

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY, 28TH SEPTEMBER 2018

Present: Professor M Campbell (Convener), Professor P Beaumont, Professor A Brown, Professor M Brown, Professor J Cleland, Dr A Cuesta Ciscar, Dr A Dilley, Professor, P Fowler, Professor H Hutchison, Dr A Lewendon, Professor B Martin, Ms K McPhail (via Skype), Professor C Montagna, Professor P Morgan (for Professor P Haggarty), Professor R Neilson, Professor G Nixon, Professor L Phillips, Professor S Piertney, Professor D Pokrajac, Dr L Rattray, Professor M Ryan, Professor C Soulsby (via Skype) Dr K Trimmings, Mrs D Walker, Dr M Watson and Mrs M Barraclough (Clerk)

Apologies: Professor G Macfarlane, Professor P Haggarty

1 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12th June 2018 were agreed.

2 MATTERS ARISING

Professor Campbell welcomed all to the meeting, and extended a particular welcome to new members: Professor Catia Montagna, Director of Research for the Business School; Dr Angel Cuesta Ciscar, Director of Research for the School of Natural and Computing Sciences and Professor Hazel Hutchison, Librarian.

She reminded members of recent good news – the award of Scottish University of the Year 2019 by the Sunday Times Good University Guide; the rise in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (up 27 places to 158th) and the nomination for the Times Higher DataPoints Merits Award. The nominations and improvement in rankings are based on citation performance to a significant degree and are therefore evidence of high quality of research undertaken at the University of Aberdeen over the recent period.

3 RESEARCH APPLICATIONS AND AWARDS & RESEARCH INCOME

Dr Rattray introduced paper 18:01 which showed a decline of research awards for most Schools during 2017/18. The figures did not include the recent awards for TauRx and the Decommissioning Centre which will deliver additional research income in the current financial year. Individual school data showed a steady decline in many schools, linked to staff losses over the last few years. Mrs Walker added that the 2016/17 application figures were inflated by three large GCRF hub applications that were ultimately unsuccessful. Projected income for 2018/19 is similar to that for 2017/18, with significant reduction in income forecast for 2019/20. Professor Campbell noted that activity had declined over the last few years. Research & Innovation are supporting the development of quality applications for external funding through the Grants Academy, with particular focus on opportunities under the GCRF programme. Robust peer review and increased mentoring aims to improve the quality of applications across the board. Specific School strategies to address the decline in applications will be discussed with Heads of School as part of the annual strategic planning process.

Mrs Walker introduced paper 18:02 which reported research income at the end of financial year 2017/18 at £56m, around £2m below budget. Indirect cost contribution (ICC) was higher than anticipated and met budget expectations. The reported shortfall was largely due to lower spend on operating budgets. She explained that the institutional order book did not yet include the recent OGTC and TauRx awards which will generate additional research income in 2018/19 and beyond. The projected outturn for 2018/19 at this point is around £58m.

In discussion, it was suggested that the income tables should include a 'per FTE' income figure to enable comparisons with previous years. A decline of per FTE income is an indicator of loss of excellent researchers, and of higher teaching and administrative workloads for those remaining. Court had recently agreed to fill 55 current academic vacancies and to make an additional 50 senior

appointments to improve REF2021 performance. In some areas, particularly around Geosciences, research income had further declined because of the down turn in the oil and gas industry and was only now beginning to pick up again.

Committee members emphasised the need for those appointment decisions to take into account disciplinary context. For example, Professor Beaumont suggested that for the School of Law, research performance would be considerably enhanced by post doctoral or early career researchers rather than mid-career or senior appointments. Multidisciplinary Schools, like Divinity, History & Philosophy or Social Sciences, will have to develop discipline specific strategies to increase applications, awards and income. Target setting will need to be done at an appropriate level, and will need to be sensitive to disciplinary culture. Professor Campbell indicated that this was the intention but emphasised that the School strategies, once agreed, would have to be implemented and monitored through Heads of School and School Directors of Research.

The Committee discussed the measures currently in place to support researchers who are applying for external funding. The Institute of Medical Sciences (IMS) has introduced informal mentorship among researchers to share good practice and improve the quality of grant applications. This will be reviewed and may be formalised if considered effective. Support is underpinned by formal annual reviews during which expectations of grant performance are clearly articulated. Social Sciences have a School forum which focuses on grant writing and encouraging working with early career researchers. The Intention to Submit process (ITS) has achieved higher success rates, but is also considered by some as an obstacle to applying for grants. Researchers within the IMS are working to improve the ITS process.

Staff departures have increased teaching loads across the board, and have impacted negatively on research. Workloads will have to be managed carefully to ensure that all staff are able to apply for funds. The University is dependent on a small number of staff for the majority of its research income and any measures to encourage further applications need to address this imbalance. Ms McPhail commented that the dependence on small numbers of researchers as grant holders had remained unchanged for a number of years. There was an urgent need to diversify the funding base for research and to access private sector funding. She called for an action plan to address this issue, and to improve the distribution of grants across a larger number of researchers. Prof Campbell noted that this issue would be discussed at the upcoming school planning meetings.

Professor Campbell emphasised the support available through Research & Innovation, and the central pump priming funds available to support pilot studies and development of grant applications for GCRF and other funding programmes. She invited the committee to think creatively of measures that would encourage additional applications and grant activity, particularly for interdisciplinary and partnership research. Professor Michael Brown suggested that the Research Policy Committee had an important role to play in changing the culture across the institution by creating cohorts of researchers who share ideas and work on scaling up projects and ambitions, and working across disciplines and Schools.

Dr Rattray commented that the University has been working with private sector partners across the region and internationally, and that overall, private sector income is growing. The CityDeal and other initiatives has enabled the University to work on partnerships that will lever industrial funding. She suggested that the outlook for industrial and other private sector income was more positive than the current figures may suggest.

4 KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE REPORT

Dr Lewendon introduced papers 18:03 and 18:04 which provided information about knowledge exchange, commercialisation and public engagement activities across the University. She reported that the Scottish Funding Council had made available to the University of Aberdeen an additional £527k for knowledge exchange activities. Paragraph 3.1 of the Knowledge Exchange and Commercialisation Report outlined how the additional funds will be used to support knowledge exchange and commercialisation activities. These have been approved by the Scottish Funding Council. Calls for pump priming funds will be issued by Dr Lewendon's team in due course, and any local strategies should be set out in the School plans. She invited questions and comments on the proposals from members of the committee, to be addressed to her (e-mail a.lewendon@abdn.ac.uk).

The Committee noted the information provided in the Public Engagement with Research Report, and particularly the winners of the Principal's Prize for Public Engagement with Research. Any further questions or comments on the report are to be addressed to Dr Jen Scott (e-mail j.scott@abdn.ac.uk)

School Directors are invited to promote within their Schools the opportunities offered by the knowledge exchange and public engagement teams within R&I.

5 NATIONAL DECOMMISSIONING CENTRE

The Committee received an update on the National Decommissioning Centre (NDC), paper 18:05. Dr Rattray commented that the National Decommissioning Centre (NDC) represented an example of a longer term relationship that will enable access to partners and research funds previously outwith the institutional reach, such as the Decommissioning Challenge Fund. We will further explore opportunities for Datascience Informatics around Decommissioning, Oil and Gas and Health. Professor Neilson added that a call to bid for postgraduate studentships had recently gone out to all Schools that had registered an interest and that the Oil and Gas Technology Centre (OGTC) were looking to fill these studentships as soon as practicable.

The Committee commended the work of all those involved in setting up the NDC. Its interdisciplinary nature and approach to partnership working will yield considerable benefits to the University, including for the next Research Excellence Framework (REF). A formal, high profile opening was scheduled for later this year. It was agreed that high levels of publicity about the Centre should be sustained to share good news around the academic community and across the region and to support the NDC in future activities.

6 RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

Professor Campbell provided a short overview of the meetings held with the Principal and Heads of School at the beginning of August. The meetings focused on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) preparedness within Schools, which varied among Schools. Across the institution, we have currently identified between 65% to 75% of the outputs needed for submission.

She confirmed that the new Principal was very focused on REF and had requested regular updates for Court. Professor Beaumont expressed deep concern that School Directors of Research had not been invited to the meetings, and that Heads of School were not necessarily best placed to answer all the questions on REF preparations within Schools. Professor Campbell indicated that the meetings had been arranged with Heads of Schools to reinforce the importance of ensuring the delivery of REF-able research quality within each school.

Impact required further work and attention, and will be the main focus of investment and support within our REF preparations going forward. During the meetings, Heads of School asked for general support to facilitate impact, and for funds to support the development of and evidence gathering for impact case studies. Professor Campbell confirmed that a pump priming fund to support impact case studies would be announced soon, and that Schools were invited to come forward with requests for support. Workshops for impact case study authors would be taking place at the beginning of October, and followed up by 'impact clinics', drop in sessions for impact case study authors to receive feedback and advice on impact case studies in development. Professor Piernney expressed concern that the sessions were focused very narrowly on impact case studies for REF, when more general impact training was needed for all researchers.

The Committee received paper RPC18:06, which provided a draft institutional response to the funding councils' consultation on the draft guidance on submission and draft panel guidance and working methods. Mrs Barraclough introduced the paper and draft response, and pointed in particular to the proposed rules around individual staff circumstances which replicated, by and large, the regime in place for REF2014.

The Committee approved the broad terms of the response. Professor Montagna commented that the ability to reduce outputs for individual circumstances should be complemented by an ability to reduce the number of impact case studies to be submitted by a unit of assessment. The Committee was

content with the suggestion that the submission of the same outputs twice in a unit of assessment should be permitted, although there was broad agreement that this should only be done sparingly if at all. There was general agreement that the rules on impact case studies should be harmonised across all main panels, and that there was no justification for the rules to be different for main panel A. Mrs Barraclough invited any further comments to be addressed directly to here (m.barraclough@abdn.ac.uk).

The Committee discussed paper RPC18:07 which set out the terms of the discussion held by the REF Steering Group on the way in which the institutional submission structure for REF should be determined. This was agreed by the Committee. There were questions around the timescale of the decision making. It was anticipated that the REF Steering Group would consider questions around the submission of larger number of researchers before looking at individual cases or cases involving small numbers of researchers.

7 POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT

Professor Nixon introduced the report from the Postgraduate School (RPC18:08). The Committee noted that numbers of applications had declined compared to previous years. Professor Nixon said that the Graduate School was developing its vision, working closely with Schools. The vision is based on three pillars: engagement, skills and wellbeing. The cornerstone of the vision is that all PGRs feel supported and the value of their PhD research is defined and shared. A number of training and engagement events are in place over the coming weeks.

8 GLOBAL CHALLENGES RESEARCH FUND REPORT DECEMBER 2018

The Committee received paper RPC18:09 which provided a summary of the GCRF related activities during the last quarter. The University's ability to pump prime GCRF related projects and to support capacity building had been improved by a larger than expected GCRF support grant from the Scottish Funding Council.

Current institutional grant holdings from GCRF, Newton Fund and any other ODA compliant funding schemes was £4.2m, with a number of applications not yet decided. Collaboration with AURORA partners on mapping institutional expertise and capacity is ongoing; early analysis shows strength for the University of Aberdeen in health and nutrition, and energy. Recruitment of a dedicated Business Development Officer for GCRF is underway.

The Conversations on... series of networking events will continue with workshops on Global Water Resources and Citizens and Conflict. Suggestions for further topics are welcome and should be directed to Dr Juliette Snow (j.e.snow@abdn.ac.uk). The Committee agreed that the Conversations on... series was well received by the academic community.

The Committee discussed the effective dissemination of GCRF intelligence. Professor Alison Brown and Dr Dille commented that researchers from social sciences and from the arts and humanities are often invited to join consortia late in the bid development stages and have therefore only limited ability to influence bid development. Dr Rattray agreed that early engagement was vital for all researchers and Professional Services to ensure the bids are as strong as possible. The dedicated member of staff would support improved dissemination. In addition, Schools were invited to come forward with suggestions on how GCRF intelligence can best be shared effectively.

9 REPORTS FROM THE ETHICS COMMITTEES AND ETHICAL REVIEW BOARDS

The annual reports from the Ethics Committees and Ethical Review Boards were note, as were the remit and membership of the Research Integrity Short Term Working Group, chaired by Professor Gary Macfarlane.

10 BREXIT UPDATE

The Committee received paper RPC18:15 which described the actions proposed and taken by the University of Aberdeen to mitigate the risks presented by Brexit. Dr Rattray reported that the University was talking with UKRO and Scotland Europa to keep abreast of developments.

Assurances are in place that all grant applications submitted before exit day are covered by the Government underwriting the grants. Researchers are encouraged to participate as usual in the remaining funding rounds prior to March 2019. The University was working separately toward a diversification of income sources to mitigate the potential loss of EU funding. We are also looking at setting up a legal entity within the EU with a view to retain access to EU funds. This is being considered by a number of UK institutions some of whom have already gone ahead and set up branches within the EU. Any action in this regard may be School or discipline specific and Schools are invited to discuss any relevant proposal with Dr Rattray.

There was a brief discussion around the support offered by the University to EU colleagues wishing to remain in the UK after Brexit and whether more could be done. It was noted that some institutions had offered to pay settlement fees for their EU employees.

11 NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place on Monday, 3rd December 2018 at 12 noon, in the Court Room, University Office, Old Aberdeen

MB
10/2018