

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 18TH DECEMBER 2023

Present: Nicholas Forsyth (Convenor), Simon Bains, Marlis Barraclough, Abbe Brown, Ed Chadwick, Matthew Clarke, Andrew Dilley, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Brian Henderson, Georgina Hunt, Shahin Jalili, Jesper Kallestrup, Gary Macfarlane, Sam Martin, Rob McGregor, Gearoid Millar (*vice* Claire Wallace), Nir Oren, Stuart Piertney, Syrithe Pugh, Liz Rattray, Brice Rea, Tracey Slaven, Juliette Snow, Ian Stansfield, Ben Tatler, Donna Walker

Apologies: Sanni Ahonen, Ruth Banks, Keith Bender, Ann Lewendon

Welcome:

N Forsyth welcomed all to the meeting for including Gearoid Millar (representing Social Sciences on behalf of Claire Wallace). Apologies for absence were noted.

URC noted the new process for managing the volume of business addressed at URC meetings. Where reports are for information only, these will be presented via a slide presentation instead of a paper. In future, papers will only be prepared for items that require URC approval.

In addition, URC noted the February URC meeting will be supported using 'Decision Time' software, the new University repository for all business discussed at committees of Senate and Court). All URC members will need to be registered on the system in order to access the committee papers, and further information will be circulated in due course.

1 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12th September 2023 were approved.

2 MEETING UPDATES

2.1 Action Log

University Research Committee (URC) noted the action log. Items related to the Power BI survey and Research Finance tasks remain outstanding.

2.2 Revised Remit and Composition 2023/24

As per an action arising from the previous meeting, URC received and approved the further revisions to the 2023/24 URC remit and composition, subject to further minor modifications (removal of 'student' from the title of the Postgraduate Research Committee; clarification of the process to be adopted for chairing URC meetings in the absence of the Convenor).

ACTION: Further revisions to be addressed, and thereafter revised remit and composition to be submitted for the attention of Senate (D Foster)

2.3 Matters Arising

URC noted the additional paper submitted by S Pugh. On behalf of URC, N Forsyth endorsed the principle that any decisions regarding the future of Modern Languages research should be based on evidence; he also confirmed the University's commitment and obligations to the responsible use of data.

He confirmed that the authority to agree the REF submission lay with the REF Strategy Group and SMT and noted that the role of URC and the REF Steering Group was to inform the consideration of those groups. Discussion was held on the interpretation of URC's role in terms of its responsibility for oversight of the institutional preparations for REF and had an advisory role in matters related to research policy.

S Pugh raised concerns about the data that has been used to support the recommendations for Modern Languages at the University. N Forsyth confirmed that further meetings will be held in order to agree relevant data. *[Note by Clerk: a series of meetings to discuss LLMVC data around student loads and research is underway, involving colleagues from LLMVC and the relevant professional service areas]*

URC noted the written update provided on matters arising from the previous meeting.

Subsequent to the September URC meeting, URC noted that the institutional response to the initial consultation on REF was duly submitted to the Funding Council in October. The institutional research leave scheme for the next academic year was approved by SMT and Senate. URC also noted that SMT did not commit to CoARA (Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment), however potential membership will be reconsidered early next year once a Dean has been appointed with responsibility for People, Culture and Environment.

URC noted the recent announcement of a 12-month delay to the REF exercise (now REF 2029).

URC were informed that NERC have announced the timetable for DTP3. A re-worked QUADRAT-2 bid will be submitted, and the Schools of Biological Sciences and Geosciences are currently in discussion with Queens University Belfast to progress a partnership, which will likely involve collaborators from other HEIs.

ACTIONS:

- **Statement to be prepared for Senate on URC's responsibility/authority to advise/decide on REF submission structure and preparations (T Slaven)**
- **Updates to be provided to N Forsyth regarding any potential bids for the NERC DTP3 (where Aberdeen will be a lead institution) to ensure appropriate triage process can be implemented. In addition, information on any bids where Aberdeen will be a partner institution would be helpful (SDoRs)**

Main Items for Discussion:

3 REF PREPARATIONS UPDATE

URC received an update on the REF2029 preparations (recently endorsed by SMT). URC noted the revisions to the portfolios for the Research Deans (with the vacancies recently advertised) and changes to the associated supporting structures for the next REF submission in light of the anticipated changes to the weighting and naming of the REF components (People, Culture & Environment; Contribution to Knowledge & Understanding; Engagement & Impact). This includes changes to the membership of the REF Steering Group, the establishment of four panel groups (for panels A, B, C and D) chaired by the Research Deans, the creation of Unit of Assessment (UoA) specific group, the creation of an Impact and Engagement Steering Group (complemented by Panel Impact Groups) and the creation of a People, Culture & Environment Steering Group (complemented by Panel PCE groups).

URC also noted the next annual review process for outputs will take place in 2024 and will be supported using the enhanced functionality available on Pure. URC discussed the output review process, noting it was unlikely to commence before April 2024. Staff (including those on Teaching & Scholarship contracts) will be invited to submit up to five outputs for review, and this will include staff within Modern Languages. Workload issues were raised, and it was noted that the review process should be sufficiently thorough without being overly time-

consuming. It was acknowledged that the outcomes of the review process may cause anxiety amongst some staff, however support mechanisms are already available within the Schools for these staff (mentorship, support for funding applications). The review process should be used to support individuals in their REF preparations, and the School Directors of Research should be involved in this. In response to concerns regarding the perceived delay in the stocktake and the need in some areas to focus resources on impact support, N Forsyth confirmed it will be important not to rush the review process but to ensure that an appropriate process is in operation as soon as possible. Impact support work with the Schools will continue, and it is essential that we understand our current output profile as this will determine the volume factor.

G Macfarlane confirmed on behalf of the Impact Oversight Group that reviews will have been undertaken for all panels by the end of January. The impact team are aware of the Schools where more work is required, and the impact work will continue in parallel with the output stocktake.

It was noted that the workload implications for reviewing up to 5 items for each member of staff could be severe where monographs are submitted. It was suggested that where outputs are already published, it may be helpful to base internal reviews on e.g. readers reports by subject specialists, where these are available.

4 OPEN ACCESS FOR LONG FORM OUTPUTS

URC discussed the paper, noting that the UKRI's open access mandate for long form outputs will come into force on 01 January 2024. This requires that monographs, book chapters, edited collections and books arising from UKRI funding must be openly available within 12 months of their publication date via a Creative Commons (CC) licence (with some limited exemptions).

URC endorsed the proposal that the existing institutional Research Publication and Copyright Policy should be extended to include long form outputs (with the opt-out option to remain, in addition to the UKRI exemptions).

ACTION: Paper to be submitted to February URC proposing the extension of the institutional rights retention policy to include long form outputs (S Bains)

5 NSIA/TRUSTED RESEARCH/EXPORT CONTROLS

URC discussed and approved the adoption of the statement of compliance on Trusted Research (a range of initiatives related to ensuring the security of our international research collaborations) and the associated compliance processes to be adopted within the University.

URC noted that this will mainly affect the Schools of Engineering, Geosciences and Natural & Computing Sciences. A training programme will commence for these Schools in the New Year, and a due diligence checklist is being developed and will be shared with colleagues to alert them to these issues.

ACTION: Paper to be submitted to SMT for approval (M Barraclough)

6 DRAFT STRATEGY FOR SUPPORTING EU FUNDING

URC noted that the UK will re-associate with Horizon Europe from 01 January 2024, enabling UK applications to be submitted to these funding schemes. URC noted the recommendations that submissions be made to the following schemes: Pillar I Excellent Science; Pillar II Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness; and Pillar III Innovative Europe. This

will be supported via a new EU pathway at the University, further enhanced by a number of additional cross-cutting support activities.

ACTION: Paper to be circulated to School Research Committees (SDoRs)

For Approval:

7 RESEARCH GOVERNANCE HANDBOOK (VERSION 11)

URC received the annual revision of the research governance handbook and noted the summarised bulletpoints as per the covering paper.

URC approved version 11, subject to further discussion regarding amendments to the use of animal tissue in research (section 3.6), openness in research (section 4.1.7), responsible use of research metrics in research assessment (section 4.1.11) and research misconduct process (section 4.2.2).

ACTION: Further revisions to be finalised prior to the publication of the handbook on the University webpages (D Foster, M Barraclough, S Bains)

Updates and Reports

Slide Presentations – Updates from Committees and Sections

- **Concordat on Career Development of Researchers Working Group** – URC received an update on recent developments in support of the researcher development concordat. Feedback is sought on two draft documents – ‘Code of Practice for Researchers and their Managers’ and ‘Guidance on Career Development for Research Fellows’.
- **Graduate School** – URC received an update on the outcomes of the 2023 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey at Aberdeen. A below sector response rate (21%) was noted amongst Aberdeen students, due to a late decision to adopt the survey (in late April). The following issues were noted: positive responses on supervision, campus working spaces and access to resources. Research culture and the PGR community were noted as areas for improvement. Lower satisfaction levels were noted amongst non-binary students, students with a disability and from those from a less well-off background. Fewer opportunities for placements were also reported, and it was noted that IT would be willing to discuss placement opportunities with the Graduate School. The next survey will be launched in February 2024 and will run until May 2024.
- **Impact** – URC received an update on recent impact activities. An additional Impact Officer will join the team in January (noting that another colleague is now on maternity leave). The impact officers have been designated to the four REF panel areas, and an Impact Lead network is being developed to support the individuals appointed to these roles within the Schools. 12 impact training workshops have been delivered since April 2023, and three Schools are hosting impact pitching sessions for their staff and will be happy to host observers for future sessions. The research leave scheme deadline is 19 January, and 14 applications are currently anticipated with focus on developing impact from their research.
- **Public Engagement** – URC received an update on recent public engagement activities. This included a summary of the Explorathon activities in 2023 and those planned for 2024/25. Updates were also provided on the Techfest STEM festival (October – December 2023) and upcoming training in 2024 which will include sessions on evaluation for researchers. URC also noted a number of grant applications which have received assistance from the PERU team.

(Copies of the slides from the above presentations were circulated to URC members after the meeting. A copy has been uploaded to the URC Sharepoint site.)

Papers:

8 CONCORDAT WORKING GROUP REPORT/POST DOC COMMITTEE

URC noted the paper (complementing the earlier slide presentation).

ACTION: Any further comments/feedback to be submitted to Claire Hawes (URC members)

9 RESEARCH FUNDING

9.1 Research Income Report

URC noted the update provided.

9.2 Applications & Awards Trends

URC noted the update provided.

10 GRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT

URC noted the paper (complementing the earlier slide presentation).

11 REPORT FROM THE ETHICS ADVISORY GROUP

URC received an update on the recent work of the Ethics Advisory Group, noting that auditing ethically approved projects will be the next key item of business.

For Information/To Note:

12 INTERDISCIPLINARY THEMES UPDATE

URC noted the update provided.

13 REF2028 – ASSESSMENT OF PEOPLE, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION

URC noted the update provided.

14 R&I RISK REGISTER

URC noted the update provided.

15 ABERDEEN 2040 OPERATIONAL PLAN

URC noted the update provided.

16 ADVANCED RESEARCH & INVENTION AGENCY (ARIA) – PRESENTATION TO UNIVERSITIES SCOTLAND RKEC, 04 DECEMBER 2023

URC noted the update provided, and that social sciences and humanities will be considered as the finer details of the scheme continue to be developed.

AOB:

17 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

URC discussed concerns raised regarding the University's position that professional membership fees cannot be paid from School funds. For some conferences, membership permits free attendance, and the membership is often cheaper than the fee. In addition, there are EDI issues (e.g. childcare often only available for members).

ACTION: Potential tax implications associated with the payment of professional membership fees to be investigated further and reported back to URC (E Rattray)

URC also discussed the implications of the new immigration rules, and salary thresholds for visas, and the potential impact on post-doc recruitment. URC noted that bids should now be made for the higher spinal point (36) to ensure the threshold is reached.

N Forsyth offered to discuss S Pugh's paper outside the meeting, noting that a governance structure to raise concerns and make representations was already in place through the Steering Group and Project Board.

Clerk's Note: Due to lack of time, the following AOB item was subsequently circulated by email to URC members.

Open Access publishing and subscriptions update

The 2023-24 UKRI open access block grant has now been fully allocated. The Library will not be able to accept any more applications for article funding until the new grant is received. The UKRI financial year starts on 1 April but we will not know the extent of our allocation before then. Open access compliance can be achieved via the Green route (exercising rights retention to ensure deposit without embargo). We will not be able to fund papers in 'Pure Gold' journals, where there is no paywall option and therefore Green Open Access doesn't apply. Note that in relation to long-form open access costs required to support the UKRI policy change that comes into effect on 1 January, there will be a separate funding stream.

Additionally, as part of the process of identifying Directorate savings, all Library subscriptions, including those with a publish element, are being scrutinised and cancellations are possible. In one case, PLoS (Public Library of Science, an entirely open access publisher), cancellation has gone ahead. Such decisions will, of course, prevent immediate access to subscription ejournals, and place funder and REF compliant publishing at significant risk, so will not be taken lightly. The case being made is that time is needed to consult carefully and to ensure mechanisms are in place to offer acceptable alternatives if we feel it necessary to cancel a publisher agreement (and in some cases, this won't be possible under contractual terms). In the meantime, continued academic support is requested where the Library is leading on negotiating acceptable pricing with the large publishers. Strong support has already helped to drive the cost down substantially for the recent Elsevier and Springer Nature deals. We are now involved in national negotiations relating to IEEE, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley. A case has been made internally in support of the Emerald Publishing renewal for 2024 which we hope to see approved shortly.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Tuesday 13th February 2024, 10.05 – 11.55am

DF 01/24