

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 3rd MAY 2023

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Marlis Barraclough, Ruth Banks, Keith Bender, Abbe Brown, Ed Chadwick, Matthew Clarke, Andrew Dilley, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Claire Hawes (*vice* Mirela Delibegovic), Jesper Kallestrup, Ann Lewendon, Sam Martin, Graeme Nixon, Nir Oren (part meeting), Dean Phillips (item 16 only, *vice* Brian Henderson), Syrithe Pugh, Liz Rattray, Brice Rea, Ben Tatler, Tracey Slaven (part meeting), Ian Stansfield, Donna Walker (part meeting), Claire Wallace

Apologies: Simon Bains, Elena Giannaccini, Gary Macfarlane

Welcome:

Marion Campbell welcomed all her final URC meeting as Vice-Principal, Research. Dean Phillips was welcomed to the meeting to discuss item 16 (Digital Research Staffing) on the agenda.

1 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 13th March 2023 were approved.

2 MEETING UPDATES

2.1 Action Log

University Research Committee (URC) noted the action log, and that most items had been completed or were in progress. The Power BI Income dashboard is not yet available but will be made available once the testing protocols have been completed.

2.2 Matters Arising

URC noted the written update provided on matters arising.

URC also received confirmation that the University Research Leave scheme had been authorised by the Senior Management Team (SMT) and will go live this week.

Main Items for Discussion:

3 REF 2028 STOCKTAKE

URC received a report on the outcomes of the REF 2028 Stocktake exercise, which was completed between January and March 2023, and the results of which will inform ongoing REF 2028 planning and support for research within the Schools.

Noting that all REF eligible researchers had been invited to nominate a single output for assessment at this stage, the stocktake indicated that in relation to the number of 4* rated outputs that were currently available, most Units of Assessment appeared to be behind in their preparations. Furthermore, the equality analysis of the output data showed that female, part-time, mid-career and black researchers appeared to have relatively fewer 4* rated papers and were more likely to have no papers than their colleagues.

URC noted that this had been a useful initial exercise to assess the current level of preparedness, however there were a number of caveats attached to this initial data, including the fact that each researcher had submitted only one output (i.e. the assessed sample was a

subset of the overall REF-able output) and most Schools took a very conservative approach to the grading of these. Hence a number of outputs were not assessed, a number of outputs are still under preparation and the Schools remain focussed on increasing the quality of the outputs at this stage. URC discussed a number of options for additional support, including additional training and support for staff involved in output preparation to ensure a wider understanding of the * rating scale and what is required to achieve higher ratings.

ACTION: REF 2028 Stocktake to be standing item on URC agenda (D Foster)

4 STRUCTURE OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR (FROM SENATE)

URC received a briefing paper on the considerations by Senate (at their meeting on 19 April 2023) of the proposals for a revised academic year structure and were asked to comment on the potential impact of the proposed changes on research activities.

The views of the URC members were mixed – some Schools had already acknowledged that summer teaching was a reality for many, and that these proposals merely formalised the status quo. All agreed that workload management by the Heads of School would be key to ensuring an equitable approach that provided all researchers with time for undertaking research (e.g. having at least one term each year that was free from teaching). Others expressed concern that the revised structure was a precursor to the introduction of more courses with January start dates, leading to an overall increase in teaching loads. Concerns were noted that the erosion of the traditionally teaching free period over the summer could inhibit collaboration and team working in research (e.g. summer field research).

Overall, URC noted that the proposals were likely to be neutral in terms of their impact on research, however concern was expressed that if teaching loads were to increase as a result of additional teaching during the summer period, the impact on research could be significant.

Research Income:

5 REG 2023/24 – INDICATIVE FUNDING

URC received an update on the recent Scottish Funding Council (SFC) allocations for academic year 2023/24. URC noted that research & innovation funding for the sector has been set at £750M (an increase of £5.5M [1.8%]), with the uplift applied to the University Innovation Fund (UIF) in its entirety. URC also noted that whilst the University's Postgraduate Research Grant has increased in line with sector funding, and the UIF allocation increased significantly above the sector average, the main element of research & innovation funding (REG) has decreased by a further £3.1M, thereby fully implementing the £5M reduction as expected following the publication of last year's REF 2021 results. The final funding allocations from the SFC are expected in May.

URC members agreed to share this information with colleagues as it was important that staff understood how this links to School income, and how important the impact of 4* material in the REF 2028 exercise is for University finances.

ACTION: To be circulated within Schools as appropriate (School Directors of Research)

6 RESEARCH FUNDING

6.1 Research Income Report

URC noted the updates provided on research grants and contract income, noting that due to the need for URC to report to Senate meetings, only one month had been finalised since the previous URC meeting in March 2023. URC noted that the income paper indicated it was

likely that the University would reach its research income and exceed the indirect cost contribution (ICC) target for the current year.

6.2 Applications & Awards Trends

URC noted that the applications & awards paper will be circulated to URC at a later date, once the third quarter of 22/23 has been finalised. URC were reminded of the importance of spending the research awards, otherwise the funding can't be claimed back from the funding council. The funding councils are becoming more robust on adherence to the project timelines, and there is no value in saving the research award as any unspent funds will be clawed back. Researchers must be realistic in their bids for funding, and only ask for the funds that they know will be spent. UKRI are asking for more details of the reasons behind extension requests, and are now increasingly rejecting these.

ACTIONS:

- **Applications & awards paper to be circulated to URC when finalised (D Walker)**
- **Briefing paper to be prepared for next URC meeting on Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) to explain the importance of this exercise (E Rattray)**
- **Additional support to be provided to J Kalstrup regarding research costings (D Walker)**
- **A guide to Indirect Cost Contributions (ICCs) and Research Finances should be prepared for the School Directors of Research (D Walker)**

7 UKRI PLAN B – PIONEER PROSPECTUS

URC received an update on the UK's current position regarding participation in Horizon Europe and UKRI's Plan B, which is now known as 'Pioneer'.

The Pioneer funding has been introduced if, in the worst-case scenario, the UK withdraws from the negotiations to associate to Horizon Europe. In the meantime, the UKRI Horizon Europe Guarantee scheme provides funding to researchers who are unable to receive their Horizon Europe funding whilst the UK is in the process of associating to the programme.

URC noted that researchers should continue to be encouraged to submit applications for Horizon Europe funding.

ACTION: To be circulated within Schools as appropriate (School Directors of Research)

Research Governance, Policy and Concordats Developments:

8 SAFEGUARDING IN RESEARCH CODE OF PRACTICE

URC approved the adoption of the above Code of Practice for Safeguarding in Research. Further work will now be undertaken to prepare a programme of researcher training in preparation for formal adoption of the CoP in the next academic year.

9 CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

URC noted the adoption of the above Code of Practice on Conflicts of Interest for research, knowledge exchange and commercialisation activities.

ACTION: To be circulated within Schools as appropriate (School Directors of Research)

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

URC approved the report and action plan to retain the 'HR Excellence in Research' award (held since 2010). URC also approved the adoption of the sector-wide CEDARS survey in 2025, which will assist in rigorously evaluating the proposed activities.

Clerk's Note: The report and action plan were submitted to Vitae on 19 May 2023 via updates on the University's Staffnet webpages.

Updates and Reports:

11 GRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT

URC received an update on the institutional proposals for Doctoral Training Programmes (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs), which are the recognised mechanisms through which the major funding bodies in the UK provide funding for UK PhDs.

URC noted that six proposals have been selected for submission to UKRI/EPSRC to date for 22/23.

12 UPDATE ON IMPACT AND OUTPUT TRAINING

URC received an update on current activities in relation to research impact and output training and support. An additional Impact Officer was appointed in January 2023.

A programme of training sessions, impact workshops and impact case study assessment workshops by REF panels have been arranged with external facilitators. These were well-received by attendees (including early career researchers, PhD researchers, mid-career and senior researchers) with follow-up sessions and ongoing training to be arranged.

Monthly catch-ups have been scheduled with the School Impact Champions / REF leads across a number of Schools to identify and progress emerging case studies. Feedback from the Schools has identified a number of areas for future activity by the Impact Team, and a series of REF impact FAQs are currently being compiled and will be added to the impact toolkit, which will be launched in Spring 2023 following testing by Schools.

In addition to the resource allocation to support external training/calibration activities for impact and outputs, a number of impact projects have been supported by internal pump-priming and impact enabling funds, with further contributions allocated from the block grant for international partnership funding within the BBSRC remit.

For Information/To Note:

13 R&I RISK REGISTER

URC noted that no major changes were noted in the risk landscape since the previous circulation.

14 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH

URC noted the update received from the Public Engagement team.

15 RESEARCH FACILITIES WORKING GROUP

URC noted the update received from the Facilities Working Group.

ACTION: Schools to consider and provide feedback/suggestions for future showcase activities and fundraising opportunities to Graeme Nixon

Additional Paper for Consideration:

16 DIGITAL RESEARCH STAFFING

Dean Phillips (*vice Brian Henderson*) provided an update to URC on the current staff resourcing issues within the Directorate of Digital & Information Services (DDIS) and the risk of significant negative impact on DDIS's ability to support the delivery of the University's research priorities, including the funded contractual obligations for High Performance Computing and also the support for further research income growth. URC supported DDIS's request to progress the recruitment of vacant core digital research roles to ensure closer alignment with the strategic requirements for research.

AOB:

17 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

URC discussed the recent allocation of pump-priming funds for the UKRI interdisciplinary call, noting that the impact of fieldwork during the summer would make it difficult to spend before the end of the financial year. URC received confirmation that splitting the funds across the following financial year would be possible, however this would mean this would be deducted from next year's budget, meaning less funds available for new applications.

Marion Campbell noted this had been her final URC meeting as Vice Principal Research (albeit there may be a one-off meeting of URC to discuss REF 2028). She confirmed that Professor Nick Forsyth will assume the role of Vice Principal Research in August and will chair the URC meetings in session 2023/24 onwards.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Thursday 28th September 2023, 2.05 – 3.55pm

DF 05/22