

Template: annual statement on research integrity

If you have any questions about this template, please contact:
RIsecretariat@universitiesuk.ac.uk.

Section 1: Key contact information

Question	Response
1A. Name of organisation	University of Aberdeen
1B. Type of organisation: higher education institution/industry/independent research performing organisation/other (please state)	Higher Education Institution
1C. Date statement approved by governing body (DD/MM/YY)	21/11/2023
1D. Web address of organisation's research integrity page (if applicable)	https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/research-governance-10644.php
1E. Named senior member of staff to oversee research integrity	Name: Professor Nicholas Forsyth
	Email address: nicholas.forsyth@abdn.ac.uk
1F. Named member of staff who will act as a first point of contact for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity	Name: Mrs Dawn Foster
	Email address: dawn.foster@abdn.ac.uk

Section 2: Promoting high standards of research integrity and positive research culture. Description of actions and activities undertaken

2A. Description of current systems and culture

Please describe how the organisation maintains high standards of research integrity and promotes positive research culture. It should include information on the support provided to researchers to understand standards, values and behaviours, such as training, support and guidance for researchers at different career stages/ disciplines. You may find it helpful to consider the following broad headings:

- Policies and systems
- Communications and engagement
- Culture, development and leadership
- Monitoring and reporting

The University of Aberdeen seeks to achieve the highest standards in its research governance arrangements, recognising both the importance and centrality of rigour and integrity to high quality research performance. The University recognises that research integrity is a primary concern of all those involved with research, and that it is vital to have appropriate training and support available for our research community, complemented by robust and effective processes for dealing with any allegations of research misconduct.

Policies & Systems

Research integrity is underpinned by the following policies relating to responsible research practices:

- *Code of Practice on Conflicts of Interest in Research & Knowledge Exchange Activities (new)*
- *Data Protection Policy*

- *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy*
- *Information Security Policy*
- *Policy and Guidelines on Good Research Conduct & Statement on Handling Allegations of Unacceptable Research Conduct*
- *Records Management Policy*
- *Research Data Management Policy*
- *Research Involving the Use of Animals – University Position Statement*
- *Research Governance Handbook*
- *University Guidelines on Keeping of Research Records*
- *Risk Assessment Policy*
- *Safeguarding Policy and Codes of Practice*
- *Policy and Procedure on Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblowing)*

The University Research Committee (URC) which is chaired by the Vice Principal (Research), has overall responsibility for matters relating to research integrity. The URC membership comprises of representatives from all Schools (normally the School Director of Research), representatives from the relevant Professional Services, an Early Career Researcher (ECR) and a Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student.

Oversight of research integrity issues at an operational level is devolved to the Ethics Advisory Group (EAG), a sub-group of URC. The EAG is responsible for the ongoing oversight of research ethics and governance issues; developing and reviewing institutional policy on research ethics and governance; receiving reports from Ethics Boards and Committees; and undertaking ethics health checks within Schools. Responsibility for facilitating ethical approval for research projects and the promotion of good research practice is devolved to six discipline-based ethics committees and boards that support non-clinical related research and research that does not require a licence under Home Office regulations. The Chairs of these committees and boards are members of the EAG, providing a direct connection to the work of the individual ethics boards.

Furthermore, teams of staff within the University give support and guidance to our

researcher community, including the Graduate School and Researcher Development Unit, which have specific responsibility for our postgraduate research students and early career researcher community, and staff based in the Research Policy & Strategy team within the Directorate of Research & Innovation, further supported by colleagues in the Library, Data Protection and Digital Research teams.

The University implements an ongoing programme of continuous improvement of its research governance arrangements. These are informed by a combination of initiatives such as the University's strategic plan for research (as part of the University's Aberdeen 2040 Strategy), the institutional Risk Register and Risk Framework to identify and mitigate research governance risks, learning from internal audits and funders' assurance requirements, voluntary instruments and codes of practice. Substantive developments and activities are discussed in turn below.

Communications and engagement

The expected standards of research integrity are detailed in our Policy and Guidelines on Good Research Conduct (section 4.1, Research Governance Handbook).

The Research Governance Handbook is available online and promoted to all research staff and research students during local induction procedures. Annual revisions to the handbook are agreed by the URC and then reported to the Schools via the School Directors of Research.

Regular training opportunities are organised and advertised to staff and research students by Research & Innovation and the Graduate School on topics such as research ethics, research integrity and reproducibility and general good research practice. This is in addition to discipline-based training provided within the Schools, and supplements the mandatory online training in Research Integrity, and the mandatory online training for applicants for ethical approval in Research Ethics & Governance. In addition, Research & Innovation staff are routinely invited to School Research Committee meetings and to participate in other School Fora to present on these topics, in addition to emerging topics such as 'Trusted Research' and the 'National Security and Investment Act (NSIA) 2021'.

Culture, development and leadership

The University of Aberdeen promotes the highest standards of research and strives to provide a working environment that supports and rewards a positive research culture. In recent years the University has embarked on a programme of work that

aims to make the University a place that researchers want to come to do their research, to develop their skills, and to contribute to the ongoing success of the University. Continuous improvement of our research culture is embedded in our 2040 strategy, supported by related initiatives such as membership of the UK Reproducibility Network, establishing the Open Science Working Group (an alliance of staff and students at the University who believe open and reproducible research practices are essential for robust scientific progress), continuing our work under the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, and achieving the HR Excellence in Research Award.

Following REF 2021, the implementation of a major review of research culture and the wider research environment was undertaken by a [Research Culture Task & Finish Group](#). The Research Culture Task and Finish Group was set up with a wide-ranging brief to identify policies and procedures in place that benefit the University's research culture, and to identify gaps and to make recommendations on how these can be addressed. Following postponement of its work in 2020 due to Covid, the group consulted widely among academic and professional services colleagues and produced several recommendations around the development of research careers and improving the experience of those working in research. All recommendations made were designed to support an inclusive, respectful and enabling environment. It reported in Autumn 2021 and the University is working on implementing proposals made, in tandem with work on meeting its commitments under the Concordat to Support Career Development of Researchers.

Since then, we have established an oversight group to monitor implementation and ensure that it complements the measures under other Concordats. The Group includes representatives from a variety of professional backgrounds and at various career stages. The recommendations are implemented alongside the actions to which we have committed under the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and those of the HR Excellence plan.

Monitoring and reporting

All queries, allegations and investigations into potential research misconduct by members of staff are managed via the Research Strategy and Policy team, in line with our Statement on Handling Allegations of Unacceptable Research Conduct. Allegations and investigations into student research misconduct are managed by Academic Affairs, in line with the requirements of the University's Code of Practice on Student Discipline (Academic). Investigations relating to funded research projects are reported to the relevant funding body in line with their requirements.

2B. Changes and developments during the period under review

Please provide an update on any changes made during the period, such as new initiatives, training, developments, also ongoing changes that are still underway. Drawing on Commitment 3 of the Concordat, please note any new or revised policies, practices and procedures to support researchers; training on research ethics and research integrity; training and mentoring opportunities to support the development of researchers' skills throughout their careers.

The University of Aberdeen Research Governance Framework

The expectations around research integrity are set out in the institutional Research Governance Handbook (RGH). It is reviewed annually and in the light of external policy developments and research practice at the University. The latest version was approved by URC in December 2022. This included a full revision of the guidance on 'Research Utilising Genetic Resources -the Nagoya Protocol' and new guidance for researchers on 'Trusted Research' and the 'National Security and Investment Act (NSIA) 2021'.

The RGH encompasses integrity in research practice, including how we share, assess, apply or commercialise research and engage with stakeholders and research users.

Worktribe Ethics

During session 2022/23, the University implemented a new online process for the ethical approval of applications submitted by staff and Postgraduate Research (PGR) students, and including PGT (Postgraduate Taught) students where required for operational reasons such as dealing with high volumes of applications e.g. the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition. The process was rolled out to each internal ethics board as per an agreed schedule, supported by a series of training opportunities for Ethics Board Chairs, members, and applicants (staff, PGR and PGT students) and guidance materials published on a dedicated university webpage. The roll-out of the application process to all six internal ethics boards (excluding the clinical related research and research that does not require a licence under Home Office regulations) has raised the profile of research ethics, leading to improved awareness of good ethical research practice amongst our researcher community. Furthermore, the implementation of the new process has ensured a consistent approach to the ethical approval of research activity across all disciplines within the University, encompassing best practice at a national level.

Institutional Policy on the Responsible Use of Metrics

In April 2023 the University Senate approved the institutional policy on the Responsible Use of Metrics, to ensure the fair and transparent use of quantitative indicators in the assessment of research performance, and building upon the commitments made by the university as a signatory to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA).

Revised University Code of Practice on Conflicts of Interest

In May 2023 the University Court approved the revised Code of Practice on Conflicts of Interest. This provides further guidance for researchers on examples of conflict of interest in research, knowledge exchange and commercialisation activities, and clarifies the routes for declarations of such conflicts (and the mechanism for resolving any declared conflicts).

UK Reproducibility Network

The University continues its membership of the UKRN and plans to participate in the UKRN survey later this year.

2C. Reflections on progress and plans for future developments

This should include a reflection on the previous year's activity including a review of progress and impact of initiatives if known relating to activities referenced in the previous year's statement. Note any issues that have hindered progress, e.g. resourcing or other issues.

Ethics Advisory Group

During 2022/23, the Group devised (i) a template standard operating procedure (SOP) for the university's internal ethics boards/committees to clarify the expectations for ethical review at the University and to ensure the boards/committees' compliance with the Concordat to Support Research Integrity; (ii) guidance for assessing the risk level of applications (low, medium, high) submitted to the Worktribe Ethics approval process; (iii) guidance on the procedures to be followed when reviewing minor/major amendments to applications previously approved via the Worktribe Ethics process; and (iv) the introduction of a standardised ethics checklist for researchers to explain the types of research activity that require ethical approval. The introduction of these items is intended to provide

further transparency and clarity for researchers on matters relating to ethical approval of research.

New Code of Practice – Safeguarding in Research & Innovation

The University Court approved a new Code of Practice in Safeguarding in Research & Innovation, designed to complement the university's existing Safeguarding Policy. The Code of Practice clarifies the types of research activity where safeguarding concerns are most likely to arise, clarifies the circumstances where a safeguarding concern should be reported, and clarifies key contacts in the process who can support and guide researchers in implementing the main safeguarding requirements in respect of research activities.

We are planning to roll out training for researchers and safeguarding contacts during 2023/24.

Research Strategy

The University launched its Aberdeen 2040 Strategy in February 2020 and work continues on its implementation.

There is continued focus on the five interdisciplinary research areas reported in the 2022/23 statement to provide leadership in research development under the five Interdisciplinary Challenge areas as follows: Data & Artificial Intelligence; Environment & Biodiversity; Health, Nutrition & Wellbeing; Energy Transition; and Social Inclusion & Cultural Diversity. As we continue to build capacity to deliver on our institutional objectives under Aberdeen 2040, we are mindful of the need to assure research quality, integrity and a supportive research culture

We will continue our work on our ethical approval process, following on from the implementation of an online platform for approval to ensure continued compliance with UKRIO standards and enhance consistency of approach and practice across all our non-clinical, non-ASPA ethics boards while allowing for disciplinary differences.

We plan to review our training offering around research ethics and integrity, and also roll out training on safeguarding and trusted research. We will also review our processes for investigation and where appropriate referral to disciplinary proceedings of cases of alleged research misconduct to ensure that resolution can be delivered in a timely manner.

2D. Case study on good practice (optional)

Please describe an anonymised brief, exemplar case study that can be shared as good practice with other organisations. A wide range of case studies are valuable, including small, local implementations. Case studies may also include the impact of implementations or lessons learned.

[Please insert response]

Section 3: Addressing research misconduct

3A. Statement on processes that the organisation has in place for dealing with allegations of misconduct

Please provide:

- a brief summary of relevant organisation policies/ processes (e.g. research misconduct procedure, whistle-blowing policy, bullying/harassment policy; appointment of a third party to act as confidential liaison for persons wishing to raise concerns) and brief information on the periodic review of research misconduct processes (e.g. date of last review; any major changes during the period under review; date when processes will next be reviewed).
- information on how the organisation creates and embeds a research environment in which all staff, researchers and students feel comfortable to report instances of misconduct (e.g. code of practice for research, whistle-blowing, research misconduct procedure, informal liaison process, website signposting for reporting systems, training, mentoring, reflection and evaluation of policies, practices and procedures).
- anonymised key lessons learned from any investigations into allegations of misconduct which either identified opportunities for improvements in the organisation's investigation procedure and/or related policies / processes/ culture or which showed that they were working well.

As a signatory to the Universities UK's Concordat to Support Research Integrity, we are committed to the ongoing development of a research culture that supports open and transparent investigation of potential misconduct, ensuring that all staff, researchers and students have confidence in our procedures and are supported throughout the process.

As part of the ongoing review of associated policies, further revisions will be made to the University's Statement on Handling Allegations of Unacceptable Research Conduct, which is embedded in our Research Governance Handbook (section 4.2) and publicly available on our website.

There is a need to maintain a high level of awareness of research ethics in Schools where researchers might, in pursuit of our interdisciplinary goals, begin to adopt unfamiliar methodologies. Training and awareness-raising is an ongoing responsibility and work will continue in the next academic session to

continue to highlight these issues amongst our researcher community.

The adoption of the Worktribe Ethics application process (and the associated training programme) in session 2022/23 has also enhanced researcher awareness of ethical approval requirements.

We plan to review our processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct, particularly the referral process to disciplinary proceedings, to ensure that we can achieve more timely resolution of cases. We will make recommendations as part of our annual review of our Research Governance Handbook.

3B. Information on investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken

Please complete the table on the number of **formal investigations completed during the period under review** (including investigations which completed during this period but started in a previous academic year). Information from ongoing investigations should not be submitted.

An organisation's procedure may include an initial, preliminary, or screening stage to determine whether a formal investigation needs to be completed. These allegations should be included in the first column but only those that proceeded past this stage, to formal investigations, should be included in the second column.

Type of allegation	Number of allegations			
	Number of allegations reported to the organisation	Number of formal investigations	Number upheld in part after formal investigation	Number upheld in full after formal investigation
Fabrication				
Falsification				
Plagiarism	4	2		2
Failure to meet legal, ethical and professional obligations	4	3		1
Misrepresentation (eg data; involvement; interests; qualification; and/or publication history)				
Improper dealing with allegations of misconduct				
Multiple areas of concern (when received in a single allegation)	1	1		1

<i>Other*</i>				
Total:	9	6	0	4
*If you listed any allegations under the 'Other' category, please give a brief, high-level summary of their type here. Do not give any identifying or confidential information when responding.				
<i>[Please insert response if applicable]</i>				