

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 16th SEPTEMBER 2020

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Marlis Barraclough, Alison Brown, Michael Brown, Katja Christie, Angel Cuesta Ciscar, Mirela Delibegovic, Andrew Dilley, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Donald Gray, Tamas Gyorf, Catherine Jones, Ann Lewendon, Amanda Lee, Gary Macfarlane, Catia Montagna, Graeme Nixon, Iain Percival, Louise Phillips, Stuart Piertney, Dubravka Pokrajac, Jacqueline Ravet, Chris Soulsby, Ian Stansfield, Donna Walker

Apologies: Colette Backwell, Simon Bains, Brian Henderson, Liz Rattray, Gwen Smith

Welcome: Marion Campbell welcomed all to the meeting and confirmed that the focus of this RPC meeting would be on research ethics issues. Due to the full agenda for this meeting, she noted that all routine reports have been placed on the agenda 'for noting' however RPC members were encouraged to raise any queries arising from these papers for discussion during the meeting.

She welcomed Ian Stansfield as the School Director of Research for the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition, and noted this replaces the previous representation by the individual medical institutes. She also welcomed Jacqueline Ravet as the School Director of Research for Education, noting that this would be a shared role between Jacqueline and Donald Gray for the first half-session in order to facilitate a handover of the role. Katja Christie was also welcomed to RPC, noting that she was on temporary secondment to Research & Innovation from Registry.

1 MINUTES

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 11th June 2020 were approved.

2 MATTERS ARISING

2.1 Gary Macfarlane provided an update on the work of the Research Culture Task & Finish Group. He noted that the work of the group had commenced in July (delayed due to the campus closure) but two meetings had been held since then, with the next meeting scheduled for tomorrow. The main group has been split into four sub-groups, focussing on communication with the wider University, developing a Research Culture website, devising a survey on Research Culture, and proposing ideas for further engagement with the University community. He noted that once the group have delivered their outputs, RPC will be required to consider where long-term responsibility for this issue should be situated.

2.2 Marion Campbell confirmed that confirmation had been received from the REF team that the applications submitted in March for output reductions (due to staff circumstances) in five units of assessment have been approved (Psychology, Biological Sciences, Archaeology, Business & Management Studies and Theology & Religious Studies). The Units of Assessment have been informed of the approved reductions.

2.3 She also noted that the University received funding under the UKRI and SFC Covid Uplift schemes. A committee has been set up to oversee the distribution of funds, and details of how the funding will be distributed to PIs will be confirmed.

3 RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP & REMIT FOR 2020/21

The membership and remit for 2020/21 was approved, subject to the following amendment:

- Colette Backwell was appointed as a member of University Court in January 2020.

ACTION: M Barraclough to amend

4 RESEARCH ETHICS DISCUSSION PAPER

- 4.1 Dawn Foster discussed the three issues raised within the paper – research data management plans, the introduction of monitoring procedures for ethically approved research projects and encouraging improved completion amongst staff of the online Research Ethics & Governance online training. These issues require to be addressed due to a combination of funder requirements, legislation and/or changes to University policy, and findings of a 2020 internal audit on the University’s research ethics policy and procedures.
- 4.2 Regarding research data management plans, RPC agreed that the Ethics Boards should monitor these as part of the ethics application process. The Digital Research Team will be responsible for advising applicants on the creation of research data management plans as they have the required expertise on this issue, with the role of the Ethics Boards to ensure that research data management plans (where required under the guidance) have been endorsed by the Digital Research Team and attached to the ethics application.
- 4.3 Regarding the introduction of a monitoring process for research projects that have received ethical approval, RPC agreed that this should be overseen by the Ethics Boards, and that the process should be proportionate to the nature and degree of risk associated with the research. It should focus primarily on projects identified as ‘high risk’, with a small sub-set of ‘low risk’ projects also included for review.
- 4.4 Regarding encouraging improved completion amongst staff of the online research ethics & governance training, RPC agreed that this training should become mandatory for all research-active staff. In order to allow sufficient time for staff to undertake the training (in view of the additional workload at the start of term), it was agreed that the deadline for completing this training (for those who wish to apply for ethical approval of their research, where completion of this training will become mandatory for those wishing to apply for ethical approval) should be 31 December 2020.

5 UKRIO/ARMA GUIDANCE ON RESEARCH ETHICS SUPPORT AND REVIEW

- 5.1 Michael Brown noted the outcomes of a recent gap analysis undertaken to assess compliance of the current Ethics Boards arrangements against the guidance published earlier this year by UKRIO and ARMA on research ethics support and review.
- 5.2 He noted that in general, most Ethics Boards are broadly compliant with the guidance, however gaps were identified in some areas. Key issues were discussed and RPC agreed the following:
 - 5.2.1 At least one lay member should be appointed to each Ethics Board, to participate in meetings and to provide guidance on policy issues (and will not be required to contribute to the review process, unless this is existing practice).
 - 5.2.2 One RPC meeting each academic year should be dedicated to the discussion of research ethics issues.
 - 5.2.3 The establishment of appropriate procedures to monitor the conduct of research which has received ethical approval was addressed under item 4 above.
 - 5.2.4 Mandatory ethics training for all Ethics Board members was addressed under item 4 above.
 - 5.2.5 RPC endorsed the recommendation that additional continuous professional development opportunities should be advertised to Ethics Board members e.g. online seminars and training opportunities provided by UKRIO.

- 5.2.6 RPC noted the current difficulties in obtaining sufficiently detailed reports from the existing ethics review processes, which in many cases would require considerable manual input in order to extract information on e.g. the types of ethical decisions given (number of rejected, resubmitted, and approved first time applications, average length of time taken to review an ethics application, etc). In order to meet this recommended reporting standard, RPC agreed that a business case should be prepared to propose the introduction of an appropriate technological solution which can provide a common, standardised application process supported by full reporting capabilities. This would also allow further benefits to be derived from the introduction of a consistent, standardised approach to ethical review across all Ethics Boards.
- 5.3 Michael Brown also noted two further research ethics issues that had recently been brought to his attention. He confirmed that a review of the University's Safeguarding Policy (for children and vulnerable adults) was currently underway, including how this should be incorporated into our ethics review processes. This will be discussed with the Ethics Boards in due course.
- 5.4 He also noted a proposal that in order to improve communication and sharing of best practice between the separate Ethics Boards, it had been suggested that the Chairs of the Boards should meet together on at least an annual basis. This was approved by RPC.

6 REPORT FROM THE SHORT LIFE WORKING GROUP ON HIGHER EDUCATION/PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEWS

- 6.1 Michael Brown discussed the proposal to constitute a separate Ethics Committee to review pedagogical research.
- 6.2 RPC noted the additional work that this would involve and referenced the earlier discussions aimed at reducing the number of separate Ethics Committees and associated application procedures.
- 6.3 RPC recommended instead that an ethics reviewer should be appointed to each of the existing Ethics Committees with a specific responsibility for reviewing applications involving pedagogical research.

7 RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK – REF UPDATE

- 7.1 Marlis Barraclough noted that subsequent to the circulation of the associated paper, the eligible FTE (as of census date) had increased to 698.23FTE.
- ACTION: M Barraclough asked the School Directors of Research to check if any of their Research Fellows might meet the REF criteria for research independence, and to submit names as soon as possible to her.**
- 7.2 She also noted that all lecturer staff appointed after 01 August 2016 had been contacted to check their eligibility to be categorised as an Early Career Researcher (ECR).
- ACTION: M Barraclough asked the School Directors of Research to check the ECR identifier on Pure and to advise her if any ECRs were missing from the list.**
- 7.3 The grade point average (GPA) for the current selection of REF outputs was discussed (3.31), noting that there had been previous hopes that some units of assessment would score at 3.4 or above. It was accepted that there is an ongoing level of uncertainty regarding the GPA scores as e.g. small units of assessment could have a large fluctuation in GPA once new outputs had been scored, due to the relative impact on the overall GPA.
- 7.4 Queries were raised regarding where the authority lies for decision making in relation to impact case study selection (i.e. for those units who have more than the required number in

development). Marion Campbell confirmed that setting aside the decisions that have to be made regarding those impact case studies which could be submitted to more than one unit of assessment (which should be decided in discussion with the relevant Dean), that the Units of Assessment should make the selection decisions. However the REF Steering Group can assist with final decision making, if required.

- 7.5 The November UoA REF reviews were discussed, noting that the Principal will be in attendance at each of these meetings to ensure oversight of the process. Although the final REF submission won't be made until March 2021, she noted the volume of work that will be required to ensure that all elements of the final submission can be completed in good time, avoiding any final rush on this process.
- 7.6 RPC agreed that it will be vital to ensure that any headline messages that are circulated to e.g. Court on the current status of the submission (in particular the currently predicted GPAs) should be accompanied by a clear warning that these are subject to further change (as discussed previously). Marion Campbell confirmed that an additional paragraph on this issue has been included in the version of this paper that will be submitted to Court.
- 7.7 A concern was raised regarding the selection of papers produced by the algorithm, noting that time should be allowed for double-checking of the selected papers to ensure these are the best quality publications. Some previous checking of early outputs graded at 4* have raised concerns regarding their perceived quality. The timing of the November reviews means there is insufficient time in the coming weeks (due to commencement of teaching) to complete all the necessary double-checks. Marion Campbell confirmed that the key priority for the November reviews should be to finalise the impact case studies and environment statements for all units of assessment, and that there will be time allowed for the finalisation of output selection after November.
- 7.8 Another concern was raised regarding the tables of data being used as 'league tables' for the units of assessment, noting that some GPAs have gone down since a previous report. Marlis Barraclough confirmed that some of the reductions will have been the result of every member of eligible staff now having an output allocated against them (where some outputs are less than 3*) as all eligible staff must be submitted with at least one output.

For Noting

The committee received the following reports for noting:

- 8 REPORTS FROM THE ETHICS COMMITTEES & ETHICS REVIEW BOARDS**
- 8.1 Committee for Research Ethics & Governance in Arts, Social Sciences & Business**
- 8.2 Physical Sciences & Engineering Ethics Board**
- 8.3 School of Psychology Ethics Board**
- 8.4 Life Sciences & Medicine Governance Report**
- 9 RESEARCH FUNDING**
- 9.1 Research Income Report**
- 9.2 Applications and Awards Trends**
- 10 KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND COMMERCIALISATION REPORT**
- 11 GRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT**

For Information

The committee received the following reports for information:

- 12 GENDER AND AUTHORSHIP – IMPACT OF COVID-19**
- 13 CHANGES TO INSTITUTIONAL OPEN ACCESS FUNDS**
- 14 ANNUAL RESEARCH GOVERNANCE STATEMENT**
- 15 NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place on Monday 2nd November 2020.

DF 09/20