

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 8TH MARCH 2021

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Simon Bains, Marlis Barraclough, Alison Brown, Michael Brown, Angel Cuesta Ciscar, Mirela Delibegovic, Andrew Dilley (part meeting), Dawn Foster (Clerk), Tamas Gyorf, Catherine Jones, Ann Lewendon, Gary Macfarlane, Catia Montagna, Graeme Nixon, Iain Percival, Louise Phillips, Stuart Piertney, Dubravka Pokrajac, Liz Rattray, Jacqueline Ravet, Tracey Slaven, Gwen Smith, Chris Soulsby, Ian Stansfield, Donna Walker

Apologies: Brian Henderson

Welcome: Marion Campbell welcomed all to the meeting. Tracey Slaven was welcomed to her first meeting of the RPC, following her appointment as University Secretary in January.

1 MINUTES

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 2nd November 2020 were approved.

2 MATTERS ARISING

2.1 Covid-19 Uplift

2.1.1 RPC received an update on the Covid-19 uplift funding from UKRI and SFC. The Governance Group continues to meet on a monthly basis to review applications for funding, which are primarily received from PIs experiencing disruption to their research, and some PhD students. Numbers of applications from PGRs are expected to increase in future. A second report has been submitted to SFC to confirm how the funds have been allocated and a final report will be submitted at year-end. The UKRI additional funds also continue to be distributed, and there is additional flexibility on the end-date and PGR support within this scheme.

ACTION: ER to circulate copy of second SFC report to RPC members.

2.1.2 M Campbell noted that she had recently met with Stuart Fancey (Director of Research & Innovation, Scottish Funding Council) regarding longer term sustainability for research and the need for ongoing support in the next financial year, coupled with flexibility on when this funding can be used.

2.1.3 M Campbell also noted that a number of clinical trials had been paused, and the NIHR will look to see if some of these should be re-started.

2.2 Researchfish reporting to UKRI

2.2.1 RPC were advised that the Researchfish returns continue to be monitored, with 32 PIs not yet having accessed their accounts. Exemptions from Researchfish returns can be requested (e.g. for MMSN staff with increased clinical duties) and further guidance can be circulated on request. Nil returns are also possible in some circumstances. Reminders have been issued to PIs and also to the BDOs who are assisting with the submission.

ACTIONS:

- **School Directors of Research were asked to help encourage Researchfish completions amongst their colleagues.**

- **M Barraclough to discuss with N Strong and circulate advice to all staff with two Researchfish accounts.**

2.3 KE Concordat

- 2.3.1 A Lewendon confirmed that the KE Concordat Task & Finish Group has been paused due to workload reductions caused by Covid-19. This will recommence shortly.

2.4 UKRI Open Access Block Grant

- 2.4.1 S Bains confirmed that there will be funding from this grant, but confirmation of the final figure has still to be received.

3 RESEARCH FUNDING

3.1 Research Income Report

- 3.1.1 RPC noted that for the first half of the current financial year, research income was currently ahead of budget by 12%, indicating that the impact of Covid-19 was not as severe as originally anticipated. The current forecast income for the full financial year was £47M. It was anticipated that between £400 – 500K of research spend would be deferred to next year, due to the SFC Covid-19 funding.

ACTION: D Walker to include a footnote in future reports explaining any large new grants that had been awarded, or where existing large grants were about to come to an end.

3.2 Applications and Awards Trends

- 3.2.1 RPC noted that these figures were encouraging and had not been adversely impacted by Covid-19. All Schools (bar one) have increased the value of their applications compared to 2019/20, and the institutional total of applications is higher than at the same point in previous years. The average award has also increased.
- 3.2.3 Applications and awards from charities have decreased, partly due to funding calls either cancelled or postponed because of Covid-19.
- 3.2.5 M Campbell noted that whilst the overall activity was encouraging, fewer large-scale funding applications (>£1M) were submitted. The level of support for researchers involved in large and complex grant applications will be reviewed. Given the relatively high number of new colleagues at early career stages, and further review of support for applicants and success rates should also include smaller grants for this group. The effect of Covid-19 was not evenly distributed among researchers, with some able to devote more time to research applications whereas others (with caring responsibilities) were not. The cancellation of all research leave in some Schools will also have affected this

ACTION: Further discussion would be held on this topic at the November RPC meeting (following the publication of the UKRI report on sector wide success rates).

4 REF UPDATE

- 4.1 RPC noted the report prepared by M Barraclough, which provided an update on the current state of readiness for the REF submission and an explanation of how the Code of Practice had been followed in these preparations.
- 4.2 Highlights from the report were noted as follows. 22 UoAs will be submitted, with a total of 698.13 FTE (729 headcount). 1,715 outputs will be returned (noting that validation checking

had unearthed approximately 700 errors, meaning some outputs have had to be replaced due to e.g. publication issues). The indicative quality profile for outputs = 3.34 GPA, with up to 8 UoAs that may achieve a higher individual GPA. 71 impact case studies will be submitted, plus 22 UoA environment statements and an institutional environment statement. The institutional statement is not formally assessed, but provides an important backdrop to the UoA statements. All narrative elements have been subjected to multiple reviews, some have involved external writers and proof-reading.

4.3 Feedback on the institutional environment was received.

ACTIONS:

- **M Barraclough to reverse the order of the final paragraph on page 1 (concerning the first half of the REF2021) to begin on a positive note.**
- **M Barraclough to include a reference to UG students in respect of all teaching being research-led.**

4.4 M Campbell confirmed that the submission has been authorised by SMT, and the full submission will be made before 31 March (likely to be in the week following the RPC meeting) to ensure that all is in order well before the final submission deadline. M Barraclough noted that around 10% of the submission is still to be validated, so there may be some further communication with the UoAs prior to the final submission.

4.5 M Barraclough advised that following the submission, there is an expectation that the national REF team will audit more material from this submission, including environment statements. She confirmed that the institutional REF team should be able to manage queries relating to REF 1 – 4, but will require a named School contact for REF 5 queries. There will be a period of between 10 – 15 working days to respond to audit queries.

4.6 T Slaven noted that the intention for REF 2021 was to manage the number of audit queries in this exercise, by ensuring that they are allocated by the central REF panel, rather than via sub panels. She noted that a high volume of sub panel queries were generated in REF 2014, which had proved difficult to manage in many institutions.

4.7 M Campbell confirmed that it would be essential to ensure that the valuable data that has been generated from this exercise must be used in forward planning activities.

ACTION: Schools should ensure that their environment statements are reflected in their School plans and also on their webpages. E Rattray and B Henderson should be contacted if there are any concerns about School resources required to support webpage updates.

4.8 E Rattray confirmed that the Impact Team were working on updating the University's impact webpage and will include and promote impact described in our impact case studies for REF. While the text of the REF case studies should not be published prior to its release by the funding councils, we can report on and promote our impact in different media and formats. The Impact Team will be in touch with the UoA leads to arrange for the impact case studies to be converted into a suitable narrative for the webpages (<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/research/impact>). Funds will be available for external writers to assist with this task, where required.

For approval/noting:

The committee received the following reports for approval/noting:

5 RESEARCH INTEGRITY COURSE UPDATE

RPC received an update from M Brown on the recent rollout of the online Research Integrity training course. Schools will be issued with lists of non-academic staff and invited to identify those who should also be registered on the course.

6 POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL REPORT

- 6.1 RPC received an oral update from G Nixon on recent activities within the Postgraduate Research School. A new bursary scheme has been launched, offering a £8K reduction in fees for self-funded EU students. He confirmed there would be no associated costs for Schools. T Slaven also advised that the University hardship fund was now available to all levels of student, including international students.
- 6.2 With regard to Covid-19 support, he confirmed that for the PGRs (non-UKRI funded) who were due to finish in September, decisions on allocation of additional funds would be made by the end of this week. He noted that the second PGR survey to identify UKRI funded students who require additional financial support for their studies had recently been issued, and there will be a separate panel convened for these applications.

7 IMPACT AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE REPORT

- 7.1 RPC received a report from A Lewendon on recent activities of the Impact and Knowledge Exchange team. As noted under 'Matters Arising', the working group on the Knowledge Exchange Concordat had been paused due to workload reductions due to the impact of Covid-19.
- 7.2 The team will be involved in the 2021 Offshore Europe event and also the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) later this year.

8 AOB

ACTION: S Bains to circulate his AOB issue (update on Elsevier ScienceDirect negotiations) to RPC via email.

9 NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place on Wednesday 16 June 2021.

DF 03/21