

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN  
RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2020**

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Colette Backwell, Simon Bains, Marlis Barraclough, Alison Brown, Angel Cuesta Ciscar, Mirela Delibegovic, Andrew Dilley, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Paul Fowler, Donald Gray, Paul Haggarty, Catherine Jones, Maria Kashtalyan, Amanda Lee, Ann Lewendon, Gary Macfarlane, Graeme Nixon, Louise Phillips, Stuart Piertney, Liz Rattray, Gwen Smith, Donna Walker

Apologies: Michael Brown, Tamas Gyorf, Brian Henderson, Catia Montagna, Iain Percival, Dubravka Pokrajac, Chris Soulsby

**Welcome:** Marion Campbell welcomed Gwen Smith (Business Manager, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition) to the Committee as the representative of the School Administrative Officers.

**1 MINUTES**

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2019 were approved.

**2 MATTERS ARISING**

2.1 Marion Campbell acknowledged the recent successes of Robert Frost (History), Chris Soulsby (Geosciences) and Pieter Van West (Medical Sciences) in achieving fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

2.2 Applications for unit reductions in REF outputs (arising from staff circumstances) had recently been submitted for Psychology, Biological Sciences, Archaeology, Business & Management Studies and Theology & Religious Studies. These will be reviewed by the REF Equality & Diversity Advisory Panel and the University will be notified of their decisions by 29 May 2020.

2.3 A response was also recently submitted to the Scottish Funding Council regarding the proposal to introduce a complaints and investigations process in respect of the institutional REF Codes of Practice. Feedback is awaited and an update will be provided to RPC in due course.

2.4 The limited completion rate of the REF Equality & Diversity training was discussed, noting that completion of this training by all members of staff involved in REF decision-making is a requirement of our institutional REF Code of Practice. Reminders will be issued to those who have not yet completed this training, and this issue will be monitored by the REF Steering Group.

2.5 School Directors of Research were asked to encourage colleagues to complete their Researchfish submission in order to avoid the application of sanctions. The deadline for submissions is 4pm Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> March, and further guidance on the Researchfish submission process is available on the University website.

2.6 The Coronavirus business continuity planning was discussed. The business continuity priorities for the University's research activities are currently under review and RPC were asked to consider the essential research activities that would have to continue during a period of lockdown. The Graduate School will review the PhD extension policy and will also monitor the Curtin Alliance students and any other PGRs who are currently abroad.

2.7 Following the 'Submission of Intentions' by all UK HE institutions in December 2019, the UK funding bodies have issued a call for nominations for additional REF sub-panel members. Applications will be welcomed from candidates from a diverse range of backgrounds, institution types and geographical region, particularly those who can assess impact and also

non-academic assessors e.g. from industry. Previous applicants will automatically be re-considered. The deadline for nominations is noon, 03 April 2020 and further guidance is available on the REF 2021 website.

- 2.8 Liz Rattray noted that PwC had recently undertaken an audit of the University's research ethics procedures. This had resulted in a relatively clean bill of health, with some recommendations expected regarding the research ethics training programme and the research governance healthcheck procedure.

### **3 RESEARCH FUNDING UPDATE**

#### **3.1 Research Income Report**

- 3.1.1 Donna Walker provided an update to RPC, confirming that the figures provided in the report covered the period up to 31 January 2020. They demonstrate that the University is currently £1.7M behind in the level of expected income. The University remains ahead of target for ICC, thus continuing to contribute towards the bottom line.
- 3.1.2 The Institutional Order Book illustrates how awards are allocated across the current and future financial years. The University is currently £3.174m behind compared with this period last year, which may affect the budget-setting for 2020-21.

#### **3.2 Applications and Awards Trends**

- 3.2.1 Concern was expressed at the downward trend for awards data. It was noted that last year's performance was above average (hence comparison with the current financial year shows a marked decline), however the ongoing decline is part of a longer-term trend. This has been exacerbated by the departures of staff who had held large funding awards. The transfer of existing grants associated with the recently recruited staff has been lower than anticipated, but they are currently preparing new funding applications.
- 3.2.3 The decline in UKRI success rates is of equal concern, and the impact of the other universities experiencing increased success in this area has pushed Aberdeen further down the ranked order. Marion Campbell noted that being the seventh-placed Scottish HE Institute for UKRI funding is a significant concern for this University, and collective action will be required in order to address this. The University needs to analyse why the current support mechanisms have not been effective in securing higher levels of UKRI funding. An action plan will be required to address this situation.
- 3.2.5 RPC suggested that a contributing factor in this issue has been the reduction in staff numbers, coupled with an increased demand for staff time to develop and teach online PGT programmes. Funding opportunities were regularly circulated but staff do not have sufficient time to submit applications. In many Schools, the responsibility for obtaining research funding (particularly for high value grants) is often carried by the same members of staff, and others should be encouraged to submit applications.
- 3.2.7 The relatively short deadlines for these funding calls were also noted, which will require improved intelligence on future research calls in order that these can be planned and discussed with staff well in advance.
- 3.2.8 Options such as sandpits and one-to-one mentoring of junior staff were discussed. It was agreed that it would be important to propose a range of options for different groups of staff, e.g. KTPs for junior staff. Using the research leave policy to provide time for staff to prepare funding applications was also suggested. RPC recommended that the University's internal peer review processes for funding applications should be reviewed.

### **4 RESEARCH CULTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN**

- 4.1 Gary Macfarlane discussed his proposal to establish a 'Task and Finish' working group to review the research culture of the University, noting that this is a key issue across the UK's research community. The proposals in the paper include a wide-ranging review of existing University policies and a review of the current research environment.
- 4.2 RPC suggested that this could assist with the work of Mirela Delibegovic's working group on the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. It was also suggested that this group could also assist with the work involved in identifying the issues that are continue to hinder progress with equality and diversity issues within research.

**ACTION: RPC endorsed the proposal for this group to be established, chaired by Gary Macfarlane. Interim reports will be produced after the three and six months, with a final report to be submitted to RPC following nine months of activity.**

## **5 UKRI CONSULTATION ON OPEN ACCESS**

- 5.1 Simon Bains discussed the first draft of the University's consultation response, noting that the URKI proposals involved significant changes to the existing open access arrangements, including a greater harmonisation of the REF and UKRI open access policies. Limited feedback had been received to date on the recent Ezine article on this issue, and RPC were invited to assist in encouraging further feedback from colleagues on these proposals. Feedback should be submitted to him by the end of the first week in April to enable a finalised institutional response to be submitted by the UKRI deadline (17<sup>th</sup> April)
- 5.2 School Directors of Research were encouraged to read the consultation response and to consider the implications from the perspective of their own disciplines.
- 5.3 Simon Bains noted that there was nothing in the consultation proposals that suggested we should change our current publishing behaviour i.e. publication choice. Instead, RPC were asked to consider how to optimise the use of funding to support open access e.g. to facilitate open access via the green route or to negotiate with publishers for transformational agreements.
- 5.4 Paper RPC19:34 (Item 9 on the agenda) considered the way in which the University currently used the UKRI block grant. Funding for the gold route was acknowledged as a key concern for open access, as insufficient money is currently available for this. This is mainly driven by the perceived need to publish in specific journals, which gives them a high degree of influence over this issue. This may require the whole country to endorse a change in the way in which funding councils review applications, with less focus on where an output has been published. The need to incentivise staff to publish in other journals was discussed, including the option to use Aberdeen University Press, as the current plan is to relaunch this as an open access venture for university staff.
- 5.5 It was noted that the proposals failed to mention the impact on medical charities as it is more than just the UKRI and Research England that are affected by the current open access arrangements. It was also suggested that it would be preferable to continue to encourage compliance rather than introduce punitive measures for non-compliance.
- 5.6 The impact of current failures in open access compliance and the consequences for the University's selection of REF outputs was discussed, and it was suggested that this would be a very small number (and noting that the REF rules permit a small number of exemptions from the open access requirements).

## **6 RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK**

### **6.1 REF Update**

- 6.1.1 Marlis Barraclough provided an update on recent REF activities. The current REF-eligible FTE has increased to 648, as a result of a combination of ongoing recruitment and also as a

consequence of the recent work undertaken to confirm 'independent researcher status' amongst existing staff.

- 6.1.2 The number of 4\* rated outputs has increased. However, the number of staff for whom no 3\* or 4\* output has been identified has also increased, mainly as a consequence of new members of staff whose work requires to be reviewed. HR have been asked to create staff records for the new starts as 'future appointments' in order that the completed reviews can be uploaded to Pure. Schools will be also be required to complete the review process for all other proposed outputs from existing members of staff.as soon as possible.
- 6.1.3 The February Impact Workshops were cancelled (in light of the industrial action) and internal reviews of the impact case studies (ICS) were undertaken instead. These reviews confirmed that there has been a significant improvement in the development of many of the ICSs. The workshops will be replaced by ICS clinics on 23<sup>rd</sup> March and 1<sup>st</sup> April, and these will allow ICS authors to discuss the feedback from the February reviews with the internal panel.
- 6.1.4 The current focus of the REF team will be on the production of REF metrics, and spreadsheets of research income will be prepared and circulated to each School. PGR data has already been issued to Schools regarding the number of PhDs awarded, and it was suggested that Schools may wish to contact Graeme Nixon to discuss progression trends and how these have improved.
- 6.1.5 A Sharepoint site will be created for REF information for Schools and this will include the updated REF Environment metrics. Any additional requests for REF metrics should be submitted to Marlis Barraclough in the first instance. (Note by Clerk: this has now been set up as a Teams site: REF Info for SDoRs, UoA Leads and SAOs).
- 6.1.6 The REF team has recently been strengthened by the appointment of two fixed term, part-time members of staff who will be helping to support the development of the environment narratives. Meetings will be arranged in the coming weeks with each of the UoAs to discuss the development of their environment narratives. The deadline for submission of draft UoA environment statements has been revised to the end of April. (Note by Clerk: deadline moved to end of June)
- 6.1.7 The current plans are for a further series of REF review meetings to be held in the early summer. In order to meet this timescale, every UoA will be required to submit full drafts of their environment statements and to have all impact case studies completed by the end of June. The period immediately after the summer break will be used for the correction of any outstanding details, with final sign-off of the institutional submission anticipated by the end of September/early October.

## **6.2 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)**

- 6.2.1 The updated EIA (previously undertaken in May 2019) showed a slight improvement in terms of gender balance, but otherwise minimal change has been effected during the subsequent period, despite the ongoing recruitment activity.
- 6.2.2 Another EIA will be required for researcher independence, and it was anticipated that there would be an improved gender balance for the University in this aspect.

## **7 RESEARCH GOVERNANCE HEALTH CHECK – SCHOOL OF LAW**

- 7.1 This issue was not discussed and will be carried forward to the next meeting

## **8 REPORT FROM THE SHORT LIFE WORKING GROUP ON HIGHER EDUCATION/PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEWS**

- 8.1 This issue was not discussed and will be carried forward to a future meeting.

**9 UKRI BLOCK GRANT PROPOSAL**

9.1 This issue was discussed within item 5 UKRI Consultation on Open Access.

**10 KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND COMMERCIALISATION REPORT**

10.1 The information provided was noted.

**11 GRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT – PGR – TASK & FINISH GROUP**

11.1 The information provided was noted.

**12 RESEARCH FACILITIES WORKING GROUP REPORT**

12.1 The information provided was noted.

**13 POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE**

13.1 The information provided was noted.

**For Information**

The committee received the following report for information:

**14 INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO WELLCOME CONSULTATION ON DORA IMPLEMENTATION**

**15 NEXT MEETING**

15.1 The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place on 11<sup>TH</sup> June 2020.

DF 03/20