UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 26TH SEPTEMBER 2019

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Simon Bains, Alison Brown, Michael Brown, Angel Cuesta Ciscar, Elizabeth Curtis, Andrew Dilley, Tamas Gyorfi, Paul Haggarty, Maria Kashtalyan, Ann Lewendon, Catia Montagna, Graeme Nixon, Louise Phillips, Stuart Piertney, Dubravka Pokrajac, Liz Rattray, Rainer Schulz, Iain Stansfield (for Paul Fowler), Marlis Barraclough (Clerk)

Apologies: Jen Cleland, Gary Cooper, Donald Gray, Brian Henderson, Constanze Hesse, Paul Fowler, Catherine Jones, Louise King, Amanda Lee, Gary Macfarlane, Catia Montagna, Chris Soulsby

1   MINUTES

1.1   The minutes of the meeting held on 24th June 2019 were approved.

2   MATTERS ARISING

2.1   Marion Campbell invited Simon Bains to give a short update on recent developments around Plan S. He said that Coalition S had been very active over the summer and had launched a learned Society toolkit to enable transition from subscription funding models to Plan S compliant models. World Health Organisation had now joined Coalition S. He pointed out that detailed funder requirements remained unclear at this stage and we would have to await further announcements. The new UKRI open access policy was expected later this year and would be launched with a consultation period of 3 months.

2.2   Marion Campbell reported that SMT had discussed RPC's recommendation to develop an institutional policy on the use of metrics in research assessment and to sign the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment. SMT were sympathetic to the case made and recommended to seek Senate's view on the matter.

3   COMPOSITION AND REMIT

3.1   Marion Campbell reported that at its meeting on 2nd October, Court would receive nominations for a new lay member of Court, Dr Iain Percival, to join the Research Policy Committee, and a new co-opted member, Dr Colette Backwell, who would be joining the Committee for its November meeting.

3.2   In discussion, it was noted that, overall, the language of the remit of the Committee was passive and did not reflect adequately the strategic nature of the committee. Marion Campbell emphasised the two way dialogue between members and the wider academic community on which the committee relied to ensure that it can play a full part in developing, implementing and monitoring research strategy and performance. It was agreed discussion of strategy should form part of every committee from now on, and Marion Campbell invited members to bring forward appropriate items for the agenda.

3.3   The membership and remit for 2019/20 were approved, subject to the following amendments:
Penultimate bullet point, amend to read:
'Oversight and operation of institutional Graduate school, development and review of policies relating to doctoral training'

Add bullet point:

Development and monitoring of research and knowledge exchange sections of the institutional Outcome Agreement and the University Innovation Fund documents
A wider review of the remit is to take place during 2019/20.

4   APPLICATIONS AND AWARDS

4.1   Liz Rattray reported that applications in 2018/19 had achieved similar value to the previous year. However, the numbers included some very large awards that masked the underlying trend which indicated a general reduction in grant activity. The National Decommissioning Centre, valued at £12.7m which will benefit a number of Schools, primarily the School of Engineering. The award from Wista, supporting the TauRx project, will similarly be shared among a number of Schools.

4.2   She referred to UKRI grant performance and said that the funding council's Research & Knowledge Exchange committee had noted that, overall, Scottish institutions have attracted a smaller percentage of UKRI funding than previously. There were concerns about Scottish competitiveness around UKRI funding. For the University of Aberdeen, this means that we need to prioritise UKRI funding and demonstrate leverage from REG. She suggested that the School strategic plans should mention the specific responses to the UKRI Delivery Plans and set out how the University can position itself to respond to UKRI challenges. UKRI set out various types of fellowships and future leader schemes and it was important that we participate in these and put forward excellent candidates. The funding regimes are generally tapered and expect the institution to provide co-funding and eventually full funding for the posts in future years. Discussions will need to take place on how the funding implications can be managed.

4.3   She also reported that the Digital Strategy Group had approved a proposal for an integrated research award management system that would replace eApp and the grants and contracts database. It would introduced a costing tool and allow simpler grant management. The development and implementation would commence in early 2020.

5   INCOME

5.1   Research income for 2018/19 is £56m, short of £58m that were budgeted for the year. Direct cost recovery is higher than expected. A number of grants had been transferred to other institutions following staff departures. New grants, like the NDC, had not yet impacted significantly on research spend for 2018/19, but would assist with direct cost recovery for the coming financial years. The target for 2019/20 is similar to the 2018/19 turnout. The targets for 2019/20 take account of staff departures.

5.2   Marion Campbell invited Schools to engage with the Grants Academy and to increase grant activity.

6   KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND COMMERCIALISATION

6.1   Ann Lewendon presented the Knowledge Exchange and Commercialisation report which had been restructured to present activity according to the outcomes listed the institutional UIF document. An application was in hand to the Strengths in Places call, entitled 'Energy Transitions', with submission of an outline application due on 9th October.

6.2   Strength in Places is a UKRI funding programme rooted in the Government's commitment to increase spend on research and development to aid regional development to 2.4% of GDP. The Energy Transitions proposal represents a partnership between the University, RGU, Opportunity North East, OGTC, Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council and focuses on industry transition from oil and gas and decarbonisation. Michael Brown said that the University was planning to respond to a future round of Strength in Places funding calls by putting together a bid around cultural strategy. Activity was ongoing to promote Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) across the University. A number of information events are currently taking place.

6.3   Metrics for commercialisations activity are stable; two spin out companies were achieved in 2018/19. Fiona Rudkin was runner up in this year's Converge Challenge, winning £20k for her business.

6.4   The Public Engagement with Research Unit's report focused on the annual Doors Open Day which was very successful this year and pointed to the Wellcome ISSF public engagement fund which was currently open for internal bids. The University was planning to host another Festival of Social Sciences, and Ann Lewendon invited Directors of Research to encourage colleagues to participate. Any feedback on the report, or any comments or questions should be addressed to Ann Lewendon (ann.lewendon@abdn.ac.uk).

7   REPORTS FROM ETHICS BOARDS

7.1   The Committee received reports from ethics committees and review boards. For the Committee for Research Ethics and Governance in Arts, Social Sciences and Business, Liz Curtis reported that she had recently taken over from Katarina Trimmings as Chair. The Committee had reviewed guidance to researchers in the light of GDPR and had considered how ethics applications from campuses abroad should be dealt with. Concerns raised by the University's BME student association had been addressed by the appropriate School, but wider issues had been raised that will be addressed through improved guidance around protected characteristics for the use of students.

7.2   Maria Kashtalyan had recently succeeded Ben Martin as Chair of the Physical Sciences and Engineering Ethics Board. During the last academic year, the Board had addressed a large variety of issues including how to deal with learning analytics based ethics applications; fieldwork outside the UK and the use of social media data in research. She also reported that a decision had been made to review PGT ethics applications by Engineering students within the School, in line with the review process for PGT applications for other disciplines. She confirmed that there was cross representation of ethics officers from different Schools on the ethics boards and committees.

7.3   The Committee discussed the implications for research ethics for large and complex projects, particularly GCRF projects which involve field work abroad. Each project may involve multiple ethics applications which may lead to issues around sponsorship. Detailed ethics and governance plans would be required, and in some cases the University may have to act as a sponsor for distinct work packages rather than the project overall. Liz Rattray, Michael Brown and Paul Haggarty undertook to discuss this further outside the RPC meeting.

8   RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

8.1   The committee received the REF Update to Court which provided information around the preparedness for REF. RPC noted the projected increase in the number of researchers to be submitted, and the increase in the number of 4* outputs identified to date. Marion Campbell commended the work undertaken in the Schools but noted that much remained to be done in the last 14 months until submission. On the institutional Code of Practice, she reported that the Scottish Funding Council had not approved our Code over the summer. She noted that, across the higher education sector, 25% of the submitted Codes of Practice were approved, for 50% minor clarifications and changes were sought, and the remaining 25% required major changes. For our Code of Practice, the SFC asked for clarification on two points which were provided by the deadline of 20th September. The committee noted the information provided.

8.2   The committee discussed the preparations for the forthcoming November reviews of REF preparedness which will be chaired by the Principal. Marion Campbell confirmed the following requirements:

- All reviews and predicted grades to be updated in Pure
- Updated versions of all impact case studies
- Outline draft environment statement

8.3   The deadline is 31 October 2019. Marion Campbell undertook to contact Heads of School and School Directors of Research/Unit of Assessment leads with the detailed requirements and deadlines for the reviews.

DRAFT

9   GRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT

9.1   The committee received and noted a report from the first meeting of the PGR Task and Finish Group.

10   RESEARCH FACILITIES WORKING GROUP REPORT

10.1   Graeme Nixon introduced the report by the Group and encouraged School Directors of Research to engage with the work of the group. He invited suggestions for additional agenda items from RPC, to be sent to him at g.f.nixon@abdn.ac.uk .

11   PROPOSAL FOR ONLINE RESEARCH INTEGRITY TRAINING COURSE

11.1   The committee received paper RPC19:13 and approved the proposal for research integrity training for researchers.

12   FUNDERS POLICIES ON HARASSMENT AND BULLYING

12.1   The committee received paper RPC19:14 and noted the information provided.

13   ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

13.1   The committee received the Grants Academy Report (RPC19:15), the Risk Register for Research (RPC19:16) and the Annual Research Governance Statement (RPC19:17)

14   NEXT MEETING

14.1   The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place on 27th November.

MB 11/19