

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 20th JANUARY 2022

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Simon Bains, Marlis Barraclough, Alison Brown, Keith Bender, Mirela Delibegovic, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Elena Giannaccini, Tamas Gyorfi, Claire Hawes, Catherine Jones, Jesper Kallestrup, Ann Lewendon, Gary Macfarlane, Sam Martin, Graeme Nixon, Nir Oren, Iain Percival, Louise Phillips, Dubravka Pokrajac, Liz Rattray, Brice Rea, Ian Stansfield

Apologies: Brian Henderson, Jacqueline Ravet, Tracey Slaven, Gwen Smith, Donna Walker

Welcome: Marion Campbell welcomed all to the meeting.

1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

M Campbell thanked all RPC members who had responded with comments on the papers circulated in early January by M Barraclough. The paper on the REG funding formula consultation had been returned to the SFC by the deadline of 12 January. The paper on the Institutional Feedback to the SFC on REF2021 would be reviewed by SMT at their meeting next week, with the finalised version submitted to the SFC by the deadline of noon on 27 January. She also noted that the 'REF Lessons Learnt' paper had been discussed at the recent meeting of the REF Steering Group and would be submitted for discussion at the Senate meeting on 02 February.

A more detailed version of the Research Income/HESA Benchmarking and Contextual Data paper (initially discussed at the November RPC meeting) had recently been discussed by SMT, who recommended that the paper be submitted to Senate for further consideration. This would also be discussed at their meeting on 02 February. The draft policy on research funding from tobacco companies would also be on the Senate agenda for approval.

RPC noted the plans to model the future REG income to provide all Schools with an indication of what they could expect from the allocation.

2 REPORT FROM THE RESEARCH CULTURE TASK & FINISH GROUP

2.1 Overview from Gary Macfarlane

G Macfarlane advised RPC that improving the research culture has been the focus of a number of external reports from e.g. the UK Government, the Wellcome Trust and the Royal Society. There was a clear momentum behind this work and a real opportunity to effect change within our research culture.

He noted that the report aligned with the themes of the University's 2040 strategy, and an inclusive and supportive research culture would be integral to the achievement of these goals. This report would be part of a wider series of changes required at individual, University, funders and publishers level, as all have a role in effecting the changes required.

He provided a summary of the activities undertaken by this group (under the workstreams of communication, survey and engagement). A Research Culture website has been created to support communication with the University community, and a series of 11 Café Culture discussion sessions were held in 2021 involving a cross-section of PGRs, research staff and professional services staff involved in research support. With regards to survey work, a group member has been involved in developing a short research culture survey (in collaboration with the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Bristol). This survey will involve a small

number of questions on key elements of research culture and should be finalised by mid-2022.

He discussed the four main areas of focus in the report: research careers, inclusive and respectful environments, experience of working in research, and how we do research, and noted that the report made a number of recommendations, including on the promotions process. He confirmed this report would also feed into the Promotions Review Committee, and he welcomed the opportunity for input from RPC at this stage in its development.

2.2 Discussion by RPC

M Campbell thanked I Percival for his emailed comments on the report to RPC members, received on 19 January.

RPC discussed the report, and the following issues were noted:

- Mentoring scheme – the importance of effective mentoring opportunities was acknowledged, noting these were particularly useful where they involved mentors from outwith the discipline. It was noted that the current mentoring scheme *is* cross-School, however clarification was required on whether research only staff have access to this scheme. The involvement of external mentors was suggested e.g. alumni, industry representatives. RPC agreed that the mentoring scheme would benefit from re-invigoration.
- Staff appraisal process - concern was expressed that research assistants and fellows may not be receiving appraisals, hence the importance of the review process needed to be re-emphasised. It was noted that staff appraisals for research assistants and fellows were a requirement of the Concordat to Support the Development of Early Career Researchers. It was suggested that the PI should not conduct the staff appraisal for research assistants and fellows due to the potential for conflict of interest. It was noted that Social Sciences appoint a separate line manager for their research assistants and fellows, and the University should consider this further.
- Opportunities for increased research collaboration – particularly important in enabling early career researchers in particular to connect with the wider research community. It was acknowledged that this could be more of a challenge in the Arts & Humanities disciplines, where the lone researcher model is still prevalent.
- Training opportunities/experience for PhDs/Research Assistants/Fellows – RPC noted that a proportion of Research Assistants go on to Teaching & Scholarship roles and would benefit from more teaching experience at the University. It was noted that training opportunities for Research Assistants were a requirement of the Concordat to Support the Development of Early Career Researchers. The University could consider innovative ways to develop Research Fellows on contract positions e.g. for them to be given a short-term (6-month) fellowship so they could go part-time on the grant they are employed on, which would give them time to develop a research proposal for an Independent Research Fellowship.
- Identifying options for careers outwith academia – the involvement of the Careers Service should be integral to this.
- Narrative CVs – it will be important to ensure that this doesn't inadvertently discriminate against sections of the researcher population e.g. females, those from non-traditional University backgrounds. RPC noted that these groups are less likely to define aspects of their research as 'outstanding' or where a 'large contribution' has been made, thereby there was a risk that the introduction of narrative CVs could inadvertently make things less equitable.
- Wide scope of the report - some concern was expressed that the scope of the report was very wide, meaning the University's resources would be stretched in meeting all of the various recommendations. Career development was viewed as an area that the University could make major improvements.

- PhD students – PhD students appeared to have limited mention in the report, but these are ‘research apprentices’ so should receive greater focus. The report overlooks the first stage in becoming a post-doc. PhD students shouldn’t be classified as students, they should be pre-doctoral researchers and treated as staff, which would help to redress the current power imbalance.
- Promotions Process – it was agreed that research volume should not be a factor and that other achievements should be considered in the promotion process. However caution was expressed at proposing ‘contribution to a research team’ as a factor, as this was not the predominant research model in several disciplines.
- DORA – it was unclear how well this type of initiative had been taken on board within School/Committee processes – further work needs to be undertaken to highlight why this matters.
- Mid-career researchers – it was suggested that there was too great an emphasis on ECRs in the report. Mid-career researchers have a high turnover due to pressured workloads. This group requires more support and this should be highlighted in this report.
- Bullying – it was suggested this remains an issue in this University. The University must take action on this and support others to come forward so that the problem can be properly addressed.
- Concordats – it was suggested that the majority of staff fail to engage with these and fail to see the relevance or impact of these on their experiences of working in research.
- Consequences for staff – concern was expressed that a number of these recommendations would ultimately result in additional workload for staff and managers, hence their implementation would not be as effective, with the result that the anticipated benefits would not necessarily arise.
- Workload – RPC agreed this was a key issue. Practices such as fractional research appointments had not helped with the overall School workload, nor had appointing staff at lower grades in order to make short-term financial savings but which had a negative impact in the longer term. Workload was not only an issue for research staff but also for colleagues on scholarship contracts. It was suggested that a review of the scholarship culture could be a useful development of this work.

G Macfarlane thanked RPC members for their insights and feedback and agreed that workload would have to be taken into account when implementing any of the recommendations contained within the report. He advised that the emphasis on the ECR experience was a consequence of the level of engagement by this group in the work of the Research Culture group, however the particular workload pressures faced by mid-career staff had been acknowledged in the report. He noted the feedback on the recommended use of narrative CVs, and the clear need to consider a wider range of factors and to recognise and reward a wider range of activities.

He recommended that the current version of the report should not be circulated to School Research Committees at the present time. Instead, he confirmed that he would give further consideration to the feedback provided by RPC, followed by further circulation of the revised report.

He also noted that the proposed Oversight Group would be responsible for ensuring that particular issues are fed into other groups for action e.g. Concordat Working Group, EDIC, etc. He also noted the recommendation that Research Culture Champions should be embedded within each School to continue this work.

ACTION: G Macfarlane to review the feedback from RPC and amend the draft report as required.

3 NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place on Wednesday 09 March 2022, 10.05 – 11.55 am.

MB/DF 02/21