



RESEARCH GOVERNANCE

ANNUAL REPORT TO COURT ACADEMIC YEAR 2018/19

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 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 Research Policy Committee's 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.

Research Governance Framework

During the reporting period the University established a Research Governance Working Group to undertake a comprehensive review of the University's Research Governance Framework and to update the framework. This is a detailed review of all the policies and processes governing and supporting research and a full report to the Research Policy Committee is expected late in 2019.

A number of changes were made to the current Research Governance Framework to ensure that it complies with current regulations and funders' requirements. The sections relating to ethical review of research, good research conduct, data management and governance in research were reviewed and updated; guidance on the secure storage and archiving of data was updated.

Research Integrity Working Group

Following the publication in summer 2018 of the House of Commons Science & Technology Report, the University established a working group to consider the recommendations arising from the report and to prepare an institutional response. The group was also tasked with reviewing the institutional procedures around research misconduct, particularly in the light of the Universities UK Concordat on Research Integrity.

The draft revised procedure proposes a 'local point of contact' for individuals to discuss initial concerns regarding alleged research misconduct, prior to submitting a formal notification. The proposal received broad support, subject to some further minor modifications to address e.g. where an allegation is made against a member of staff is affiliated to more than one School, the role of the Line Manager of the member of staff under investigation, and how allegations against staff involved in externally funded research would be reported to the external funding body. The final recommendations of the Group are expected in the autumn of 2019.

Research Ethics Approval Process

During 2018/19 the University conducted a review of ethics processes for non-medical/NHS research. The objective was to consolidate the separate processes currently in place for the five disciplinary committees and to replace them with a single process in order to improve the user experience, efficiency of the process and to enhance consistency and transparency of decision making and reporting. The project team comprised staff from the University's Business Improvement Team, Research & Innovation and the Chairs of the five Ethics Boards. Representatives from Digital and Information Services and Data Protection/Records Management were co-opted onto the project as necessary.

The Research Policy Committee received the project report late in 2018. It included a consolidated process map, a common pre-assessment ethics checklist applicable to all non-medical/NHS research and recommendations around the roles of School Ethics Officers, Proportionate Review and Allocation of Reviewers. It also made a number of recommendations aimed at enhancing consistency of terminology and decision making across disciplines. These have been accepted and enacted in the current processes. The consolidated process and check list is capable of being translated into an online process as part of an award management system the University is planning to implement in the near future.

School Research Governance Healthchecks

We have continued to undertake School Research Governance Healthchecks throughout the year. These are self-assessments which ensure that Schools are aware of their ethics and governance responsibilities, and that processes at School or discipline level and their interfaces with institutional processes are assessed by the Chairs of the institutional or discipline ethics committees who make detailed operational decisions. The Research Policy Committee, chaired by the Vice Principal for Research, oversees the process. Feedback from Schools is that this is a useful process which reminds researchers and professional services staff of their responsibilities and obligations under the Research Governance Framework and prompts improvements in School based ethics and governance processes.

Animal Welfare and Ethical Review

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 updates to the University Code of Practice for Research Involving the Use of Animals was updated. 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 Committee has appointed a new Convenor (previously the Depute Convenor) and a new Depute Convenor. An individual from the pool of Lay Members has stood down from the ERC and a replacement will be sought in the coming months.

Training for research staff

The University of Aberdeen currently offers training on research ethics, and its processes to obtain ethical approval for research projects to all researchers as an online training package. An introduction to research ethics and institutional procedures is also offered as part of induction. Staff can undertake specific training in research integrity in a number of different ways e.g. a module within the online research ethics training package, line management training, discipline-based training, etc.

The Research Integrity Working Group (referred to previously) has recommended that Research Integrity training, in addition to being compulsory for PGRs and their supervisors, should also be undertaken by research-active staff and associated professional services staff e.g. research assistants, 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

To simplify/standardise the delivery of this training, an online training package has been identified which is produced (and can be shared under licence) by the University of Dundee. This is currently in use within a number of other Scottish universities, and can be customised where necessary to link to Aberdeen policies and procedures. A recommendation will be submitted to the University's Research Policy Committee that this training package be purchased for use at the University of Aberdeen. The standardised training can then be supplemented by more specialised or discipline-related training within the Schools and Research Institutes, as appropriate.

Training for Postgraduate Research Students

The Research Policy Committee, via the PGR Committee, agreed a suite of mandatory training courses for PGR students that must be completed within the first six months of registration from AY 19/20. This included Research Governance and Ethics and the above Research Integrity modules.

The Research Governance and Ethics training is provided as programme of online learning courses that reflect the expectations as set out in the UoA Research Governance Handbook. Research active staff are strongly encouraged to complete the training and PGR students are required to undertake it as a condition of being a registered student at the university.

The Postgraduate Research School is responsible for reporting compliance data and for liaising with schools where there are cases of non-completions. This data will be reported quarterly and will be reviewed on an individual basis at the PGR year one progress review.

Additionally, in order to meet recommendations from the Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR), the RPC (via the PGR Committee) approved the recommendations for Supervisor training to be:

- mandatory for all new supervisors (new to the University of Aberdeen and/or new to supervising PGR students).
- Required to update knowledge via refresher training every five years.

The PGR School is responsible for maintaining records and reporting to schools. The above sessions will include case study discussions around research culture, research-integrity and ethics that complement the online training modules for staff and students. A supervisor training programme has been launched and includes a masterclass series and peer support groups.

Research Misconduct

A formal investigation into inappropriate authorship on research publications by a postgraduate research student took place, the claim was upheld and the publications involved were withdrawn. No disciplinary action was taken against the author who has left the institution.

We concluded an ongoing investigation into misuse of research funds. The outcome was that there was no evidence of misuse of funds or an intention to mislead the funder. The funding body was informed and confirmed that no further action was required.

A formal investigation into misrepresentation of involvement in a grant was concluded. The investigation did not find evidence of misconduct. The member of staff has since left the institution.

An investigation is ongoing into an allegation of plagiarism against one of the University's graduates, for a PhD thesis.

The University investigated a potential data breach following the theft of a laptop from a research partner abroad. The investigation revealed that data security processes set out in the data management plan for the project had not been adhered to by all project partners or members of the project team. A report on this issue, which included a description of the steps taken to mitigate any potential risks to researchers and data subjects, was submitted to the Director of Research and Innovation. A revised data management plan has been implemented for the project, with additional safeguards introduced to ensure strict adherence.

Finally, where required as part of the terms and conditions of external research funding, grant awarding bodies have been informed of an ongoing review by the Scottish Funding Council of payments made to the former Principal of the University of Aberdeen.

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