

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 16th JUNE 2021

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

Apologies: Brian Henderson, Iain Percival, Chris Soulsby

Welcome: Marion Campbell welcomed all to the meeting. Brice Rea was welcomed as the new School Director of Research for Geosciences. Ella Ritchie was welcomed to the meeting as an observer from the Senate Effectiveness Review, and also Emma Francis (Library Cataloguing and Metadata Manager), observing as part of her staff development.

Marion Campbell noted that a number of terms of office for School Directors of Research were due to finish before the next session – Angel Cuesta Ciscar (NCS), Andrew Dilley (DHP), Catia Montagna (Business School) and Chris Soulsby (Geosciences) will demit office, as will Michael Brown, Dean for Cultural Strategy and Research Governance. RPC thanked them all for their contributions.

1 MINUTES

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 8th March 2021 were approved.

2 MATTERS ARISING

2.1 Update from the Research Culture Task & Finish Group

RPC received an update from G Macfarlane on the recent activities of this group. He confirmed that work was ongoing with representatives from the UK Reproducibility Network on the development of a research culture survey. He also noted that further engagement activity was being planned for the summer period, and this would involve small focus group discussions (staff and PGRs) on the topic of research culture at the University of Aberdeen.

2.2 Aberdeen University Press (AUP)

RPC received an update from S Bains, noting that Senior Management Team (SMT) approval has been obtained to re-launch and develop the AUP as an open access press, in alignment with the Aberdeen 2040 strategic plan. This will become a strategic project, reporting to the Digital Strategy Committee. The Project Board is currently being established, and further members would be welcome. S Bains invited members of RPC to get in touch if they wished to be involved with this project at its early stages.

2.3 Research Governance Healthchecks

RPC noted that the SMMSN healthcheck had been submitted by the School and was currently being considered by the Review Panel. Feedback was submitted to the School of NCS and their response was awaited. Both healthchecks (and responses) would be submitted to the September RPC meeting.

2.4 Ethical Conduct of Research

M Campbell noted the number of investigations undertaken this session into potential research misconduct, which continued the upward trend noticed in session 2019/20. Several of these have involved publication ethics (either allegations of plagiarism, including self-plagiarism), or alleged failure to properly acknowledge contributions to publications. In addition, she noted there have been two recently identified cases of researchers proceeding with research activity without obtaining the necessary prior ethical approval. She reminded all to ensure that, where ethical approval is required, full ethical approval must be secured before the research activity can commence. PGR supervisors also have a duty to ensure that PGRs do not embark on any research projects where ethical approval is required before the approval has been granted.

ACTIONS:

- **School Directors of Research to raise awareness of the need to obtain *prior* ethical approval for any research activity that requires said approval.**
- **School Directors of Research to promote the CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) <https://casrai.org/credit/> which can be used to describe each contributor's specific contribution to scholarly outputs.**
- **D Foster / M Barraclough to review the Authorship section of the Research Governance Handbook.**

2.5 ResearchFish

Thanks were expressed to all staff who had been involved in ensuring that the University was fully compliant with the ResearchFish submission in March 2021.

3 RESEARCH FUNDING

3.1 Research Income Report

- 3.1.1 RPC received an update from D Walker, who confirmed that overall, the research income showed an upward trend compared to last year, and that overall, research income and indirect cost recovery were ahead of budget, confirming that the impact of Covid-19 had not been as significant as originally anticipated. She also provided an update on large research awards. When taking into account the additional new staff appointments, it was noted that income per FTE had declined slightly and placed our per FTE income 5th within the Scottish universities (behind Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and Strathclyde).
- 3.1.2 In respect of the budget setting for 2021/22, she confirmed that these have been finalised, subject to Court approval in June. The proposed research budget is £49.753M, with an ICC contribution of £8.873M.

3.2 Applications and Awards Trends

- 3.2.1 RPC noted that, overall, the applications and awards continue to demonstrate an upwards trend. The Committee discussed a number of options to support the development of large and complex projects.

ACTION: D Walker & M Barraclough - Research income generation to be the focus of further analysis and benchmarking, for further discussion at the next RPC meeting.

4 REF 2021 – DRAFT EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT FOR PUBLICATION

- 4.1 RPC noted the draft EIA and Staff Circumstances report prepared by M Barraclough for REF 2021. These reports will be submitted to the funding council by 31 July 2021, for publication on the SFC website, and on our own web pages.

- 4.2 The key messages from the draft EIA were noted as follows:
- Men are more likely to be employed on REF-eligible contracts than women;
 - On average, women are submitted with fewer outputs than men;
 - On average, researchers declaring black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds are submitted with fewer outputs than those who declare a white ethnic background or those who preferred not to declare this information;
 - The data demonstrates that at earlier career stages (e.g. lecturer or research fellow) the staff population is more balanced in terms of gender and more diverse in terms of ethnicity than at mid or later career stages; and
 - The proportion of REF eligible researchers who have declared a disability is lower than that for the University overall, and for academic staff across the UK sector.
- 4.3 The key messages from the Staff Circumstances report were noted as follows:
- Far fewer researchers declared individual staff circumstances for REF2021 than for REF 2014;
 - Early career researcher status was the most commonly declared individual staff circumstance, followed by family-related leave; and
 - The administrative arrangements supporting the declaration of staff circumstances, although revised since REF2014, remain cumbersome and resource intensive and disproportionate to the benefit they provide.
- 4.4 RPC noted that the EIA and Staff Circumstances reports had been discussed at various committees, including the REF Steering Group, the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Committee, the Research Culture Task & Finish Group and the Senior Management Team (SMT). Following the SMT discussion, an additional item was added to the list, namely the completion of longitudinal work around diversity and retention. Following the Research Culture meeting, issues with occupational health and reasonable the need for a policy on returners (e.g. following family related leave, or research leave) was identified, with the aim of helping staff to reintegrate into the workforce and rebuild their administrative experience. Resourcing issues in relation to maternity leave were also discussed. Among the actions taken described in the document, race awareness training should also be mentioned.
- 4.5 In addition, RPC agreed that the EIA should refer to the recent institutional race awareness campaign and training. RPC agreed this was a complex issue affecting the entire higher education sector in the UK and elsewhere. It was noted that during the assessment period, Athena Swan and the institutional 'Respect' agenda had done much to raise awareness around diversity and gender equality. RPC welcomed the development of a research-focused Gender Action Plan which would come to RPC for discussion at a future meeting.
- 4.6 RPC approved the EIA and Staff Circumstances Report, subject to the above amendments.

ACTION: M Barraclough to amend the EIA prior to final submission to the SFC.

5 ELSEVIER SCIENCEDIRECT NEGOTIATIONS

- 5.1 RPC received an update on the negotiations with Elsevier on our institutional ScienceDirect subscription. This subscription is to a large number of e-journals and is negotiated at a national level via a consortium of all UK universities with input from the Joint Information Systems Committee (Jisc). The total UK expenditure with Elsevier on journal subscriptions and enabling open access in 2021 will be £50m; our expected contribution to this is £649k. This is the largest subscription held by UK universities and potentially one of Elsevier's largest global contracts.
- 5.2 The UK consortium is currently negotiating for a significant reduction in the costs of these subscriptions on the basis that these do not represent good value for money and, unlike other publishers, Elsevier has made little progress in adapting to the changing open access environment. The UK sector is not alone in objecting to their pricing model and approach to open research; a number of consortia within Europe, the University of California and MIT are also conducting similar negotiations.

- 5.3 RPC discussed the current UK negotiating position and endorsed it. They agreed that a representative consultation group should be created to support our institutional input into these negotiations which are led by Simon Bains, who also represents the Scottish institutions in these talks through Scottish Universities Research Libraries (SCURL).

6 UPDATE ON RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND RESEARCH ETHICS & GOVERNANCE ONLINE TRAINING COURSES

- 6.1 RPC received an update on completion rates for the recently launched online Research Integrity training course, noting that following the 'soft' roll-out (due to workload pressures) 242 PGRs and 180 staff have completed this as of 08 June 2021. It was noted that some Schools have introduced a local completion date for this training for their staff in order to encourage take-up.
- 6.2 The Committee also discussed the online Research Ethics & Governance training. The Committee agreed that the ethics & governance training should only become mandatory for researchers seeking ethical approval of their research, and for all reviewers and members of the University Ethics Boards. To allow sufficient time for researchers to complete this training, the target date for implementation of this requirement would be 31 July 2021. SMMSN staff members who have already completed the GCF/GRF will be exempt from this training, as will recently appointed staff who have completed equivalent training at their previous institution.

ACTIONS:

- **School Directors of Research are asked to support the Research Integrity course by encouraging colleagues and PGRs to complete the training in a timely manner, and for this to be discussed during the staff and PGR student induction and review processes, where necessary. Schools should ensure that the requirement for completion of the Research Integrity course is included in induction materials for newly appointed staff.**
- **D Foster to advise Ethics Chairs to ensure that the applications processes can be amended accordingly. D Foster to ensure appropriate communication is shared on this issue with the wider University researcher community.**

7 OPERATIONAL PLAN FOR ABERDEEN 2040 COMMITMENTS

- 7.1 RPC noted the paper submitted on the proposed key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure progress of the implementation of the research elements of the new strategic plan (Aberdeen 2040), along with an update from the Chair on a recent discussion of the KPIs by SMT. RPC noted that general interdisciplinary activity should be included, as should mention of interdisciplinary PhDs. RPC also suggested that KPIs on collaboration and interdisciplinary research may have to be adapted or augmented to demonstrate the true extent of such work in some social sciences and in the arts and humanities. RPC suggested that open access/data should be included and monitored, and that impact should include academic impact and impact on teaching, as well as non-academic impact.

ACTION: M Campbell, E Rattray and M Barraclough to review the key actions and reflect these in the revised plan. A revised version (incorporating the suggested amendments) will be circulated.

8 RESEARCH UPDATE FOR COURT

- 8.1 RPC noted and approved the research update for Court.

For approval/noting:

The committee received the following reports for approval/noting:

- 9 POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL REPORT**
- 10 IMPACT AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE REPORT**
- 11 RESEARCH FACILITIES WORKING GROUP REPORT**
- 12 UPDATE ON THE CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCHERS**
- 13 REVIEW OF REF2021 (PRESS ITEM)**
- 14 NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place in session 2021/22.

MB/DF 06/21