

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 13TH MARCH 2023

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Simon Bains, Ruth Banks, Keith Bender, Abbe Brown, Ed Chadwick, Matthew Clarke, Andrew Dilley, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Claire Hawes (vice Mirela Delibegovic), Jesper Kallestrup, Ann Lewendon, Gary Macfarlane, Graeme Nixon, Nir Oren, Stuart Piertney (vice Sam Martin), Syrithe Pugh, Liz Rattray, Brice Rea, Ben Tatler, Tracey Slaven, Ian Stansfield, Donna Walker, Claire Wallace

Apologies: Marlis Barraclough, Elena Giannaccini, Brian Henderson

Welcome:

Marion Campbell welcomed all to the meeting. Syrithe Pugh (School of LLMVC) was welcomed to her first meeting as School Director of Research, having taken up this post in January. Ruth Banks (item 7), Claire Hawes (item 9) and Stuart Piertney were also welcomed to the meeting.

1 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 15th December 2022 were approved.

2 MATTERS ARISING

University Research Committee (URC) noted the action log, and that most items had been completed or were in progress. Item 3.1 (15/12/22) Suggestions for increasing research income will be discussed with Schools. URC also noted that the Power BI Income dashboard will be made available once the testing protocols have been completed.

URC also noted the written update that was provided on matters arising.

ACTION: Explanation of acronyms to be include in future iterations (D Foster)

URC also noted the recent announcement from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) of three Alliances for Research Challenges (ARCs), building on the previous Research Pooling Initiatives, and which will receive up to £600K of funding over the next four years. Two of the funded ARCs will involve the University of Aberdeen – Scottish Alliance for Food, Health, Equity & Sustainability (hosted by the University of Glasgow) and the Brain Health Alliance (hosted by the University of Glasgow), with ongoing discussions with the University of St Andrews regarding participation in the Scottish Research Alliance for Energy, Homes & Livelihoods.

Additional research funding for the University (c. £250K) has been allocated by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), to be spent by 31 March 2023 (and can be allocated to ongoing activities).

Research Income:

3 RESEARCH FUNDING

3.1 Research Income Report

URC noted that research income to date is slightly behind budget, but the overall spend was as expected. The current forecast for the year-end is that income should be on target.

Indirect Cost Contributions (ICCs) are ahead of budget, and also expected to be ahead of budget at year-end.

ACTION: Format of research income reports to be amended for next URC to include full year budget and forecast by School (D Walker)

With regards to the Order Book, URC noted that additional funding was awaited from the Development Trust (DT).

URC noted the underspends in Annex 1 Monthly Management Reports, which were explained as a result of last year's budget setting process having been over-ambitious in setting these targets. For SMMSN it was noted that a number of clinical trials were put on hold due to the impact of covid, and the funding bodies had requested that these should not be re-started after the covid restrictions were lifted. This will be reflected as a reduction in spend in the clinical trials programme. For Engineering, the underspend was due to delays in the arrival of equipment.

3.2 Applications & Awards Trends

URC noted the contents of the applications and awards trends paper, which was on par with this period last year. The £4M DT application (for the interdisciplinary research (IDR) fellows and post-graduate research (PGR) cohort) is listed against 'senior management' but will be reflected against School budgets once the locations of the fellows and PGRs have been confirmed.

Projected applications and income to 2025/26 have been included to reflect the growth required to meet the target of £65M income, which will require a shift to larger grants for this institution. The projections have been benchmarked and reflect the increase in UK Research and Innovation (UKRI's) funding portfolios. There are an increasing number of large-scale funding calls available, and this university is well-placed to bid for these e.g. Centres for Doctoral Training.

R&I are working with the Schools regarding engagement with future funding programmes, and modelling has been set up for each School.

URC discussed options for additional support for the required volume of activities, including another stage to help identify who might be best placed to apply for the funding calls e.g. discussions via email circulation, informal intelligence sharing over coffee, appointing lead school Directors of Research (DoRs) as champions for particular calls.

Early intelligence on calls was noted as important, as waiting until the call has gone out was often too late to prepare a bid. The limitations of the 'one size fits all' approach for grant processes was raised, and instead a suggestion that a tailored approach according to size of bid / experience or career stage of investigator etc might be worth investigating.

The volume of calls was also noted, and the importance of strategic selection of funding opportunities. Increased support for participation in Peer Review Colleges was suggested.

Reducing the bureaucracy around low value applications will also be considered in order to allow more time for support for mid and high-level applications.

It was noted that early career researchers (ECRs) need more support for funding bids. For those with previous awards, consideration should be given towards reducing the bureaucracy for these individuals when applying for future funding.

ACTIONS:

- **Suggestions for a tailored approach to be submitted to M Campbell & E Rattray (G Macfarlane)**
- **Benchmarking paper to be circulated again to School Directors of Research (M Barraclough)**

Post REF2021 Action Plan:

4 POST REF2021 ACTION PLAN & BUDGET

URC noted this was a version of a paper that has been submitted to the Senior Management Team (SMT), Court and the Finance and Resource Committee. The full package of REF support is estimated at approximately £11.5M over three years. This has been endorsed (in principle) by FRC.

URC discussed the need to improve impact ratings, noting the difficulties caused by issues with staff retention. URC were supportive of the proposed institutional research leave scheme, noting this could help with staff retention issues (in addition to outputs and impact case studies (ICS)). It was confirmed that the institutional research leave was not meant to replace School research leave and should be complementary.

URC suggested that some of the proposed actions should be more tailored to the needs of specific Schools, recommending that a degree of flexibility towards the deployment of these funds would be beneficial. URC were reminded that there are existing sources of funding that are already available e.g. pump priming for teaching backfill. The main purpose of the new £11.5M bid was to address large-scale issues and improve the quality of our research and impact ahead of REF2028.

URC noted the need to enhance the quality of outputs, and the funding that could be available to support staff in improving a 3* output to a 4* output.

5 REF 2028 STRATEGY GROUP – REMIT & COMPOSITION

URC noted that the REF 2028 Strategy Group proposals were approved by the SMT meeting on 08 March 2023. David Sweeney (ex-Research England) has been appointed as Special Adviser (Research Excellence) and will play an important role in developing the University's REF and related research strategy.

Consideration is still ongoing regarding how governance around REF decisions (e.g. eligibility, selection of outputs and ICSs, etc) will be managed, potentially via a separate group.

URC noted that feedback to the Schools will be important. It was confirmed that the REF 2028 Strategy Group will provide regular updates to the URC, and URC will be able to provide feedback to the group and to Schools.

ACTION: Feedback from REF 2028 Strategy Group to be standing item on URC agenda (D Foster)

6 REF 2028 STOCKTAKE

URC noted the stocktake was ongoing (final deadline 17 March 2023), hence this was a preliminary report based on the information received to date. School DoRs were thanked for their support and input to the process, which is designed to demonstrate our current state of preparedness and where further investment may be required.

URC also noted it will be important to remain alert to any issues in equality, diversity and inclusion that may emerge during the REF 2028 preparations.

In discussions regarding the responses by School on current outputs, School DoRs were advised to note in particular the columns for 'None' and 'No response' as those indicating the need for additional support.

URC noted that only the aggregate figures from the stocktake will be included in any future reports to Court. Schools will discuss the results with the staff involved.

7 UPDATE ON IMPACT AND OUTPUT TRAINING

URC received an update on recent support for impact and output training.

All Schools have been contacted regarding support for impact and meetings have been held with 9/12 Schools to date. The central impact team are working with Gary Macfarlane (as Dean for Interdisciplinary Research and Research Impact), and a number of useful discussions have taken place regarding forward planning which have helped to shape the priorities of the central impact team.

MS Teams sites for individual Schools are currently being established to track progress on their ICSs. This has been piloted in the School of Engineering and will be rolled out to the other Schools in due course.

£45K has been awarded to Schools (pro-rata based on the number of outputs expected) to support external training and calibration activities for outputs and ICSs. The budget set up and reporting will be managed by the central impact team, with this funding to be spent by 31 July 2023.

Research Governance, Policy and Concordats Developments:

8 ETHICS ADVIORY GROUP REPORT

URC noted the report on recent Ethics Advisory Group (EAG) activities, accompanied by three papers arising out of the implementation of Worktribe Ethics. The papers have been previously discussed, commented on and approved by the EAG, which includes all Chairs of the non-clinical/non- ASPA (Animals Scientific Procedures Act) Ethics Boards.

8.1 Risk Categorisation of Ethics Applications

URC discussed the risk categorisation guidance for ethics applications. URC were advised that the guidance was designed around the specific questions asked in the Worktribe Ethics module, hence issues such as the 'Prevent' Duty are not specifically highlighted as this is a governance rather than ethical issue. Risk levels for research identified in high risk locations and research involving vulnerable participants were also discussed.

URC approved the risk level guidance.

ACTION: URC Approval to be communicated to the EAG members for adoption by the Ethics Triage teams. (D Foster)

8.2 Minor/Major Amendments to Existing Ethics Approvals

URC approved the minor/major amendments guidance.

ACTION: URC approval to be communicated to the EAG members for adoption by the Ethics Triage teams. (D Foster)

8.3 Standard Operating Procedures for Ethics Boards

URC approved the draft SOP for Ethics Boards.

ACTION: URC approval to be communicated to the EAG members for adoption by the individual Ethics Boards. (D Foster)

9 ACTION PLAN – CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCHERS

URC received an update on the action plan and were asked to approve the 3-year institutional-level action plan that is required to meet the requirements of the Concordat. URC also noted this will be the basis for the next 'HR Excellence in Research' award bid.

URC approved the action plan for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

10 RESEARCH CULTURE UPDATE

URC received an update on the work of the Research Culture group, noting this would be the final URC meeting before the Wellcome bid deadline (early May). Building on the previous work undertaken on our research culture, the University has been invited by the Wellcome Trust to bid for up to £1M to fund further activities to support our research culture.

A call was previously circulated for University staff who would be interested in joining the bid Committee, and has resulted in a group that is reflective of the wider University, including staff from across the University, including those at various career stages and including a mix of academics/professional services/support staff.

Initial discussions have focussed on interdisciplinary research (IDR), e.g. leadership of IDR, who is involved in IDR, how open and transparent research can best be supported, how to make this IDR impactful. The bid team have been divided into sub-groups to formulate specific plans on various aspects of the bid.

Open sessions will be arranged to allow colleagues to input their own ideas and provide feedback on the work of the Bid Committee, and URC may be approached for their input to the bid.

For Information/To Note:

11 R&I RISK REGISTER

URC noted the updated risk register (updates highlighted in red). No major changes were noted in the risk landscape since the previous circulation.

12 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH

URC noted the public engagement event in Aberdeen Art Gallery scheduled for September.

AOB:

13 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

URC were advised that the Founders Day events on 25 May 2023 will include a number of public engagement activities, plenary sessions and Q&A sessions on research, which will coincide with activities hosted on the day by the Graduate School e.g. 3 minute thesis. This is with the aim of showcasing the University's research on Founder's Day.

URC also noted a concern raised regarding risk assessments in the existing room booking process in relation to visiting scholars.

ACTION: Visiting Scholars - risk assessment issues in the Room Booking process to be forwarded to T Slaven. (N Oren)

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Wednesday 03 May 2023, 9.35 – 11.25am

DF 03/22