

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 29TH OCTOBER 2024

Present: Nicholas Forsyth, Sanni Ahonen, Simon Bains, Ruth Banks, Keith Bender, Abbe Brown, Ed Chadwick, Matthew Clarke, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Amelia Hunt, Shahin Jalili, Jesper Kallestrup, Lucy Leiper, Sam Martin, Michelle Macleod, Rob McGregor, Abbie McLaughlin, Nir Oren, Stuart Piertney, Syrithe Pugh, Liz Rattray, Brice Rea, Ian Robotham, Nykohla Strong, Juliette Snow, Ian Stansfield, Ben Tatler, John Underhill, Claire Wallace

Apologies: Michelle Macleod, Tracey Slaven, Donna Walker

Welcome:

N Forsyth welcomed all to the first URC meeting of academic session 2024/25. On behalf of the URC, he gave thanks to members who have recently stood down from the URC – Georgina Hunt (ECR representative) and noted that this will be the last meeting for Sanni Ahonen (PGR representative). He also gave thanks to Tracey Slaven (outgoing University Secretary) for her contributions to the work of the URC.

He noted the following new members – John Underhill (attending on behalf of the IDR Directors), Abbie McLaughlin (new SDoR for Natural & Computing Sciences), and in attendance – Ian Robotham (Interim Director of DDIS).

Apologies for absence were noted.

1 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 25th April 2024 were received and approved.

2 MEETING UPDATES

2.1 Action Log

URC noted that almost all items had been completed since the previous meeting.

An update was provided on the item relating to tax implications associated with the payment of professional membership fees. URC noted that this matter was still under discussion with Finance, but the current view was that payment of professional fees required on a personal basis would remain a personal responsibility, however payment of professional fees where these were tied to free attendance at a conference would not have any tax implications.

2.2 Matters Arising

2.2.1 Update on UoA Leads

URC noted REF UoA leads are still required for several units of assessment.

ACTION: Schools to discuss and provide names to dawn.foster@abdn.ac.uk (SDoRs)

2.2.2 Research Strategy Away Day, 2nd October 2024

URC were reminded that finalised School research strategies will be required in December in order that further reflection and feedback can be provided in January 2025.

ACTION: Finalised School research strategies to be submitted by 04 December to nicholas.forsyth@abdn.ac.uk (SDoRs)

2.2.3 External Memberships

URC noted that details of external memberships were being collated in order that these can be promoted across the Schools. Subscription costs were discussed in relation to the potential impact on School budgets if current subscriber limits were breached by allowing access to staff external to the School. It was confirmed that Schools would remain responsible for subscription costs for professional memberships which were directly relevant to their School, and central funds would be limited to those subscriptions with a wider appeal beyond a single School.

ACTION: Further information will be circulated to URC on external memberships (E Rattray)

2.2.4 URC Representative on TRAC Steering Group

URC were informed that a representative from the SHAPE disciplines was required to join the TRAC Steering Group (noting that STEM subjects were already represented by S Piertney). URC received an overview of the work of the group, which is responsible for providing reassurance to the University that our processes for obtaining TRAC data (Transparent Approach to Costing) were appropriate and ensured good data to assist the University in understanding the costs associated with teaching, research and other activities.

ACTION: Name of a URC volunteer from a SHAPE discipline willing to join the TRAC Steering Group to be submitted to dawn.foster@abdn.ac.uk (URC members).

2.2.5 Senate Meeting, 23 October 2024 (additional item)

URC were advised that the research updates and presentations given at the recent Senate meeting were well-received, resulting in supportive two-way dialogue between Senate members, N Forsyth and the Research Deans.

Main Items for Discussion or Approval:

3 REMIT AND COMPOSITION

URC noted the annual requirement to review and approve the URC remit and composition at the first meeting of each academic session. URC received a summary of the key changes made, including a new statement regarding delegated responsibilities from Senate and clarification of URC's role in relation to the work of the REF Strategy Group.

Discussion was held on the terminology used in the remit in relation to the associated powers and responsibilities of the URC. URC were advised that whilst they will receive updates and be consulted on the issues listed therein, the remit must reflect the correct process in relation to current decision-making structures within the University.

ACTIONS:

- **Further explanation to be provided on the terminology adopted within the remit to describe the responsibilities of URC (N Forsyth/E Rattray)**
- **Proposals for further changes to revised remit and composition to be submitted to dawn.foster@abdn.ac.uk as soon as possible, as the finalised, approved remit is due to be submitted for information to the December meeting of Senate (URC members)**

4 REF2029

4.1 SFC Research Assurance & Accountability Submission 2024/25

URC noted the institution's draft SFC Research Assurance and Accountability report 2024-25, which provides a high-level summary to be prepared explaining how the annual Research Excellence Grant (REG) and Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG) is deployed. (URC noted that this will replace the annual SFC outcome agreement). This new approach is designed to help SFC understand how these grants are deployed within institutions to support research, whilst providing evidence and case studies to assure SFC of the appropriate use of these funds.

In respect of the RPG section of the submission, a high-level summary of the RPG outcomes will be prepared, supported by a case study on how RPG is used to support postgraduate provision at Aberdeen.

URC noted that the draft report was deliberately set at institutional level this year to allow time for Schools to help refine the report for future years to reflect School activity in relation to the use of REG and RPG. Case studies on other aspects of research activity e.g. culture and inclusivity would be welcomed. Work will also be undertaken with the Directorate of Planning to promote the use of REG in Schools.

4.2 REF Policy Updates

URC received a detailed summary of further decisions and policy updates relating to REF 2029, their potential impact on institutional preparations for REF 2029, and a summary of next steps in institutional REF preparations. The summary included updates on the initial decisions in summer 2023 and further clarifications in December 2023 on the timing of the REF (now 2029), updates on staff volume, clarification on submission of items with a connection to the submitting institution, and the reduction of Impact Case Study limits.

Updates were also provided on the People, Culture and Environment Pilot exercise; the Open Access consultation; REF 2029 main panels and advisory panels; and the REF policy roadmap and initial decisions consultation report.

URC noted the engagement activities undertaken in the Schools by the Vice Principal Research and Deans for Research, to ensure awareness of REF requirements and institutional preparations. Output assessment is ongoing, and work has commenced on the identification of existing institutional measures aligned to the People, Culture and Environment pilot exercise and potential REF metrics. URC also received a summary of next steps in preparation for REF 2029.

4.3 REF Equality Impact Assessment

URC discussed the annual update of the interim REF equality impact assessment process in relation to the REF 2029 preparations, based on a snapshot of staff numbers as of 31 July 2024. It was noted that the figures were on a par with the analyses performed by other UK HEIs. URC noted that with the proposal to remove the requirement to report on 'individual circumstances', that the impact of e.g. pregnancy and maternity leave would not be covered within the impact assessment, however will be considered under other preparations for the REF submission. URC also noted the recommendations made to aid the promotion and support of equality, diversity and inclusivity across our researcher population. URC queried whether there had even been EDI consideration at national level about the focus accorded to PGR completions? This does not appear to be so and URC queried whether this might be an issue to be raised in the future.

ACTION: Typo to be corrected in first table under section 5, REF2014 census date, % of white/unknown should be 90.4% (N Strong)

4.4 Engagement and Impact

URC received an update on engagement and impact activities, including proposed timelines for these activities, the overarching framework and available budget, including the Impact & Engagement Accelerator Fund (IEAF). This is a new fund (£250K) and will cover multiple aspects of impact and engagement, including impact case study (ICS) development and strengthening the evidence base for existing ICSs within the current REF cycle. The funds will be allocated in three streams – major, mission and agile awards, with the expectation that most awards will be made under the major and mission schemes (for strategic support of ICSs and research projects), and a smaller level of funding held in a light-touch, annual responsive fund to support operations issues such as writing support. A flexible approach will be taken towards allocation of the IEAF to ensure the scheme is responsive to the needs of our ICSs. URC noted that teaching buyout support may also be of value.

URC noted that the role of ‘engagement’ is currently under consultation and reflects the REF’s ambition to shift the focus of assessment away from individuals toward an institutional and disciplinary level by recognising and rewarding a wider range of impact-enabling activities such as industrial engagement. URC noted that another round of institutional research leave funding would be made available (focussed on research culture) and the scheme would consider applications related to engagement and impact under this theme.

URC recognised that the schools may find the associated timelines to be challenging, however information sessions will be arranged for schools and the overall aim is to be as responsive as possible to their needs.

4.5 Update on Output Assessment

URC received an update on the 2024 output assessment exercise, which due to slippage in timescales is still ongoing. Based on the current submissions, and where a self-assessment score has been provided, the current assessment grades are similar to the reviewed grades from the 2023 review exercise, with 40 – 50% within the 3* range and 15% in the 4* range. URC noted that whilst internal assessments have taken place to date, external assessments will be undertaken for subsequent benchmarking exercises. It was recommended that a timeline for recruiting external reviewers should be considered as these individuals will be in high demand.

URC also noted that recent outputs that weren’t included in the 2024 review exercise should now be part of the rolling stocktake review of outputs. Further guidance from the national REF team on the final guidance for assessment of outputs was awaited, and in the meantime Schools were encouraged to be as inclusive as possible when undertaking output reviews.

URC also noted that a number of staff with existing outputs have not proposed them for review, and also there are a number of staff who still have nothing to submit for review. Schools were urged to discuss this further with staff to ascertain the reasons for this to ensure that corrective action can be taken.

4.6 Research Culture Strategy

URC received an update on the proposal for developing our research culture strategy, which will be submitted for approval to the REF Strategy Group.

The paper summarised the approach as follows: (1) shared standards of excellence; (2) collective problem solving and sharing good practice; (3) recognising contributions and supporting career development, and (4) developing an evidence-informed approach to culture change. URC noted that funding will be available to support research culture, with an anticipated launch before Christmas with sufficiently long lead in times to allow funding bids to

be developed in line with academic planning. It was also confirmed that a resource would be prepared to provide examples of good practice in developing a positive research culture.

URC also noted the appointment of Dr Frances Medaney to the post of Scottish Research Cultures Collaboration Manager, who will support collaborative approach to supporting research culture across HEIs in Scotland. The role will be based at Aberdeen and will provide support for researcher career development, reward and recognition and enhancement of the research environment. URC also noted the appointment of Miss Dawn Hibbert to the role of Head of Research Strategy & Policy and REF Manager, with the appointment commencing in January.

5 INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

URC discussed the proposal to undertake an annual exercise in relation to international collaboration data from R&I and the Library. The exercise is designed to monitor co-authorship and identify and evaluate trends, emerging publication partnership strengths at institutional and school level, and to highlight publication strengths in international development research. The proposed approach will ensure compliance with the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and will ensure that a board set of metrics will be used to represent the full research environment, allowing for contextual information to be provided alongside values and measures. URC endorsed the proposed approach, whilst acknowledging some limitations to this analysis for Panel D disciplines.

6 RESEARCH INCOME, APPLICATIONS AND AWARDS

URC received an update, noting that the figures were subject to final audit. The figures showed that research income was slightly behind budget (by 1%), whilst the indirect cost contribution was slightly ahead of budget by 4.8%. Data available on Power BI data illustrates the growth in applications and awards during session 2023/24, with an increasing number of high value awards received.

URC also noted that the new process for managing funding applications was introduced on 01 August onwards. Early indications show a positive trend following the soft launch of the new process, however there were still some instances of late applications being submitted for checking.

7 INTERDISCIPLINARY CHALLENGE AREAS – APPLICATIONS AND AWARDS

URC noted the applications and awards data that have been assigned against an interdisciplinary theme, summarised under each of the 2040 challenge areas. The data illustrates a healthy percentage of funding applications related to one or more IDR themes (65%), with the majority of these (80%) aligning to a single IDR challenge area and the remaining 20% aligned to two or more IDR Challenge areas. These figures will continue to be monitored on a quarterly and annual basis.

8 DRAFT ANNUAL RESEARCH INTEGRITY STATEMENT

URC received and approved the annual research integrity statement.

ACTION: To be submitted to Court (for final approval) and thereafter publication on the University Research Governance webpages (D Foster)

9 RESEARCH & PGR RISK REGISTER

URC noted the latest version of the Research and PGR risk register and were asked to make observations and suggest recommendations for further changes to the risks/associated risk levels or new risks that should be included.

ACTIONS:

- Amendments required to risk 3 'Failure to address weaknesses in research environment/impact and output support identified in REF2021 feedback' to include additional mitigations relating to use of REG at School level and to consider the balance of teaching and research capacity (E Rattray)
- Current list of PGR risks to be forwarded to dawn.foster@abdn.ac.uk (S Piertney)

10 PGR COLLEGE REPORT

10.1 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2024

URC noted the summary of the University's results from the Postgraduate Research Experience 2024 survey. The report has been circulated to Heads of School and discussed in detail at the Postgraduate Research Committee, and it was noted that the underpinning data will be circulated to Schools for their information and awareness. It was noted that the sample sizes were fairly low (lack of engagement is a sector wide issue), hence some individual comments may bias the overarching messages from the survey.

The survey confirmed an overall satisfaction rate of our PGRs of 78%, which is an improvement against last year's survey results.

The survey data will be used to identify areas of greater focus and investment to enhance the PGR experience at Aberdeen. Engagement with the survey remains a sector wide issue.

10.2 PGR College Review of Academic Year 2023/34

URC received a summary of the PGR admission figures, studentship awards and change of student circumstances information for academic year 2023/24. URC noted that despite the fluctuations in application numbers, offers, acceptances and clearances over the previous three years, the number of 'ever registered' students has remained relatively consistent. URC noted the ongoing focus on ensuring that the number of doctoral degrees awarded was maximised. URC also noted that for self-funding overseas and home students the overall terms they were offered must be consistent with those of PGR students funded via UKRI, in example.

11 APPOINTMENT PROCESS FOR ETHICS CHAIRS

URC received and approved the paper on standardising the appointment process for Ethics Chairs for the University's internal ethics boards. Chairs will be appointed following a competitive interview process, to serve for three-year basis (with the option to extend).

For Information:

12 RESEARCH CENTRE REPORTING

URC noted the update provided.

13 UPDATE FROM THE ETHICS ADVISORY GROUP

URC noted the update provided.

14 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH UPDATE

URC noted the update provided.

15 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

ACTIONS:

- Problems identified by the IDR Directors in relation to the University's current policy on gmail accounts and spam filters to be discussed with Ian Robotham (J Underhill)
- The University Sustainability Group has developed a draft Net Zero Strategy – copy to be submitted to dawn.foster@abdn.ac.uk for circulation to URC (S Piertney)

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Tuesday 10 December 2024, 10.05 – 12.10pm (Committee Rm 2)

DF 11/24