

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 18TH MARCH 2019

- Present: Professor M Campbell (Convener), Professor M Bodig (for Professor P Beaumont), Professor A Brown, Professor A Cuesta Ciscar, Dr A Dilley, Professor P Haggarty, Professor A Lee, Dr A Lewendon, Professor G Macfarlane, Professor C Montagna, Professor R Neilson, Professor G Nixon, Professor L Phillips, Professor S Piertney, Dr L Rattray, Professor C Soulsby, Professor S Treweek,
- Apologies: Professor J Cleland, Professor P Fowler, Dr K McPhail, Dr J Scott, Mrs Donna Walker, Dr M Watson

1 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 3rd December were approved, subject to the following amendment:

p 2, Postgraduate Research School Update: first sentence to read: 'Professor Nixon reported that the application for a NERC Doctoral Training Centre for MASTS had been successful.

2 MATTERS ARISING

Professor Campbell reported recent successful grant applications:

Professor Paul Haggarty and Dr Alan Walker (both RINH) are co-applicants on the GCRF Action Against Stunting Hub led by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The total value of the award is £18.2m, the Aberdeen share is £1,002k. Professor Paul Haggarty is Deputy Director of the Hub.

Professor Jo Smith (SBS) is co-investigator on a GCRF Hub led by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology to tackle nitrogen pollution in South Asia. The total value of the award is £20m, the Aberdeen share is £749k.

Professor Beth Scott (SBS) is co-investigator on the EPSRC Supergen Ore Hub, led by the University of Plymouth; Aberdeen share of the award is £394k

Professor Xavier Lambin (SBS) is principal investigator on a Newton/NERC award – Optimising the Long Term Management of Invasive Species Affecting Biodiversity and the Rural Economy Using Adaptive Management (£1,095k)

Professor Justin Travis (SBS) is principal investigator on a Newton/NERC award – Forecasting Biodiversity Losses from Ecological and Evolutionary Patterns and Processes (£391k)

Dr Alan Bowman (SBS) has been awarded £462k by the BBSRC – Elucidating the Regulation of Reproduction in Varroa Mites: Uncovering Potential Control Strategies

Professor Russell Howe (NCS, Chemistry) and Dr Xiaodong Wang (Engineering) have been awarded an International Collaboration Award by the Royal Society, value: £224k

Professor Marcel Jaspars (NCS, Chemistry) has been awarded an MRC African Leadership Award, value: £714k

Professor John Howell (Geosciences) has been successful in attracting 12 industrial partners to the SAFARI IV project, value: £1.5m

Professor Campbell further reported that work on the Strategic Plan was about to commence. Several working groups had been set up, their membership representing the breadth of activity across the institution. A workstream looking at interdisciplinary teaching and research was particularly relevant to the work of RPC. The intention was to hold stakeholder meetings and evidence sessions open to all staff, and members of RPC were encouraged to participate in the consultations.

The Research Leave Policy had been considered by the senior management team recently. It was well received, and the feedback was very supportive. SMT requested clarity on how much notice would have to be given with an application for leave to ensure workloads and teaching loads can be managed effectively across Schools. SMT also requested the inclusion of an entitlement to research leave after return from maternity leave.

In discussion, it was clarified that research mini breaks did not apply to standard research activities, but to enable researchers to undertake or complete research related tasks in more exceptional circumstances, for example taking on leadership for a complex and large grant application. It was also agreed that returners from long term sick leave should be given the same favourable treatment as those returning from maternity or family related leave.

3 RESEARCH APPLICATIONS AND AWARDS

Dr Rattray introduced paper RPC18:29 which showed an upward trend in the total value of applications for the year to date compared to previous years at this point. She emphasised that the total included a small number of high value applications.

Professor Campbell said that the MRC had visited the University of Aberdeen recently. It was noted that the number of applications by the University of Aberdeen to the MRC had fallen, indicating a decline of activity under the MRC remit. Some of this is clearly linked to recent and imminent staff departures, but there may be other reasons that are less apparent. She invited Schools to analyse the application data to inform their application and research strategies.

Dr Rattray added that the MRC had been extremely helpful and drawn attention to a number of relevant calls for applications. Potential applicants are strongly encouraged to contact and discuss their proposals with the relevant programme manager at the MRC. They would like to see more applications from the University of Aberdeen.

Professor Haggarty commented that the current intention to submit process set a very high bar internally and asked whether the current level of triage prior to application had become an obstacle rather than a support mechanism. Dr Rattray and Professor Piertney pointed to the example of NERC where the institution had responded to funder requirements. Some institutions now had a 46% success rate with NERC, and the expectation among funders was that the institutional bar was set at a high level.

Professor Campbell said that the MRC expected to see reworked and improved versions of any applications rated 8 or above but not funded. MRC panels now have a GCRF uplift – where the application indicates that it is GCRF relevant, and the application is fundable and graded at least 8, it will receive an automatic uplift. Professor Haggarty confirmed that the BBSRC had introduced a similar process; Professor Piertney said that this did not apply to NERC.

In discussion, it was agreed that early career researchers should be encouraged to sit on funding panels, as this experience was beneficial to their own grant performance.

4 RESEARCH INCOME

Mrs Walker introduced paper RPC 18:30 which provided details of research income for 2018/19 to date. She said that the Monthly Management Reports (MMRs) would from now on incorporate applications and awards information, including the top ten awards (by value). The order book was instrumental for budget setting.

The committee noted the information provided. 2018/19 income is expected to remain below budget expectation. The message to researchers is to maximise spend from research grants and contracts during the current financial year.

5 IMPACT AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Dr Lewendon spoke to paper RPC18:31 which provided a summary of knowledge exchange, commercialisation and impact related activity across the University of Aberdeen. In relation to the REF2021 Impact Support Awards she emphasised that some funds were still available but would have to be spent by the end of the current financial year. Schools were encouraged to come forward with proposals without waiting for further calls.

The committee discussed industrial engagement. Dr Rattray said that School plans needed to include a strategy of engagement with industrial and other partners.

Schools had been invited to put forward nominations for the Principal's Research Excellence Awards – deadline is 19th April 2019. These awards will recognise engagement, impact, best research team, and will be awarded during a celebratory event in June. Professor Piertney commented that the application forms were unduly detailed, which was noted.

6 POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT

The committee received the PGR Admissions Report (RPC18:32), introduced by Professor Nixon. The report notes a decline in cleared UK/EU numbers and in overseas applications compared to 2017. 2018 numbers are behind target, although it is difficult to say at this stage, since international students continue to arrive in-year and may make a difference to the end of year outturn. Work to address this is underway with the marketing team and through the Postgraduate Student Committee.

Numbers for 2019/20 show significant increases, particularly within Biological Sciences and Geosciences.

Professor Nixon further reported that the recent Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR) had recommended compulsory training for all PGR supervisors. The Postgraduate Committee will look at this and report to RPC. Initial plans were for training to be offered on induction and then every 3 to 5 years for experienced supervisors. Compulsory training for supervisors is required by many DTC grants and UKRI studentship schemes which award higher scores in the application process to institutions that have compulsory training.

Professor Campbell said that members of RPC should champion supervisor training in their areas. It was noted that Schools should have an easy way of checking who had completed online training. It was agreed that we should take into account good practice elsewhere when implementing this.

The committee was reminded that completed doctoral degrees was an important REF metric and should be maximised. The Graduate School planned to issue lists of PGR students that were due to complete within the REF assessment period. For REF purposes, completion date is the date on which the formal decision to award the degree is made (not the date of submission or graduation date).

7 RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

Mrs Barraclough introduced paper RPC18:33 which outlined the provisional REF submission structure as recommended by the REF Steering Group and agreed by SMT. On current researcher numbers, and based on the current research portfolio, the proposed scenario is likely to achieve the best outcome for the institution overall. The committee noted that around 60 appointments were due to be made later this year and the submission structure may change in the light of these new appointments.

Professor Haggarty asked why researchers in RINH had been allocated to UoA 1 instead of being presented in a separate submission. Professor Macfarlane replied that the GPA of the outputs available for submission to date did not indicate top quartile performance, and there were currently insufficient impact case studies available. This would be kept under review; Professor Haggarty and Professor Macfarlane agreed to discuss further separately. Professor Macfarlane undertook to discuss further with all Heads of Institutes within the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition.

Professor Piertney commented that communications generally, and in particular between Schools needed to be improved to ensure effective preparations for REF. This was supported by Professor Soulsby.

The committee received and discussed paper RPC18:34. The changes to the draft Code of Practice were noted, as were the next steps required listed. The committee noted that a strong statement of 'no detriment' should be issued to REF eligible researchers.

It was agreed that e-mails should be issued to all staff clarifying to which unit of assessment they will be submitted. There were mixed views on the visibility of predicted grades in Pure, which would allow personal users to their own grades. Only staff with a REF responsibility (HoS, School Directors of Research, SAOs, Unit of Assessment leads) would be able to see predicted grades across their unit(s) of assessment. Professor Pokrajac said that the view of the Head of School of Engineering was that grades should not be made visible in Pure until the Code of Practice had been approved by Court. Professor Campbell pointed out that the process of notifying REF eligible staff of their predicted grades to date should be nearing completion.

Professor Haggarty asked whether the Code of Practice should allow an appeal against a predicted grade. The current draft allows for appeals where due process has not been followed, or where the panel reaching a decision was not competent to do so. Allowing an appeal against a predicted grade would be a departure from practice adopted by us and most other institutions during previous assessment exercises. The absence of a formal route of process does not stop colleagues from raising concerns about or stating their disagreement with specific grades. The process for agreeing grades should be sufficiently robust to withstand challenge, while at the same time allowing for genuine errors to be corrected.

The committee discussed the potential impact on the REF submission of the planned strategic appointments. Dr Rattray confirmed that colleagues in Research & Innovation were on hand to explore potential candidates who could be targeted and/or to check the external funding of current candidates. Schools are expected to score individual papers prior to interview; due diligence is required to ensure that the appointments improve the quality of our institutional submission to REF. Professor Campbell confirmed that the posts would be advertised soon.

8 SFC FUNDING ANNOUNCEMENT – INDICATIVE REG FUNDING 2019/20

The committee received and noted the Scottish Funding Council's announcement of indicative funding for research and knowledge exchange for the next financial year, 2019/20. It was noted that the recent uplift for 4* funding within the funding formula favoured institutions with a higher percentage of 4* than Aberdeen. In addition, the continued downward trend of our research income resulted in a reduction of REF(b) and (c).

Dr Rattray said that the funding councils and Universities Scotland were currently looking for strong case studies in support of REG and it would be helpful to develop a bank of case studies that we could draw on, given that timelines for such requests are often very short. She invited suitable case studies from Schools.

9 RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND GOVERNANCE UPDATE

The committee received paper RPC18:36 which provided updates on the work of the Research Governance Framework Working Group and the Research Integrity Working

Group. The committee noted the progress of the work of both groups. The Research Governance Framework Working Group had met just days prior to the RPC meeting and had continued its detailed review of the Research Governance Framework, which was expected to be complete by the end of this academic year. Professor Brown noted that the Government's Prevent initiative was now under legal challenge. Professor Macfarlane reported on progress of the Research Integrity Working Group which focused on provision of research integrity training and the procedures around research misconduct.

10 SCHOOL RESEARCH GOVERNANCE HEALTHCHECKS

The committee received the healthcheck documents for the School of Geosciences and noted the information provided.

11 SFC OUTCOME AGREEMENT FOR 2019/20

The committee noted the draft outcome agreement and University Innovation Fund, drawn up for the Scottish Funding Council. Dr Rattray explained that this document sets out the objectives the University commits to achieving under the terms and condition of our funding from the SFC. She pointed to the use of case studies to support our case for funding and invited School to come forward with additional case studies.

12 PLAN S INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION

The committee noted the institutional response to PlanS, the proposed new open access policy to be adopted by cOAlition S, representing a number of research funders, including the European Research Council and Wellcome. It was agreed that the new Librarian should be invited to join RPC.

13 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Professor Haggarty reported that he would be attending a GCRF Hub meeting for the Action Against Stunting Hub, where he is Deputy Director. The meeting would focus on hub-associated projects to lever additional funding for the project. The University should explore which of the Hub Directors it should engage with to set up associated projects. It was agreed that Professor Haggarty would invite appropriate Challenge leads to the University of Aberdeen.

14 NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place on **24th June, 12 noon – 2pm**, in the **Court Room**, University Office, Old Aberdeen.

MB
10/06/2019