UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 12th SEPTEMBER 2023

Present: Nicholas Forsyth (Convenor), Sanni Ahonen, Simon Bains, Marlis Barraclough, Ruth Banks, Keith Bender, Abbe Brown, Ed Chadwick, Matthew Clarke, Andrew Dilley, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Brian Henderson, Shahin Jalili, Jesper Kallestrup, Ann Lewendon, Sam Martin, Rob McGregor, Nir Oren, Stuart Piertney, Syrithe Pugh, Liz Rattray, Brice Rea, Juliette Snow, Ian Stansfield, Ben Tatler, Donna Walker, Claire Wallace

Apologies: Georgina Hunt, Gary Macfarlane, Tracey Slaven

Welcome:

N Forsyth welcomed all to the first meeting of the URC meeting for academic session 2023/24, including the new (and returning) members of the URC as follows: Sanni Ahonen (PGR representative), Georgina Hunt and Shahin Jalili (Post doc representatives), Rob McGregor (School Administrative Manager representative), Stuart Piertney (Dean for Postgraduate Research) and Juliette Snow (Team Lead, Research Development Executive). Apologies for absence were noted.

1   MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 3rd May 2023 were approved, subject to the correction of a typo (duplicated text under item 9, "Conflicts of Interest").

ACTION: Minutes to be corrected (D Foster)

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. Confirmation was received from the School Directors of Research that all tasks allocated to them (mainly involving dissemination of information) should now be marked complete.

2.2   Matters Arising

URC noted the written update provided on matters arising.

URC also noted the recent announcement regarding the deal made by the UK government to associate with the Horizon Europe scheme. URC agreed it will be important to engage with this scheme and resurrect previous partnerships and networks.

2.3   Worktribe Ethics Update

A Dilley provided an update on Worktribe Ethics. He confirmed that the project had now formally closed, however ongoing support would continue to be provided to help embed the application process within our researcher community. He noted that associated workload issues have been identified and work is ongoing to address these via further guidance for applicants and improvements to the operation of the review process. The Worktribe Ethics system is a standing item on the agenda for the Ethics Advisory Group, and feedback on Worktribe Ethics is welcomed from researchers. N Forsyth noted it was important for the School Directors of Research (SDoRs) to help identify any issues with the system, and also to remind the researcher community of the assistance available to applicants.

3   REMIT AND COMPOSITION

URC received the draft remit and composition for session 2023/24. This was approved by URC, subject to some further updates to the membership to reflect recent appointments. It was also recommended that the remit be revised to include reference to research culture and also oversight of core research facilities.

ACTIONS:
- **Typo to be corrected re. S Piertney's title and R McGregor noted as the new School Administration Managers' representative (D Foster)**
- **Further revisions to remit to be finalised (M Barraclough)**

Main Items for Discussion:

4   REF 2028 INITIAL DECISIONS AND CONSULTATION

URC discussed the draft institutional response to the funding councils' initial decisions and consultation on REF 2028 and noted that a number of questions remain about how REF 2028 will work in practice.

There was concern that removing the minimum of one output for each researcher could act as a disincentive to awarding teaching & research employment contracts to employees. There was a brief discussion around the use of 'scaled' or HESA FTE for determining the volume factor. URC noted that care must be taken that the combination of measures does not create an incentive to employ researchers on short term contracts.

Other concerns were raised regarding the removal of a minimum requirement of one output for each researcher, which could lead to a few 'stars' being highlighted, and that too much focus on individual researchers' outputs contradicts the ethos of 'inclusivity' and would conflict with the new environment/culture assessment element. It was also suggested that including staff in the REF submission without an output could be divisive amongst staff in the Schools. In response, it was noted that the minimum of one output per researcher was a consequence of removing the declaration of personal circumstances, therefore in any unit there could be staff with no outputs. The expectation is that output selection should be representative of the unit and it is likely that penalties would be applied if any institution is found to be 'gaming' the system. Output decisions will be an important element of the institutional Code of Practice.

Concerns were also raised at the proposal to include PGRs within output submissions, or staff who are not employed on research contracts e.g. non-academic staff. There should be no pressure placed on these individuals to submit papers to REF2028.

URC approved the consultation response, subject to some further revisions, to be submitted to SMT for final approval (and Senate for information) and thereafter to the funding councils by 6th October 2023.

ACTION: Draft consultation response ('Volume Measure' section) to be revised to note the unintended consequences of the removal of the minimum of one output (M Barraclough).

5   INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH LEAVE

E Rattray acknowledged the assistance provided by the Schools in helping to administer this process, and confirmed that the financial awards were currently being finalised. A number of recommendations have been made for revisions to future iterations of the scheme, including allowing a longer lead in time for applicants to develop their applications and a planned focus

on impact in the next tranche of awards (which will be launched in October, for research leave commencing in September 2024).

She noted that five applications were unsuccessful, however constructive feedback has been provided so that those individuals may reapply to a future application round of the scheme.

URC noted that it had been difficult for Schools to recruit Teaching Fellows to cover the teaching duties of those who have received institutional research leave awards. Instead, it was suggested that the leave period should coincide with the term structure which would allow for a appropriate handover at either end of the leave period.

URC noted the useful EDI analysis of the applicants. It was noted that applications from all career stages had been encouraged. It was further suggested that the SDoRs would be able to support future schemes by promoting the scheme and supporting applicants, particularly ECRs (early career researchers).

URC approved the report.

ACTION: Report to be submitted to SMT (M Barraclough)

6   WORKLOAD REPORT

E Rattray noted that the paper provided a list of operational findings (relating to research) which arose from the Academic Workload Engagement Exercise that was undertaken during the summer.

URC noted issues with time allowed for research activities. In addition to supporting research leave, it is important to ensure a reduction of some of the other aspects of staff workload (e.g. teaching and admin) to allow ongoing research to continue e.g. one day per week for research. It was noted that in many instances, Chairs/Readers are involved in administrative tasks that could be undertaken by others.

It was also noted that peer review duties often fall to the same groups of staff, and it was suggested that a peer review process that spanned the entire University (and with appropriate hours allocated within the workload model) should be introduced.

Incentivisation for research grants was also discussed. URC were advised that there are a variety of incentives that Heads of School (HoS) can adopt regarding overheads, as there was no overall consensus on how this should work within the institution. It was confirmed that all overheads are awarded to the School as Indirect Cost Contributions (ICCs). Thereafter it is up to the School budget setting process to determine how these are allocated.

URC also noted the number of senior academics covering 1st and 2nd year tutorials, and suggested that graduate students should be involved with small group teaching. However the drawbacks of this were noted – PGRs are part-time by definition, and involving them in relatively poorly paid word for extended periods whilst they are completing their PhDs can have an adverse impact on their studies.

Research Income:

7   RESEARCH FUNDING

7.1   Research Income Report

URC noted the research income by School for the full 2022/23 financial year, and the order book as of 22 August 2023. Significant expenditure had been made on equipment during the final months of the academic year, which had a positive impact on income and ICC. URC also noted that the current research income is ahead of budget by £2.4M (4.4%).

D Walker confirmed that more detailed information is available in Power BI (up to May 2023) with further data due to be published once the accounts have been finalised. She also advised that a Power BI training session will be held this month.

She noted that a number of large awards have been received since the previous URC meeting, and that the institutional order book was encouraging.

7.2   Applications & Awards Trends

URC received an update on the research grants applications and awards for the full 2022/23 financial year, noting the positive trend in the average value of awards (which have increased from £166K in 2021/22 to £193K in 2022/23).

7.3   Support for Strategic Research Grants

J Snow provided URC with an update on the proposal for strategic research support, aimed at achieving our research income targets (to grow to £65M by 2025 and £85M by 2030). The scheme is designed to provide more structured support to PIs who are planning to apply for large grants (>£1M), and would be flexible, tailored to the PI's individual circumstances.

URC expressed some concerns regarding their School's resources to support this (administrative support,and the ability to allocate appropriate PI time). Concerns were also raised regarding the support that would then be available to researchers applying for smaller value grants, and the impact this could have on their other activities.

URC noted the lower frequency of high value grants within Arts and Humanities and suggested that the eligibility criteria (£>1M) should be reviewed for these disciplines. J Snow confirmed that SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) will continue to be supported by the Researcher Development Executive (RDE) team. She also confirmed that the SDoRs will be involved in discussions surrounding the other types of support provided by the Grants Academy, and that discussions will be held with the Schools to identify current activities that will no longer be supported. She also noted that this proposal provides an opportunity to separate out the various grant support activities and free up some additional time.

URC raised queries regarding the procedure for selection of the proposals which will receive strategic research support. J Snow noted that the item was raised for initial discussion today and that further work will be undertaken by the team to progress this initial proposal, including the creation of a triage group to make the decisions on which proposals will be supported. It was also noted that many of the high value applications will involve interdisciplinary research hence the IDR Directors could be involved in supporting the process.

Research Governance, Policy and Concordats Developments:

8   COARA

URC discussed the proposal for the University to become a signatory on the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment. M Barraclough noted that the ten principles within the agreement are what we should aspire to as an institution, however there will be resource implications if we agree to proceed. These include the development of an action plan (with milestones) within a year of becoming a signatory, and five yearly reviews of assessment criteria, tools and associated processes.

However, she also noted that the initial decisions from REF 2028 indicate that implementation of CoARA would provide a good framework for improving and reporting on our research culture and environment. S Bains noted that the Library will be able to provide support for this activity.

URC approved the proposal for SMT, subject to the correction of a typo regarding his name.

ACTION: Typo to be corrected, and proposal submitted to SMT (M Barraclough)

9   ETHICS APPEALS POLICY

URC noted the proposal to introduce an appeals process for applications submitted to the Worktribe Ethics review process. A Dilley confirmed that the process had been developed in in consultation with the Ethics Advisor Group (EAG), HR and Academic Services, and was modelled on best practice from other universities.

He noted the key aspects of the policy. It will be an asynchronous online process, hence will avoid the delays caused by having to arrange meetings; therefore the appeals process should be quicker to complete; the grounds for appeal are based on other university appeals processes (such as the review procedures were not correctly followed, or the Ethics Board did not have the authority to make the decision; or the Board did not act impartially when making their decision), therefore applicants can only appeal on the grounds of incorrect process.

URC approved the policy.

ACTION: To be submitted to SMT (then Senate - for information - via the URC report) (D Foster)

10   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)

11   POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH COMMITTEE REMIT & COMPOSITION

S Piertney noted that the remit and composition of the committee has been updated to reflect the full PGR lifecycle, including an explanation of the links with other University committees and groups, and the commitment and input expected from the Schools.

URC approved the revised remit and composition.

Updates and Reports:

12   INTERDISCIPLINARY THEMES REPORT

URC noted the update provided.

13   GRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT

URC noted the update provided.

14   IMPACT UPDATE REPORT

URC received an update on current activities in relation to support for research impact. URC endorsed the Terms of Reference for the role and responsibilities of the Impact Leads and

noted that the Impact Leads were encouraged to identify any training or additional support required for the role.

URC discussed the links between IDR and Schools, and the need for improved connections between these areas.

URC also acknowledged the excellent support for Schools provided by the Impact Team.

15   PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH

URC noted the update received from the Public Engagement team.

16   REPORT FROM THE ETHICS ADVISORY GROUP

URC noted the update received from the Ethics Advisory Group.

17   INTRODUCTION TO ARIA

URC noted the update provided on ARIA (Advanced Research and Invention Agency).

For Information/To Note:

18   R&I RISK REGISTER

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

19   ABERDEEN 2040 OPERATIONAL PLAN

URC noted the update provided.

20   EXPLORING THE SCOTTISH KE LANDSCAPE

URC noted the report from the Oxentia workshop, July 2023.

AOB:

21   ANY OTHER BUSINESS

N Forsyth confirmed that a review of the URC membership and committee agenda structure will follow as an item of business at a future meeting. He also noted there had been no URC meeting since May and proposed that an additional URC meeting should be held during the summer months in order that a submission can be made to the first Senate meeting of the academic year.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Monday 18th December 2023, 2.05 – 3.55pm

DF 10/23