



RESEARCH GOVERNANCE

ANNUAL REPORT TO COURT ACADEMIC YEAR 2019/20

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-medical 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) and representatives from the relevant Professional Services and it meets four times a 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.

2040 Strategy

In February 2020 the University launched its 2040 Strategy. The strategy includes the University's long-term approach to producing high-quality research over the next 20 years. It emphasises the ongoing development of the University's research culture, based upon the overarching themes of inclusive, interdisciplinary, international and sustainable research.

Research integrity and high standards of governance are important tenets of the strategy. It is underpinned by the University's Research Governance Framework (first published in November 2012, reviewed and revised annually with the last major revision in November 2019).

As part of the implementation of the new research strategy, a new role of Dean for Cultural Strategy and Research Governance was introduced in October 2019. The role incorporates specific responsibilities for oversight of research governance and integrity within the University.

Research Governance Framework

In session 2018/19, the RPC agreed that a comprehensive review of the University's Research Governance Framework should be undertaken. The purpose of the review (undertaken by the Research Governance Framework Working Group, a short term working group reporting to RPC) was to ensure a comprehensive review of the University's Research Governance Handbook, thereby ensuring full compliance with the Universities UK 'Concordat to Support Research Integrity'.

A sub-group (Research Integrity Working Group) was also established to respond to the House of Commons Science & Technology Select Committee's Report on Research Integrity (June 2018). The

work of the sub-group was primarily focused on reviewing the University's procedures for allegations of research misconduct, considering the recommendation that research integrity training become compulsory for PGR students and supervisors, and considering the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee's report on 'Research Integrity: Clinical Trials Transparency' (October 2018) to ensure that University practices were aligned with the requirements relating to appropriate registration of clinical trials, and subsequent reporting of the trial outcomes. The University's NHS partners in clinical governance were instrumental in this undertaking, working under our joint framework agreement.

The review of the Research Governance Framework was also informed by an external audit of the University's research data management practices, which led to a comprehensive revision of the Research Data Management Policy and development of further guidance on this issue, both of which were approved by RPC.

In November 2019 RPC reviewed and approved the recommendations of these groups. Key outcomes of this work included a comprehensive revision of the guidance on obtaining ethical review of research projects, a revised Policy on Handling Allegations of Research Misconduct, and the agreement to implement of a mandatory training programme in research integrity, to be completed by PGR students, supervisors, all research-active staff and associated professional and technical services staff e.g. research technicians, staff who have a role in reviewing research data, or who work as part of a research team, or have a related administrative function. This training programme will be rolled out in session 2020/21.

Research Culture

- **Task & Finish Group**

In response to the 2020 publication of the Wellcome Trust report "What Researchers Think About the Culture They Work In", the University Research Policy Committee (RPC) approved the establishment of a short-term task and finish (T&F) group to review the existing research culture within the University and to propose new initiatives for further enhancement. To date, the University has introduced a number of activities aimed at positively impacting upon our research culture (e.g. full review of our Research Governance Handbook, revised procedures in relation to research integrity), and the work of the T&F Group will promote the University's commitment to a supportive working environment for all research staff. The T&F Group will report their findings to the RPC in session 2020/21.

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

The University became a signatory of the revised Concordat in July 2020 and fully supports the principles within.

We are committed to ensuring that our research culture is creative, innovative, collaborative and supportive which places inclusiveness at its heart and recognises the vital role our research staff play at the University. The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers provides a framework to focus work to ensure the University continues to push boundaries in the way we support research careers within our University and across the HE sector.

The University has agreed to work collectively and engage with initiatives to address systemic challenges in progressing towards a UK research system where researchers work in healthy and supportive environments. Through aligning research-related concordats and equality and diversity charters we will ensure that researchers are recognised and valued for their contributions in research and beyond, supported in their professional and career development, and equipped and empowered to succeed in their chosen careers.

Research Awards Management System Project

Following RPC approval, the University has commenced the implementation of a new research awards management system. The new system will improve the governance of all grant applications,

monitor the acceptance of research grant awards and enhance the overall financial management of all funded research projects. It is expected to go live towards the end of 2020.

UK Reproducibility Network (UKRN)

In 2019 the University of Aberdeen was one of the first group of Universities to join the UKRN, a group which aims to improve the rigour, robustness and quality of UK research. The group will investigate the factors that contribute to robust research, promote training activities across career stages, and disseminate best practice e.g. in hiring and promotion criteria, working with institutions to ensure coordination of efforts across the Higher Education sector. Associated activities in the University of Aberdeen have involved both staff and students, and one example of their work to date is the introduction of a new MSc module in Open and Reproducible Science, introduced in 2020.

DORA signatory

In June 2020, the University became a signatory to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), a set of recommendations to clarify how research is evaluated by funding agencies, academic institutions, publishers, organisations that supply research metrics and researchers. The overall principle is that journal-based metrics should not be used as a surrogate measure of quality, e.g. in funding, appointments and promotion decisions, and that research should be assessed on its own merits by exploring new indicators of research significance and impact. We are currently working on fully implementing the principles enshrined in DORA throughout our processes that support researchers and research, thereby improving the transparency of how we evaluate the quality of our research.

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. Healthchecks have continued throughout the year, albeit were temporarily halted in March as a consequence of the disruption caused by Covid-19. The Healthcheck template was revised in session 2019/20 to include a request for additional information on the School processes for internal review of research-based teaching, including review of UG and PGT dissertation modules and the information provided to these students regarding ethical research practice.

The Healthcheck process has now resumed in session 2020/21.

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 there had been a slight reduction in core ERC business (the review of all applications for new project licences and amendments to existing licenses from a local perspective and carrying out prospective (mid-term) reviews) largely as a result of the number of personal licence holders reducing (due to staff departures). The Convenor of the Committee announced her intention to stand down from the role at the ERC's annual meeting, and she further reported that the appointment of the Depute Convenor to another senior role within the University meant that the Depute Convenor was also to resign from the ERC. The current Convenor agreed to stay in the role until her post, and that of the Depute Convenor, has been filled and she will facilitate a smooth transition into the roles by the new appointees. During the campus closure

necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic all ERC business has been successfully undertaken remotely, with biannual meetings held online.

Training for Research Staff

A comprehensive review of the online training programme on Research Ethics & Governance was undertaken in session 2019/20. The revisions ensure that the content continues to reflect current ethical practice, guidance and legislation in this area. The revised training will be launched in preparation for academic year 2020/21, with enhanced reporting capabilities on course completion rates.

In addition, and as per the recommendations arising from the work of the Research Governance Framework Working Group, the University has purchased an online Research Integrity training package. The package consists of six modules, covering topics such as plagiarism and recycling of text and research outputs, collaborative research and data management, peer review and publication ethics, and has been customised to signpost to University of Aberdeen policies and procedures.

The training will be mandatory for all research active staff (including research supervisors), PGRs and associated professional services staff e.g. research assistants, research technicians, staff involved in reviewing research data, who work as part of a research team, or have a related administrative function.

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

Graduate School

During 2018/19, the University carried out a university-wide strategic review of PGR admissions and the training that had been undertaken, with the aim increasing the student numbers, harmonising admissions processes and introducing a structured framework of training for PGR students and supervisors. PGR and supervisor training is now in place and completion will be recorded, with supervisors required to repeat the training every five years. Different levels of training are offered (from mandatory through to optional training), with further details available via the Postgraduate Research School [website](#).

From 2020/21 [PGR mandatory training requirements](#) include research integrity and the avoidance of plagiarism. Mandatory training is reported within the six-monthly review process for all students. Additionally, all formal annual progression work in the first year of a research degree must be submitted via Turnitin, a text matching application that is routinely used in Universities across the UK for students work at all levels.

Research Misconduct

The University complies with Commitment 5 of the Universities UK's Concordat to Support Research Integrity, outlining our commitment to strengthen research integrity and to regularly review progress on this issue. As a signatory to the concordat, 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 ongoing review of associated policies, the University's Policy on Whistleblowing will be comprehensively reviewed and updated in session 2020/21.

As part of the remit of the University's Research Governance Framework Review in session 2018/19, a revised policy for dealing with allegations of unacceptable Research Conduct was published in November 2019. The revised policy simplifies the reporting process, establishes a nominated contact for individuals to discuss initial concerns regarding alleged misconduct and introduces a two-stage process for dealing with allegations. Stage 1 assesses if there is a case to answer, and if so, this is followed by the stage 2 formal investigation process. Stage 2 investigations will involve an external

panel member (a recommendation made in the House of Commons Science & Technology Select Committee's Report on Research Integrity (June 2018)).

During academic year 2019/20, research-related investigations were undertaken as follows:

- An allegation was submitted by an external academic regarding plagiarism by a member of academic staff. Following an investigation, the allegation was not upheld.
- A combined complaint was made against an Ethics Board and an allegation of research misconduct against a PGT student. Following an investigation, neither issue was upheld.
- An investigation is currently underway into an allegation brought by a journal of self-plagiarism by a member of academic staff.
- An investigation is currently underway into an allegation of plagiarism in a PhD thesis against a graduated student.
- We investigated three allegations of research misconduct (plagiarism and data fabrication) made against PhD students in relation to their theses. Following investigation, two allegations were upheld and the students involved were permitted to resubmit for a lower award and the third investigation (into plagiarism) is ongoing.
- An allegation of data fabrication was made against a PhD student. Following an investigation, the allegation was upheld, but due to mitigating circumstances, the student was permitted to continue their studies with the requirement of that element of work being redone.
- An investigation was undertaken into alleged PGR research misconduct involving intellectual property and authorship of research publications. The investigation was upheld and the publications in question were withdrawn.
- An allegation was made regarding fabrication of data included within a lapsed patent application but following further discussion with the complainant it was accepted that no misconduct had occurred and the allegation was withdrawn.
- Concerns have been 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. A Stage One - Informal investigation is currently underway to establish if there are any grounds for these concerns.
- An allegation was raised by a former member of staff against another former member of staff regarding insufficient author acknowledgement in a publication. The University was unable to take any further action on the allegation as the member of staff to whom it was directed is no longer employed by the University.

Finally, where required as part of the terms and conditions of external research funding, grant awarding bodies have been informed of the outcome of an investigation by the Scottish Funding Council and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) of payments made to the former Principal of the University of Aberdeen.

Professor Marion Campbell
Vice Principal for Research
m.k.campbell@abdn.ac.uk