

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 11th JUNE 2020

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Colette Backwell, Simon Bains, Marlis Barraclough, Alison Brown, Michael Brown, Angel Cuesta Ciscar, Mirela Delibegovic, Andrew Dilley, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Paul Fowler, Donald Gray, Tamas Gyorfi, Catherine Jones, Paul Haggarty, Maria Kashtalyan, Amanda Lee, Ann Lewendon, Gary Macfarlane, Catia Montagna, Graeme Nixon, Iain Percival, Louise Phillips, Stuart Piertney, Dubravka Pokrajac, Liz Rattray, Gwen Smith, Chris Soulsby, Donna Walker

Apologies: Brian Henderson,

Welcome: Marion Campbell welcomed all to the meeting and confirmed that the focus of this RPC meeting would be on measures that have been introduced to ensure the continuation of research and knowledge exchange activities (as far as possible) during the current COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

1 MINUTES

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 9th March 2020 were approved.

2 MATTERS ARISING

2.1 Marion Campbell noted that UKRIO and ARMA have recently published new guidance on research ethics support and review in research organisation. Michael Brown will lead the work involved in implementing this guidance, and an initial gap analysis has been undertaken to assess the key issues to be addressed. This will be brought to RPC for further discussion of how the University's policies and procedures should be revised in order to align with this guidance.

2.2 She also noted the recent successes of our staff in obtaining @£1M Covid-19 research funding, with six grants awarded by the Chief Scientific Officer of Scotland. In the last week, three applications for covid research funding have been supported by Medical Research Scotland. RPC were also informed of a new University [website](#) that promotes the University's Covid response and research activity.

2.4 She confirmed that the University's SFC REG allocation for 2020/21 has been announced (noted in paper REFSG19:47).

2.5 RPC were informed of the SFC's Covid support fund for HEIs (£75M). SFC were due to meet last week to discuss the allocation of this fund, however no information has been received to date of this University's share.

2.6 RPC noted that the work of the Research Culture Working Group commence soon and initial delays were caused due to the transition to home-working.

3 RESEARCH FUNDING UPDATE

3.1 Research Income Report

3.1.1 Donna Walker provided an update on the research income covering the period to 30 April (Q3). RPC noted that income is currently behind budget by £3.6M however the indirect cost contribution (ICC) is ahead of budget by £279K. Current end of year forecast (taking into

account the impact of Covid-19) is for research income to be £7.9M behind budget, with an ICC £32K ahead of budget.

- 3.1.2 The negative impact on the grant income spread across future financial years was also noted. However there is a lot of grant application activity at present so this may be mitigated to an extent in the short to medium term
- 3.1.3 Marion Campbell agreed to circulate an email to RPC members regarding the current pause in Carnegie Trust Funding.

3.2 Applications and Awards Trends

- 3.2.1 Liz Rattray confirmed that @70 staff employed on research grants have been furloughed, and these have primarily been associated with industrial or charity funded research.
- 3.2.2 She also noted that the University has been successful in securing rapid response funding for covid-related research, and that a number of existing grants have been re-purposed to deal with the covid response. This has resulted in a slight recovery in Q3 with £16.8M of new awards.
- 3.2.3 RPC discussed the applications and awards information provided, noting the impact of the loss of staff with significant grant funding. On a positive note, some funders have extended their application deadlines and also the KTP portfolio was holding up and that the pipeline for future projects was good.
- 3.2.4 RPC noted that there should be an increased focus on the quality of applications (rather than quantity) through a robust peer review process, to ensure the most productive use of staff time. Options for maximising success rates were discussed, and RPC members were asked to consider the funding schemes where the University have the highest success rates, also to share the workload in writing grant applications by using teams of research staff where possible, to promote 'open calls' for funding which don't have application deadlines, and to ensure early engagement with new staff on this issue.

4 PGR ACTIONS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

- 4.1 Graeme Nixon provided a summary of the policy proposed by the Postgraduate School to minimise the impact of Covid-19 on PGR students, particularly those who are due to complete their PhDs by March 2021. RPC noted that this has recently received Senior Management Team approval.
- 4.2 A key aspect of the policy is the funded extension policy for students who are facing exceptional circumstances caused by covid (noted in appendix 1 of the paper). An application form will be circulated to all PGRs in the near future regarding this issue. (UKRI-funded students will not be eligible for this assistance as they already have access to similar UKRI funded extensions.) Applications for unfunded extensions will also be considered.
- 4.3 PGRs have also been urged to modify their projects wherever possible, whilst still maintaining doctoral level quality.
- 4.4 Priority will be given to lab access for students in the later stages of their PhDs. Marion Campbell confirmed that PGRs are being considered as priority cases in the Covid-19 Campus Planning Group discussions, with the current expectation that labs may be opened during the Scottish Government's phase 2 lifting of lockdown restrictions.

5 KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND COMMERCIALISATION ACTIVITY

- 5.1 Ann Lewendon provided an update on the recent activities of this team. Industrial engagement is ongoing, including potential opportunities for future funding mechanisms from industry. Innovate UK have commended the University for its support for KTPs in the current situation.
- 5.2 For entrepreneurship support, she noted that Santander have been extremely supportive for student start-ups, with 13 students taking part in the virtual Elevator Summer Accelerator programme.
- 5.3 The Public Engagement team continue to develop new methods of engagement during the current restrictions. The team have received funding received for Explorathon, which will fund public engagement activities for European Researchers' Night in late November.
- 5.4 The UK Government Covid-19 expert database has fourteen researchers from Aberdeen acknowledged in the reports produced from a survey following lockdown. This will be helpful in building their research impact portfolio.
- 5.4 She confirmed that the current lockdown has paused the work with the University's Facilities Group, however this will re-start once the labs begin to open up again.

6 MITIGATING COVID IMPACT ON RESEARCH ACTIVITY

- 6.1 RPC discussed the opportunities for mitigating the impact of Covid on research activity, noting that the main impacts may not be felt until months or possible years later. Impact on lack of access to labs was discussed, and also the access to the library and archives (which are equally important to Arts and Humanities disciplines).
- 6.2 Use of the flexible working policy will be important to acknowledge the ongoing impact upon staff working arrangements, particularly for those with ongoing caring responsibilities. The analysis of awards and applications for 2019/20 did not indicate particular impact on the levels of applications generally, or on levels of activity across gender. In discussion, it was acknowledged that applications and awards activity will have to be monitored closely for the any indication of disparate impact on gender or any of the protected characteristics or by career stage to make sure that, as far as possible, mitigations can be put in place. Consultation with staff will be critical to ensure that Heads of School are aware of the various pressure points, and so that adjustments can either be made now or to help address these issues in future e.g. by the effective application of the Research Leave policy.

ACTION: RPC members were asked to consider these issues and to continue to provide feedback/suggestions for further actions that could be taken.

7 RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK UPDATE

- 7.1 Marlis Barraclough confirmed that feedback is awaited from the Funding Councils on the revised REF submission deadlines. The current expectation is that the staff census date (31 July 2020) and the publication deadline (31 December 2020) will remain, however there might be an extension to the impact assessment period (currently 31 July 2020) to 31 December 2020. The likely date of submission is 31 March 2021.
- 7.2 In anticipation the revised submission deadline, RPC approved the revised institutional REF timetable. RPC members noted that revised UoA Environment statements will be required by the end of June, with all outstanding REF outputs to be reviewed and uploaded to Pure by the end of July. Institutional reviews of each UoA will occur in October and November and it will be important to ensure that there is no slippage in the preparations for final submission.

- 7.3. Issues regarding delayed publication dates were noted, and the REF team have been asked if exceptions to the publication deadline can be accepted. For impact, it may be permissible to make reference to planned events that have been cancelled due to covid-19, with panels asked to take this information into account during the review process. Further clarification on these issues is awaited.
- 7.4 Other key points noted were the increase in eligible staff FTE (now over 670, a significant increase from fewer than 600 at this time in 2019). Ongoing focus on the production of REF environment statements was noted, with the plan for the majority of the REF-related work to be completed by the end of this year.

8 UPDATE ON THE CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCHERS

- 8.1 Mirela Delibegovic provided an update on the work of the University working group responsible for the implementation of the Concordat. The University is a signatory to the Concordat, which aims to address issues with research culture and places obligations on institutions to ensure that improvements are made. The Concordat covers issues such as research staff roles and contracts, career development policies and practices, and training and support for Principal Investigators and Academic Line Managers of researchers. Monitoring of compliance is undertaken via the submission of an annual report from the University.
- 8.2 School Directors of Research were asked to assist in the promotion of the work of this group within their Schools and to provide support for this group when requested.
- 8.3 Marlis Barraclough agreed to circulate this paper to all UoA leads involved in the preparation of the UoA Environment statements.

9 UKRI BLOCK GRANT 2020/21

- 9.1 Further to a previous discussion on the block grant at the March RPC meeting, Simon Bains provided an update on the budgetary pressures for session 2020/21 and the impact of an £80K reduction in the funding available for payment of article processing charges (APCs).
- 9.2 RPC endorsed the proposal that no payments would be made from the block grant for gold open access in hybrid journals. Simon Bains agreed to draft staff guidance on this issue and circulate to RPC members

10 RESEARCH GOVERNANCE HEALTH CHECK – SCHOOL OF LAW

- 10.1 RPC noted the information provided by the healthcheck.
- 10.2 RPC noted that the recent audit of the University's ethics review procedures acknowledged an improvement in the uptake of ethics training by students, however opportunities for further engagement with this training by staff need to be progressed. In addition, the University will consider how to implement a more robust process for checking ethics compliance of research projects. These issues will be captured in the work that will be undertaken to ensure that the University meets the requirements of the recent URKIO & ARMA guidance on ethical review of research, as noted in item 2.1 of this meeting.

For Information

The committee received the following reports for information:

11 SFC REG ANNOUNCEMENT

12 KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE CONCORDAT

13 NEXT MEETING

13.1 The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place in session 2020/21.

DF 06/20