

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 25th APRIL 2024

Present: Nicholas Forsyth, Sanni Ahonen, Simon Bains, Ruth Banks, Keith Bender, Ed Chadwick, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Susan Halfpenny, Amelia Hunt, Shahin Jalili, Jesper Kallestrup, Georgios Leontidis, Michelle Macleod, Jennie Macdiarmid, Alisdair MacPherson (*vice* Abbe Brown), Iain McEwan (*vice* Ian Stansfield), Gearoid Millar (*vice* Claire Wallace), Stuart Piertney, Syrithe Pugh, Liz Rattray, Tracey Slaven (part meeting), Juliette Snow, Ben Tatler

Apologies: Marlis Barraclough, Matthew Clarke, Brian Henderson, Georgina Hunt, Ann Lewendon, Lucy Leiper, Rob McGregor, Sam Martin, Nir Oren, Brice Rea, Donna Walker

Welcome:

N Forsyth welcomed all to the meeting, including new members – Amelia Hunt (new School Director of Research, Psychology), the new Research Deans – Michelle Macleod (Impact & Engagement), Ben Tatler (People, Culture & Environment) and Nir Oren (Knowledge & Understanding), noting that Ben and Nir had (until recently) attended URC as School Research Directors.

Guests were welcomed – Alisdair MacPherson (representing Law), Iain McEwan (representing SMMSN), Gearoid Millar (representing Social Science), and visiting speakers – Susan Halfpenny (Library) and Georgios Leontidis and Jennie Macdiarmid (Interdisciplinary Research Centre Directors).

Thanks were also expressed to the former research Deans Andrew Dilley and Gary Macfarlane members who had previously stood down from URC upon the appointment of the new Research Deans.

Apologies for absence were noted.

1 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 13th February 2024 were received but not yet approved (pending further time granted to allow for members who had not yet had time to review these).

ACTION: Any further amendments should be submitted to D Foster by close of business Friday 03 May (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.

URC noted that further clarification is being prepared by Tracey Slaven on governance procedures.

URC noted that discussions about personal taxation issues in relation to payment of professional membership fees are ongoing. Examples of the types of related expenditure have been shared with the Finance team for clarification.

URC noted that Abbe Brown and Ben Tatler agreed to join the Copyright Literacy Steering Group.

URC noted that for REF preparations, all output audit queries should be submitted to Nir Oren, and that Pure should be ready for the input of output reviews in the very near future.

2.2 Matters Arising

2.2.1 UKRIO 'Research Integrity' Training – Participation in Pilot

URC noted that the University will be participating in a national pilot of a new online course on 'Research Integrity', promoted by UKRIO, and various groups of staff (including URC members) and PGR students have been invited to participate. Registration on the course must be completed before 10 May, with the course content completed by March 2025. An email containing further details on the course and registration process will follow.

2.2.2 'Reimagining the Campuses' Proposals

URC noted the recent circulation of these proposals and the concerns raised within the School of Language, Literature, Music & Visual Culture, regarding the proposed loss of private office space, which could negatively impact on staff working in the humanities.

N Forsyth confirmed that it was important for all Schools to respond to the campus proposals so that all concerns are raised with the Research Working Group of the Project Board.

Main Items for Discussion or Approval:

3 RESEARCH GRANT APPLICATION PROCESS – PROPOSED CHANGES

J Snow presented this item on behalf of N Oren. URC noted the revised version of the paper which had been produced in response to feedback received on the original version. The purpose of the new process was intended to re-balance the support available so that greater focus can be placed on higher value applications, those submitted by Early Career Researchers (ECRs) or from those who were yet to secure significant research funding. The paper was supplemented by a new annex explaining the proposed role of a new Strategic Research Team, noting the introduction of this would be resource-dependent.

She confirmed that flexibility was embedded in the process, the requirements for registration on Worktribe had been further clarified, and also the process for the identification of priority applications had been explained (i.e. via the School, the School Director of Research (SDoR) or the Research Development Executives (RDE)).

URC noted concerns from Social Science regarding the reduced support for smaller grants, and concerns regarding the notification timelines. However URC acknowledged that continuing to provide the current level of support for small or last-minute applications was not sustainable given current resource constraints and the need to achieve income growth.

J Snow further noted that early notification of grant applications could be done via the RDE (not necessarily via Worktribe) and that funding thresholds will be discipline specific.

URC approved the introduction of the revised research grant application process (subject to some further clarifications on financial thresholds).

4 UPDATE ON INTERDISCIPLINARY CHALLENGE AREAS ACTIVITIES

URC received a presentation from Jennie Macdiarmid and Georgios Leontidis, providing a summary of key activities within each interdisciplinary challenge area (Energy Transition; Social Inclusion & Cultural Diversity; Environment & Biodiversity; Data and Artificial Intelligence; and Health, Nutrition & Wellbeing).

URC noted that there were lots of areas of overlap in activity between the challenge areas. 14 IDR fellows have been appointed across the areas, currently advertising PhD studentships to be co-supervised by the IDR fellows (12 to be appointed). A number of internal networks have been created, and key external partnerships confirmed. A range of external grants have also been secured, in addition to the interdisciplinary funding made available internally (£107.5K).

The challenge areas are also supporting Schools with the development of funding applications and REF impact case studies and will also be able to assist with the development of REF environment statements.

N Forsyth also noted the Times Higher Education's (THE) Interdisciplinary Science Research Survey and that colleagues should be encouraged to submit a response. The University is currently short of the 50 submissions required for inclusion.

ACTIONS:

- IDR representative (one or two) to join URC and attend future meetings (**IDR Directors to nominate**)
- Email regarding the THE Interdisciplinary Science Research Survey to be circulated to SDoRs (**N Forsyth**) for circulation within Schools to promote further submissions to the survey (**SDoRs**)

5 REF 2029

5.1 People, Culture & Environment

URC received an update on this issue from B Tatler. A key priority for the University will be to develop a shared understanding of research culture and how our researchers are supported, and how our strategy on this aligns with the People, Culture and Environment (PCE) element of REF 2029.

He proposed the adoption of the Research Culture Framework (Vitae) as a useful tool for planning University activities around research culture and identifying gaps and priorities for future initiatives on research culture.

He noted the importance of engaging with Schools to take stock of what is already being done in support of research culture. In terms of how this will be measured in the next REF, he confirmed that there will be a national PCE pilot and we have applied to participate in this (at the current time, there is no indication of when the pilot institutions will be selected and announced). In addition, Vitae will be hosting a series of 14 online workshops to co-develop assessment indicators for the PCE element of REF 2029, and it is intended that the University will be represented at all of these, with the University facilitating at least one of the workshops.

In addition, he confirmed that a Research Culture Steering Group will be established with representation from key areas across the University, and with REF Panel leads included as members of this group. The group will report to the REF Strategy Group. Further engagement will be held with the Schools/UoA leads regarding this group.

5.2 Open Access Consultation

URC received an update on the draft consultation response from S Bains and S Halfpenny.

URC noted that following the REF 2029 open access consultation proposes two key changes to the REF 2021 Open Access (OA) policy – the proposal to reduce embargo periods for journals and conference proceedings (6 months for panels A and B, 12 months for panels C and D) with effect from January 2025; and the proposal to introduce open access requirements for long form outputs with effect from January 2026 (noting that trade books will be excluded from these requirements). The circulated paper is a first draft at an institutional response, and further comments/input would be welcomed. As the submission deadline is noon on 17 June, and this is the final URC meeting of the academic year, the final sign-off on the agreed draft will be via correspondence.

S Halfpenny noted that the REF OA policy was anticipated, and the Library have been preparing for this in line with the UKRI OA policy. The University has already addressed the rights retention issue, and have been working on the embargo periods, so are in a position to endorse the REF 2029 OA policy and will work with the URC to address any issues/concerns raised on these proposals. There are some concerns regarding the fact there is no funding available to support the extension of the OA policy to long form outputs, which means costs will need to be paid (if no associated grant funding) by the University or deposited in manuscript form in the institutional repository. It is anticipated that publishers will change their policies to comply with REF; also the indirect costs have been reviewed to check if they will be covered by the tolerance levels.

ACTION: Feedback on the draft response to be provided to Simon Bains and Susan Halfpenny (by the end of May) - SDoRs

5.3 Impact Update

URC received an update from M Macleod. She confirmed the appointment of REF leads for Impact within the Schools. The Impact and Knowledge Exchange team have been supporting Schools with the monitoring and development of impact case studies (ICS), and she has been in touch with Schools to arrange visits in her role as Dean for Impact and Engagement. She confirmed that monitoring of the progress of ICSs will be undertaken via the REF Strategy Group and Impact Oversight Group..

A programme of training and workshops has been successfully delivered during session 2023/24 and next year's programme is under development.

She confirmed that the paper noted a number of issues, risks and mitigating actions, in particular in relation to e.g. numbers of potential ICSs required, issues with small UoAs, and the importance of communications and management of workload for the staff involved.

5.4 UoA Leads

URC received an update from E Rattray regarding the list of UoA leads for each aspect of REF.

She also noted that discussions are ongoing regarding the potential REF submission structure, and the individuals who could be submitted to the UoAs.

ACTIONS:

- **Remaining REF leads to be identified and details submitted to Dawn Foster (SDoRs)**
- **Corrected list of LLMVC REF leads to be submitted (S Pugh)**

5.5 REF Institutional Research Leave

URC received an update from N Forsyth on the REF Institutional Research Leave process for session 2024/25. He noted the focus on plans for the development of impact and/or research culture in respect of the REF 2029 submission.

He noted the 55% increase in applications received (54 received, was 30) including 3 applications carried forward from the previous cycle. Applications were received from 10 Schools, and 15 awards were made (28% success rate), at a value of c. £223K.

He noted that Schools had been asked via the Heads of School to provide a triaged list of research leave applications. Not all did so, and in these instances further advice on the applications was sought from the panel members.

He confirmed that budget setting for next year had not yet taken place. The University remains committed to the REF support action plan, with leave awarded on an annual basis and based on the same timelines wherever possible. However, mindful of the current University budget restrictions, he advised it would not involve any increased level of funding.

6 SCHOOL RESEARCH STRATEGY

URC received an update from N Forsyth on School Research Strategy. He confirmed that all Schools will be asked to develop research strategies, noting that several are already in various stages of development.

He confirmed that the deadline for submission will be the end of summer, with plans underway for an off-campus, research away day to enable consideration of the School plans. This will likely occur in September, prior to the beginning of the academic term.

He confirmed that further information will be provided to Schools on what should be included within their research strategy.

ACTIONS:

- **Schools to prepare a draft School Research Strategy before the proposed Research Awayday in September (SDoRs)**
- **Original planned presentation on this issue to be circulated to SDoRs to provide some guidance on possible content/structure of the draft plan (N Forsyth)**

7 RESEARCH REPORTING

7.1 Research Income Report

URC noted the update provided, currently a little behind budget on research income (£2M = 6%), but ahead on indirect cost contributions by £694K (11%). Budget setting is currently taking place with Schools, with research income targets to be set for the next academic year, along with targets for applications and awards.

Regarding research grant application targets, annex 3 of the paper provides some figures produced using a new methodology, based on using the previous five years of data to suggest future targets (i.e. in cases where the calculated forecast was lower than the previous year, 5% was added onto the previous year's value to create the target and 10% added for the 'stretch' target). This methodology may also be helpful in budget setting.

The new tool will be uploaded on Power BI for Schools to use.

7.2 Applications & Awards Trends

URC noted that no paper was submitted to the meeting due to the full quarter not yet having elapsed. Instead, live applications and awards data is available at <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/governance/power-bi-dashboard-portal-12779.php>

8 GRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT

URC received a presentation from S Piertney. He confirmed that the Graduate School will be looking to adopt an enhanced strategic focus with the aim of increasing the PGR student numbers in the face of a challenging environment.

He noted that 30% of PGR students are beyond their funded periods, with some on year 7 or 8. For the REF, the number of PhDs awarded per academic year is an important metric and we need to ensure the conversion into PhD submissions. He also noted that the number of PGR registrations is reducing year on year, whereas the external picture mainly shows an increase in PGR numbers. He noted the impact of an 18% reduction in funded studentships within the UK, emphasising this is an extremely competitive market.

He reflected on the drivers of change in PGR provision, including feedback from the PGR Experience survey (which showed we do well in some areas e.g. supervision, quality of resources, and other areas where we do less well e.g. research culture). He also noted the changing landscape for PGR provision e.g. UKRI's 'New Deal for Postgraduate Research', with a shift in emphasis to reflect how the PhD journey will help students personally (employability, careers training, collaboration with employers, increasing focus on placements and internships), and the societal impact of their studies.

He also noted a proposal to re-brand the School as a PGR College, working alongside Schools in delivering the PGR experience. He confirmed this is evolving work, and input from Schools would be welcomed prior to a planned launch in session 2024/25.

ACTIONS:

- **Copy of presentation to be circulated (D Foster)** (*Clerks's Note: Completed*)
- **To be distributed and discussed within Schools, and feedback provided to S Piertney (SDoRs)**

9 UPDATE FROM THE POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE

URC received an update from B Tatler on the work of the Postdoctoral Research Committee (PDRC). This included the work undertaken to adopt the framework for Research Culture proposed by Vitae (discussed under item 5.1 of the minute); the draft researcher development framework currently being developed; and closer alignment of the work of the PDRC with the URC priorities.

10 AI IN RESEARCH – GOVERNANCE AND PRACTICE (TASK & FINISH GROUP)

URC received an update from E Rattray on the remit and composition for this recently established group, chaired by G Leontidis, and which will explore the use of artificial intelligence in research (and will complement the group chaired by B Henderson on the wider use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in other University processes).

ACTION: Two volunteers sought from URC membership to join this group. Names to be submitted to E Rattray and G Leontidis (URC members)

For Information:

11 FACILITIES WORKING GROUP

URC noted the update provided.

12 UPDATE FROM THE ETHICS ADVISORY GROUP

Due to rescheduled EAG meeting, an update will be provided to the first meeting of the URC in session 2024/25.

13 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH UPDATE

URC noted the update provided.

14 RESEARCH RISK REGISTER

URC noted that the Risk Register is a standing item on the agenda, however in future this will be addressed in-depth at the first URC meeting of each academic year.

15 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was raised.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Tuesday 29 October 2024, 10.05 – 11.55am (Court Room, University Office)

DF 05/24