

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 13TH FEBRUARY 2024

Present: Nicholas Forsyth (Convenor, item 7 onwards), Sanni Ahonen, Simon Bains, Ruth Banks, Keith Bender, Abbe Brown, Matthew Clarke, Andrew Dilley (Convenor to item 6), Dawn Foster (Clerk), Brian Henderson, Georgina Hunt, Shahin Jalili, Jesper Kallestrup, Ann Lewendon, Sam Martin, Nir Oren, Stuart Piertney, Syrithe Pugh, Liz Rattray, Brice Rea, Juliette Snow, Ian Stansfield, Ben Tatler, Donna Walker, Claire Wallace

Apologies: Marlis Barraclough, Ed Chadwick, Gary Macfarlane, Rob McGregor, Tracey Slaven

Welcome:

On behalf of N Forsyth, A Dilley welcomed all to the meeting and explained he would be chairing the meeting until item 7, at which point N Forsyth would be available to resume the Chair duties.

Apologies for absence were noted.

URC noted the concerns raised by some members regarding the introduction of Decision Time as the online tool for managing and distributing URC papers. They raised concerns that the new process was time-consuming and required additional time for meeting preparation. They also noted the duplication of effort, given that the papers could not be downloaded from Decision Time and thus had to also be uploaded to the URC Sharepoint site.

ACTION: T Slaven to be approached to explore options regarding for URC papers within Decision Time (E Rattray)

1 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th December 2023 were received but not yet approved (pending further time granted to allow for members who had not yet had time to review these).

ACTIONS:

- **Amendment to the wording of the final paragraph of 2.3 to include Geosciences in the discussions with Queens University Belfast regarding a potential partnership for a QUADRAT-2 bid (D Foster)**
- **Any further amendments should be submitted to D Foster by close of business Tuesday 20 February (URC members) and thereafter the finalised copy to be uploaded to the URC webpages (D Foster)**

2 MEETING UPDATES

2.1 Action Log

URC noted that all items had either been completed or presented for further discussion within the meeting agenda.

ACTIONS:

- **Item omitted in error from previous AOB – potential tax implications associated with the payment of professional membership fees. Item to be included in the revised action log (D Foster)**
- **Initial discussions have indicated a potential difficulty when trying to differentiate these payments from personal taxation matters. This will continue to be**

progressed and a further update will be provided to the April URC meeting (E Rattray)

2.2 Matters Arising

URC noted that targeted training on NSIA, Trusted Research and Export Controls will be focussed on identified 'high risk' Schools initially, and thereafter rolled out to all Schools.

2.2.1 Policy on Peer Review

In response to a query raised by the School of DHPA, URC received confirmation that Schools are empowered to adapt the peer review policy to reflect their local circumstances e.g. if Schools no longer wish to apply the peer review process to grants of <£10K. This would not affect the other elements of the peer review policy.

2.2.2 UKRI Grant Applications

Confirmation was provided to URC that applications for UKRI research funding are still encouraged and remain a priority. Achieving at least 80% of the full economic cost is beneficial for the overall cost recovery of research hence the University will continue to support staff who wish to apply for UKRI funding.

2.2.3 DFN Project Search, University of Aberdeen

URC members welcomed the opportunity to support this initiative within their Schools and agreed that the most appropriate method of circulation for this type of opportunity would be via the Grants Academy.

ACTION: DFN material to be circulated to Schools via the Grants Academy (J Snow)

Main Items for Discussion:

3 OPEN ACCESS FOR LONG FORM OUTPUTS

URC noted the proposal to extend the current research publications policy to include long form publications. This is in response to changes to the UKRI's Open Access Policy (which requires such outputs to be made open access if published on or after 01 January 2024), and also mandates from Horizon Europe. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the REF is likely to align with this approach following their open access consultation which is due to take place later this year.

URC noted that following the introduction of the University's research publications policy in May 2023, 25 UK universities now have a similar policy, and to date, no challenges have been raised by publishers regarding the requirement for them to honour any rights retention statements submitted with a paper.

Further benefits are anticipated for the University in relation to the REF's People, Culture and Environment submission, as this policy will demonstrate our commitment to an open research culture. The revised policy still allows for author opt-outs, embargo periods and flexibility regarding creative commons licences.

URC discussed the need for transitional arrangements to provide support and reassurance to staff, and concerns regarding publishers who don't currently support open access. Confirmation was provided that staff will still have the freedom to select the most appropriate publisher for their work, irrespective of whether they support open access, so long as the publisher is endorsed by the University and where required, the research funder. URC noted that Aberdeen University Press can support open access publications.

ACTION: URC approved the policy, subject to the expansion of the accompanying FAQs to address the issues raised by URC, including transitional arrangements, agreed implementation date and a proposed approach from the University to publishers who currently don't support OA to strongly encourage them to transition (S Bains)

4 COPYRIGHT LITERACY STRATEGY & POLICY

URC discussed the policy, which had recently been approved by the University's Information Governance Committee and University Education Committee. The policy has been informed by best practice and aligns with similar policies within the sector. The purpose of the policy is to provide further clarity on the creation and use of copyright material by streamlining the process of making copyright-related decisions and reducing the risk of copyright infringement or breaching the licensing terms and conditions.

Two representatives from URC were asked to join the Copyright Literacy Steering Group, which has been established to oversee the implementation of the policy and to assist in delivering the University's associated strategy. A Brown volunteered to join the group.

URC noted and endorsed the introduction of this policy.

ACTION: One further representative from URC sought to participate in the Steering Group – contact S Bains (URC members)

5 COSTING & PRICING POLICY

URC discussed the draft policy, which deals with costing and pricing for work with external parties, primarily related to research, knowledge exchange, consultancy and continuing professional development services (CPD). The policy has already been considered by the Senior Management Team, the Commercialisation Committee of Court and the Enterprise and Innovation Committee.

Costings will be calculated and recorded on Worktribe system using TRAC methodology with guidance on appropriate pricing for a variety of activities, with support from the Research Development Executives/Technology Transfer Executives as appropriate.

Clarification was provided on the process for pricing contract research, including associated insurance provisions. Confirmation was also provided on the role of the academic applicant(s), Research Development Executive and Director of R&I in relating to pricing and approval of commercial research. It was confirmed that should the workload involved in the approval process become overly burdensome, a degree of delegation may be required, and this aspect of the policy will remain under ongoing review.

URC provided its approval of the policy, which will now progress towards final approval within the University's Financial Regulations.

6 CHANGES TO BID SUBMISSION

URC noted and discussed the proposed changes to the grant application process, designed to allow more resources to be directed in support of high value and industry related applications and proposals from Early Career Researchers, as well as to improve the overall quality and competitiveness of final submissions.

The focus of the proposed changes were noted as follows (1) introduction of a four week notice period from when applicants plan to submit a funding application (minimum of eight weeks' notice for complex projects, and three weeks' notice for directed calls); (2) fixed deadline of five days before the funder deadline or the application to be finalised on

Worktribe, including institutional letters of support; (3) rebalancing of the support provided by R&I staff towards higher value applications (based on disciplinary norms), applications from early career researchers, researchers who have not yet secured a significant research grant at this university, and applications directed towards industry clients; and (4) a recommendation for greater alignment of School-based processes (intention to submit/supporting grant applications/peer review) with the research grant application process.

It was noted that all applications will still be costed and approved within Worktribe, with a financial review on the costings in place prior to Head of School approval. Whilst these would be the overarching principles, it was confirmed that in exceptional circumstances, PIs could approach their Heads of School to request lower value applications be included in the bid submission process, if a lighter touch review was deemed inappropriate. It was also noted that 'expressions of interest, which arise from directed calls and usually have a shorter deadline, would continue to be supported, and with appropriate notice for R&I staff.

URC agreed this was a pragmatic response to current resourcing challenges within the University. All Schools will continue to be supported by dedicated Research Development Executives, who will continue to work closely with the School Directors of Research to discuss School priorities to ensure support is provided, and to enable allow some flexibility in approach in discussion with Schools.

ACTION: Further version of the paper to be presented to the April URC meeting – further detail to be included on flexibility of timelines, the process for a 'lighter touch' approach, and monitoring of the impact of the approach (J Snow – with SDoRs)

7 REF PREPARATIONS UPDATE/OUTPUT REVIEW 2024

URC noted the REF2029 update on People, Culture and Environment (PCE), confirming that work has been commissioned on the development of a series of indicators to be used for the assessment of PCE. Institutions have been invited to bid to participate in a pilot exercise, which will involve drafting PCE statements and metrics for up to 8 Units of Assessment (UoAs). Aberdeen plan to submit a declaration of interest in being part of the pilot, which will ensure a wider representation of universities. If selected, the results of the pilot are expected in July 2025.

URC also noted the proposals regarding the establishment of an institutional framework for research, in support of the REF2029 preparations, which will be used to guide annual reviews of outputs.

URC discussed the proposed output review process for 2024. The proposals have taken into account previous concerns expressed by some Schools around workload and are in line with the approach taken by institutions within the Wesley Group (our peer group). The proposed requirement is for a minimum of one additional output (which is likely to meet the 3* and 4* output criteria) to be nominated by each member of REF eligible staff. The introduction of an annual review cycle means we can gather this type of data as outputs are being produced so that further support can be offered where necessary, and would avoid the pitfalls associated with a final, major review process.

A number of queries were raised by the SDoRs regarding the proposals. It was confirmed that this framework will replace the full stocktake that had previously been proposed, however Schools would still be free to go beyond the minimum review requirements if they wished to do so. The purpose of the review is to offer feedback to staff on the quality of their outputs, so if the papers submitted are not currently at 3*/4* level, the feedback provided will still be useful in terms of identifying where additional work may be required to increase the quality of outputs. In response to concerns raised about lack of awareness amongst staff regarding the REF * quality ratings, it was confirmed that training and support has been provided to colleagues on the understanding that this best practice would then be shared with others within their Schools. Confirmation was provided that there is no funding for external reviews,

so this process must be managed internally. Some concerns were raised regarding the proposal that reviewers should remain anonymous (as this would be difficult to maintain in some Schools), and in any case it may be beneficial for staff to know who had conducted their review so that further discussions could take place. Some schools presented their approach of reviewing outputs through a workshop style exercise which was received positively by those schools.

Whilst recognising the importance of output reviews, SDoRs also noted the importance of providing sufficient time and support to help develop the quality of research outputs. Examples of best practice in providing support to improve the quality of research e.g. the use of a Sharepoint site where colleagues can upload papers of at least 3* quality for feedback; seminars where staff can share their work and receive suggestions for improvement were also noted. There was some agreement that it would be important to identify 2* work from staff, as there is still time to help develop their research towards 3*/4* rated outputs.

It was noted that in some disciplines, staff were currently working on monographs. This should be acknowledged within the proposed requirement of a minimum of one additional Overall, there was a general agreement within URC that a further assessment of our output quality should commence as soon as possible.

It was also noted that outputs are not the only contributions that can be made to the REF submission, and colleagues can contribute meaningfully to different aspects of the REF as we want to have an inclusive approach.

URC were advised that the feedback from these discussions will be considered in the further development of a final version of the framework, to be submitted to the REF Strategy Group (for approval) and SMT (for approval, and to Senate (for information).

ACTION: Output review to proceed, providing Schools with the ability to enhance requirements in line with School preparations (N Forsyth, SDoRs)

7.1 Pure Updates

URC noted that the Pure database must be up to date in order to support the output review process.

ACTION: Data will be provided to SDoRs on current Pure entries for each School with reference to the current REF period (E Rattray) to ensure records are complete (SDoRs)

7.2 Impact/Output Training Update Report

URC received an update on these issues, noting the work undertaken with the Schools to assist staff with the calibration of their assessments of the quality of outputs and impact case studies (ICSs). A number of examples of innovative practices were provided from Schools with regard to developing ICSs e.g. impact pitching sessions, the development of peer-to-peer support mechanisms; and the development of ICS focus groups in Schools.

URC also noted the appointment of a new impact team member - Sam Paterson - who will be responsible for supporting the Physical Sciences & Engineering Schools.

8 SCHOOL RESEARCH STRATEGY

Due to lack of time, URC noted this paper would be carried forward to the next meeting.

ACTION: This item will be carried forward for discussion at the April URC meeting (N Forsyth)

9 RESEARCH GOVERNANCE HANDBOOK (VERSION 11) - REVISED

URC received a revised version 11 of the Research Governance Handbook, following the feedback received from the December meeting. URC were asked to approve the subsequent revisions made to the handbook, as explained in the covering paper.

ACTION: Approved, subject to offline discussion regarding the wording of section 4.1.7 Openness in Research and section 4.2.2 Reporting Allegations of Unacceptable Research Conduct (D Foster & A Dilley)

10 RESEARCH REPORTING

10.1 Research Income Report

URC noted the update provided, noting that research income is currently behind budget (by 3.5%), however there has been an increase in research spend since the last URC meeting, with the indirect cost contribution (ICC) being ahead of budget. URC also noted that the order book (the value of research grants and contracts, spread across the financial years) showed an improvement compared to this stage during the previous financial year.

ACTION: SDoRs to confirm to E Rattray that they have received the benchmarking data that was prepared and issued to Heads of School from Planning (as per the weblinks in slide 3 of item 10.1, paper URC23:47, summarising all research reports) (SDoRs)

10.2 Applications & Awards Trends

URC noted the update provided, detailing activity across the Schools. As discussed under item 6 of the meeting, support for applications will be more focussed in future to maximise the use of resources.

URC were also advised of an application submitted for a Marie Curie Fellowship had scored 100%, which was an exceptional achievement for the applicant and the University.

11 UPDATE FROM THE ETHICS ADVISORY GROUP

URC received an update on the recent work of the Ethics Advisory Group, noting that the recruitment process for a lay member was currently underway.

For Information:

12 INTERDISCIPLINARY THEMES UPDATE

URC noted the update provided.

13 R&I RISK REGISTER

URC noted the update provided.

ACTION: R&I Risk Register to be reviewed and feedback provided to N Forsyth and E Rattray (URC members)

14 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

URC noted the busy agendas for these meetings, which may require the meeting duration to be extended for future meetings in order to allow sufficient time for appropriate discussion and consideration of the issues raised.

A query was raised in respect of the remit of the URC, in light of previous discussions about this. It was confirmed that the remit would be raised for further discussion in line with the standard timescale (at the beginning of each academic year). In the meantime, confirmation was provided that T Slaven is preparing a statement regarding URC and governance procedures.

ACTION: T Slaven to provide (N Forsyth)

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Thursday 25 April 2024, 2.05 – 3.55pm

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