



## RESEARCH GOVERNANCE

### ANNUAL REPORT TO COURT ACADEMIC YEAR 2020/21

#### Introduction

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 in place robust and effective processes for dealing with misconduct.

The Research Policy Committee (RPC), which is chaired by the Vice Principal (Research), has oversight of research ethics and governance issues; developing and reviewing institutional policy on research ethics and governance; receiving reports from Ethics Boards and Committees; undertaking ethics health checks within Schools. Responsibility for facilitating ethical approval for research projects and the promotion of good research practice rests with five 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 RPC membership comprises of representatives from all Schools (normally the School Director of Research), representatives from the relevant Professional Services, and an external member from University Court. It meets four times per year.

In addition to the work of the RPC, 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, the outcome of internal audits and through compliance with funders' requirements, voluntary instruments and codes of practice. Substantive developments and activities are discussed in turn below.

#### Mitigating the Impact of Covid-19 on Research Projects

In order to address the impact of the pandemic on research activities, the University Campus (Research) Planning Group was established to ensure that timely and practical guidance was issued to the staff and students within our researcher community. The group were responsible for ensuring that all national and Scottish government guidance was reviewed and implemented in order to ensure the safety of all University researchers and research participants, and anyone else who may have come into contact with our researchers.

Guidance for researchers was promoted through the University webpages on the procedures to be followed for lab-based research, and for any research projects involving human participants. This was supported by a series of Covid FAQs for researchers, covering issues such as research funding, research involving the NHS, research involving human participants, and guidance for PGRs and their supervisors. Supplementary guidance was also provided on the appropriate use of digital tools (for those who were able to transfer their research activities to involve online contact with research participants), and once travel restrictions were eased, on the University procedures for business travel during the pandemic and on any visitors onto campuses.

The Group continues to meet to ensure that the University can respond promptly to the dynamic nature of the current pandemic.

## Strategy

The University launched its 2040 Strategy in February 2020 and work is underway on its implementation. It focuses, among other things, on interdisciplinary research and engagement with partners and stakeholders, and Interdisciplinary Challenge Interim Directors have been appointed with responsibility for overseeing the delivery of this aspect of the University's 2040 Strategy. The five Interdisciplinary Challenge areas are as follows: Data & Artificial Intelligence; Environment & Biodiversity; Health, Nutrition & Wellbeing; the Centre for Energy Transition; and Social Inclusion & Cultural Diversity. These new roles will encourage and support our academic colleagues in engaging with interdisciplinary work (as per the increased focus on interdisciplinary working, endorsed by the UK Research Funding Councils) and will ensure that our research activities are impactful and enhance our reputation for world-class research.

## Research Awards Management System Project

As of February 2021, the University implemented a new research awards management system (Worktribe). This online platform provides a single end-to-end solution for the development, submission and approval of grant applications through to post award monitoring and financial management.

It offers enhanced reporting functionality and transparency around research funding which will also improve the governance of research projects and grants.

## Research Governance Framework

The University's Research Governance Handbook (explaining the standards, principles and expectations for research ethics and governance) underwent an annual review with a revised version approved by RPC and uploaded in November 2020. Updates included information on the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA); revisions to the remit of the internal Ethics Committee responsible for research involving the use of animals; and further clarification on ethical review procedures to be followed when undertaking research outside of the University or the UK, and revisions to the 'Policy & Guidelines on Good Research Conduct', based on feedback received on the implemented revised policy during session 2019/20.

In March 2021 an online training package on Research Integrity (purchased on licence from the University of Dundee) was provided to researchers through the MyAberdeen training platform. This training is mandatory for all PGR students, research staff (including academics with a research element in their contract) plus Professional Services/Technical/Support Staff who are responsible for supporting the University's research activities.

The training complements the existing training provided on research ethics & governance, line management training and discipline-based training. It also meets one of the key recommendations of the Universities UK's Concordat to Support Research Integrity in supporting the development of researchers' skills.

## Research Culture

- **Task & Finish Group**

This group was established in 2020 to review the research culture at the University and to propose suggestions for improvement. In late 2020, group members gave a number of presentations to different Schools/meetings/groups of staff & students to raise awareness of the work of the group, and to promote wider staff engagement with its aims. Group meetings were then temporarily paused in early 2021 as a result of a University-wide initiative to reduce staff workloads due to the increased pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The work of the group recommenced in April 2021, and since then the group has devised and arranged a series of Café Culture sessions, whereby groups of similar staff/researchers e.g.

Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs), Early Career Researchers (ECRs), Professional Services staff could meet to discuss key aspects of the University's research culture, identify issues and propose recommendations for improvement. In partnership with the University of Edinburgh, a short set of questions is being devised which will help to measure research culture and which could be used in future surveys. Feedback from the staff engagement sessions will be used to produce a final report of the group's findings and recommendations for the University's senior management team.

The timescale for completion of this work is expected to be in the early part of 2022.

- **Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers**

The Researcher Development Concordat was revised in September 2019, with new Principles and Obligations which institutions were invited to sign up to. Having signed up to these in July 2020 the University submitted a report and action plan in December 2020 to retain the HR Excellence in Research Award, which evidences progress against the Concordat Principles. Due to the impact of Covid-19 we reported against the old document (in common with several other institutions in our cohort) and retained the Award in January 2021.

Researcher Development has undertaken a mapping exercise, which transfers existing HR Excellence activity to the new Concordat format, notes the identified gaps, and highlights alignment with other initiatives, the 2040 strategy and a recent Russell Group toolkit on Research Culture. Work is ongoing to establish a steering group and produce a final action plan, following alignment with other initiatives and consultation with Schools.

The Concordat work sits firmly within the scope of Research Culture, which is concerned with career development and working conditions for researchers, amongst other elements, offering the opportunity to situate the Concordat work in a broad and dynamic conversation. It has therefore been important to align the Concordat work with that of the Research Culture Task and Finish Group.

### **Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)**

DORA is a worldwide initiative comprising a set of recommendations aimed at improving the ways in which researchers and their research outputs are evaluated. The University became a signatory to the declaration in June 2020, however implementation of the declaration was paused in session 2020/21 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. A recruitment process is now underway for the post of Scholarly Communications Officer with specific responsibility for publication metrics, to ensure that the University can meet its obligations under DORA. The postholder will lead on the development of policies, training and other support services.

### **School Research Governance Healthchecks**

The School Research Governance Healthcheck process is designed to assess each School's compliance with the University's Research Governance Framework. School responses (and feedback from the Healthcheck Review Panel) are submitted to the RPC for information. Due to the disruption caused by the covid pandemic, the review process was temporarily halted. The process resumed in the session and completed healthchecks were submitted by the School of Natural and Computing Sciences (NCS) and the School of Medicine, Medicinal Sciences & Nutrition (SMMSN). The NCS healthcheck was reviewed and feedback returned to the School with further suggestions for improvements to local practices. The SMMSN healthcheck is still under review, due to the current vacancy in the role of Dean for Cultural Strategy & Research Governance.

### **Animal Welfare and Ethical Review**

The University of Aberdeen Ethical Review Committee (ERC) acts on behalf of the Establishment Licence Holder to ensure that the University meets its obligations under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (amended 2012 to comply with Directive 2010/63/EU). The ERC discharges

functions of an Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body, as required under the ASPA legislation, and has oversight of all matters related to animal welfare, care and use at the University.

At the ERC's annual meeting, the University Code of Practice for Research Involving the Use of Animals was reviewed, and some updates were identified and applied. The ERC's workload for the preceding year was reviewed and it was noted that undertaking bimonthly ERC meetings online continued to work well. Recruitment of a new ERC Convenor is underway and a formal handover of responsibilities will be undertaken in academic year 2021-22. The ERC initiated a new activity in 2021, organising an online 'in-term review event' during which project licence holders presented an overview of their work to their peers. The event was successful and will become an annual ERC-led activity.

## **Graduate School**

PGR induction and orientation practices were revised and a comprehensive suite of online resources have been made available to support new PGRs to make a successful start to their research degree. These enhance the tailored in-School activities and provide a robust training and support package for all PGRs.

In light of the impact of Covid-19 on the PGR population, a University Policy to Minimise the Impact of Covid-19 on PGR students was approved and applications were accepted for exceptional funded extensions for students for whom projects had been significantly disrupted as a result of the pandemic. The funded extensions were designed to extend the submission date for the PhD rather than the supervised period of study. The University also considered a number of applications from UKRI funded students who required additional financial support for their studies. The University will continue to provide support for funded extensions through AY 2021/22.

## **Research Misconduct**

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, the University's Policy on Whistleblowing was reviewed and updated in session 2020/21.

During academic year 2020/21, the following research misconduct investigations were undertaken:

- An allegation of plagiarism was made against a PhD graduate. Following a disciplinary hearing and appeal process, the allegation was upheld and the PhD was revoked.
- An allegation of research fabrication in relation to a freelance researcher at the University was raised under the Whistleblowing procedure. The investigation concluded that there was no case to answer.
- A 'near miss' was identified in relation to ethical approval of a research project involving human participants. Once the issue was identified, corrective action was taken (with the agreement of the external funder).
- Proceedings in a case of alleged research misconduct against a PhD student (failure to obtain ethical approval prior to the commencement of the contact with research participants) are currently underway.
- An authorship dispute occurred between collaborators on a research project involving an external partner. The dispute related to data ownership issues arising from the data obtained during the research collaboration. The dispute was resolved via an internal mediation process.
- An allegation of self-plagiarism was made against a researcher in relation to the publication of two almost identical journal articles, which had been published a number of years ago. The

article was retracted from the second journal, and a University investigation was held to consider the allegation. The self-plagiarism was immediately acknowledged by the researcher, and due to mitigating circumstances, the issue was concluded by the requirement for the researcher to complete further training on research integrity issues.

- Concerns were raised in relation to a study with Healthy Volunteers, a potential breach of our duty of care towards the volunteers and an alleged failure to meet ethical obligations. Following investigation of the allegations, the complaint was not upheld by the University, but, in further correspondence with the complainant, we undertook to amend our review process for research to be undertaken in this specific area to take account of the concerns raised.
- An investigation is currently underway into a complaint raised against a member of academic staff in relation to a claim of joint authorship of an article.

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