics and integrity and to provide further guidance on the research ethics approval process.

Authorship was raised at Research Policy Committee to promote greater awareness of these issues, and the adoption of CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) was discussed. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines are promoted to our research community and are regularly consulted in relation to authorship queries and also when required to investigate authorship disputes.

Training and awareness-raising is an ongoing responsibility and work will continue in the next academic session to continue to highlight these issues amongst our researcher community.

The adoption of the Worktribe Ethics application process (and the associated training programme) in session 2022/23 will also enhance researcher awareness of ethical approval requirements.

Further information is available from Professor Marion Campbell (m.k.campbell@abdn.ac.uk).

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