UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

RESEARCH POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 27th NOVEMBER 2019

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Colette Backwell, Marlis Barraclough, Michael Brown, Angel Cuesta Ciscar, Helen Pierce (*vice* Andrew Dilley), Dawn Foster (Clerk), Paul Haggarty, Catherine Jones, Maria Kashtalyan, Amanda Lee, Graeme Nixon, Iain Percival, Louise Phillips, Stuart Piertney, Dubravka Pokrajac, Liz Rattray, Chris Soulsby, Donna Walker

Apologies: Simon Bains, Alison Brown, Jen Cleland, Elizabeth Curtis, Mirela Delibegovic, Paul Fowler, Donald Gray, Tamas Gyorfi, Brian Henderson, Ann Lewendon, Gary Macfarlane, Catia Montagna

Welcome: Marion Campbell welcomed the new lay member of Court, Dr Iain Percival, and a new co-opted member, Dr Colette Backwell, to the Research Policy Committee.

1   MINUTES

1.1   The minutes of the meeting held on 26th September 2019 were approved.

2   MATTERS ARISING

2.1   Marion Campbell confirmed that as part of the REF preparations, REF review meetings will be held with each Unit of Assessment (UoA) between November 2019 and January 2020, involving the Principal, Marion Campbell, the Deans of Research, and representatives from the School Management Team and Unit of Assessment leads. The meetings held to date have been extremely helpful for discussing any issues with submission preparations and identifying where further progress is required.

2.2   School Directors of Research were asked to ensure that all REF data on Pure is as up-to-date as possible to ensure that current information is circulated in preparation for the review meetings. Papers will be issued one week prior to each meeting date and the data will be downloaded from Pure approximately 10 days beforehand.

2.3   With reference to the REF Survey of Submission intentions, it was noted that the internal deadline for responses had now passed with only just over half of the completed surveys received. School Directors of Research were asked to ensure that any outstanding submissions are returned to Marlis Barraclough as soon as possible (and in any case before 4th December) to ensure the external submission deadline is met. It was confirmed that estimated data would be sufficient for these returns. Where the REF panels allow, UoAs were particularly asked to add any research specialisms for their staff which were not currently listed, and also to include the research specialisms of staff who are expected to join the University before the REF census date (31st July 2020).

2.4   She also noted that the recently published 'Web of Science 2019 Highly Cited Researcher' list included several Aberdeen members of staff and confirmed that this was a very prestigious achievement for these individuals (Sylvia Duncan, Harry Flint, Petra Louis, Roger Pertwee, James Prosser, Pete Smith, Shaun Treweek and Alan Walker).

3   PRESENTATION: WORKTRIBE AWARD MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

3.1   Donna Walker confirmed that the business case for the new award management system has been approved by the Digital Strategy Group. She noted that it will provide an integrated costing tool to support each stage of the research award process (pre- and post-award).

3.2   Key implementation timelines were discussed. Work on the implementation of the pre-award element will begin in February 2020 (for development and costing, including an approvals process) and will last approximately 5 – 6 months. The benefits of the new process were noted, including the ability to view the real-time progress of an application, the availability of templates with in-built costing rules for each of the major research funding bodies, and links to the HR system to allow access to salary data. Mid-June to September 2020 will see work commence on the implementation of the post-award module, which will be linked to the Finance system and will provide access to all award documentation (including peer review, budget information) and will also provide real-time budget assessments.

3.3   She confirmed that a website will be created to inform staff of the progress of the implementation programme. The Research & Innovation team will be undertaking a series of School visits to publicise the new system, and training will be provided for staff.

4   RESEARCH APPLICATIONS AND AWARDS

4.1   Donna Walker confirmed that applications in the first quarter of the financial year were at a significantly lower level compared to the previous year. A high number of staff departures (particularly within the Schools of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition, Biological Sciences and Natural & Computing Sciences) have affected these figures.

4.2   She noted that lots of smaller value applications have been submitted, and the EU funding applications are down. However, the success rate in UKRI applications continues to improve.

4.3   Grants Academy staff will be focussing efforts on the new cohort of researchers that are being recruited.   IT is anticipated that the increase in staff will result in more research funding applications (and ultimately greater success in obtaining research funding awards).

4.4   School Directors of Research were asked to scrutinise the data, and to examine the circumstances where there have been nil applications submitted during the first quarter

4.5   Notwithstanding the above, it was confirmed that despite the reduction in staff numbers, the level of research income per FTE has been maintained.

4.6   The University pump-priming funds were discussed, including for GCRF (for overseas development), the research enhancement fund (to support efforts to transform 3* rated REF outputs to 4* outputs), and funding support to improve the research environment (related to the REF Environment submission). School Directors of Research were invited to contact the Grants Academy to discuss pump-priming opportunities.

4.7   Paul Haggarty suggested there was a need for funding for Teaching Assistants to release staff time to prepare for major funding calls. Liz Rattray confirmed that the calls tended to have short deadlines, therefore it would be more beneficial for the School Directors of Research to obtain intelligence on the likely nature of the upcoming funding calls.

5   RESEARCH INCOME (Order Book)

5.1   Donna Walker noted that the order book was very similar to previous years, despite the departure from the University of some large research groups.

5.2   For the first quarter, the University was behind the budgeted target for research income, but ahead in indirect cost contributions. Strategic income has not yet been included in these figures. Research income figures for the next committee meeting will include a separate budget to reflect this spend.

5.3   Schools were asked to look ahead and prepare for the predicted drop-off in research income after 18 months, and to put strategies in place to maintain and increase levels of research spend.

6   GRADUATE SCHOOL REPORT

6.1   Graeme Nixon confirmed that a university-wide strategic review of PGR admissions and training had been undertaken, with the aim increasing the student numbers. PGR growth is important for the University in that it will help to increase research income and the research capacity of the University. High numbers of PGR students are also an important factor in the REF research environment statements.

6.2   Phase one of the review (involving the harmonisation of the PGR application process) is almost complete. Phase two will involve strategic training requirements, with a new process to be rolled out for all PGRs and their supervisors.

6.3   As part of the REF preparations, the Graduate School will be issuing lists to the Schools of PhD students to who are due to submit before the REF census date (31 July 2020). There are around 400 students who are due to complete in 2020, and of these approximately 160 of them could be awarded degrees by the census date. Schools will be encouraged to ensure that as many as possible are completed by this date.

6.4   PGR and supervisor training is now in place and completion will be recorded, with supervisors required to repeat the training every five years. Different levels of training are offered (from mandatory through to optional training), with further details available via the Graduate School website. The Graduate School are considering a proposal for the introduction of specific start dates for PhD intakes to help with more coordinate recruitment, training and induction for these students.

6.5   It was agreed that this committee should monitor the completion of ethics and integrity training, as well as supervisor training.

7   UPDATE ON ACTIVITY IN RESEARCHER DEVELOPMENT

7.1   The committee received and noted the report on research development activities, including the remit of the recently formed Postdoctoral Research Committee, an update on the Graduate School's work in relation to The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, and information on UIF-funded training activities (including plans to develop further Business Booster programmes).

8   KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND COMMERCIALISATION REPORT

8.1   On behalf of Ann Lewendon, Liz Rattray reported on progress made against the six UIF outcomes. She noted that in October, the University had submitted a collaborative bid to Wave 2 of the UKRI's Strength in Places funding scheme (for £50k of seedcorn funding to be used to support a full bid).

8.2   The primary source of data in support of knowledge exchange activities in the UK HEIs is the Higher Education Business & Community (HEB-CI) Survey, and she confirmed that Scottish HEIs are currently involved in a review of this survey to advise how this can be used to support Knowledge Exchange activities. It remains unclear how the Scottish Funding Council will reward universities for Knowledge Exchange activities in the final funding allocation model.

8.3   She confirmed that the annual HEB-CI return will be submitted in December, with the results expected in April. Traditionally Aberdeen tends to come around fourth in the overall placings, but league table position varies across the different aspects of the survey. The committee suggested that it would be helpful to receive contextual data (with Aberdeen's performance benchmarked against other HEIs). Liz Rattray confirmed that more KTPs and more Innovate UK funding would be key to improving our status.

8.4   She also noted that Mirela Delibegovic has recently been appointed as the Dean for Industrial Engagement & Knowledge Exchange, and will be undertaking a series of visits to the Schools.

9   RESEARCH GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK – REPORT FROM WORKING GROUP

9.1   Michael Brown confirmed that he had chaired a Working Group during the previous session, which had been set up to review the University's Research Governance Framework (in particular the Research Governance Handbook) to ensure continued adherence to the principles outlined in the Concordat to Support Research Integrity.

9.2   A sub-group (focussing on Research Integrity) was subsequently established, chaired by Gary Macfarlane, with the purpose of responding to the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee's reports on Research Integrity and Clinical Trials Transparency.

9.3   The key changes introduced to the handbook were noted as per the covering paper. Significant changes included a comprehensive review of the research misconduct process, and the introduction of mandatory research integrity training for research-active staff and also support staff in research-related roles. (The latter proposal was considered and approved by RPC at the September 2019 meeting). The Research Data Management policy had also been revised and was submitted for approval. The Working Group also proposed that the Research Governance webpages be revised in order to improve the presentation and accessibility of the published information.

9.4   The committee suggested a small number of recommendations/corrections to the handbook. School Directors of Research were invited to submit any further amendments to Dawn Foster by Friday 6th December.

9.5   Colette Backwell noted concerns at the proposed length of time to complete an investigation into alleged research misconduct (six months) noting the implications for the member of staff under investigation. Liz Rattray confirmed that as a result of the investigation process, six months was an appropriate length of time within the higher education environment. She also confirmed that this information would only be disclosed to external funders during the funding application process for applicants who have had an allegation **upheld** against them, hence this process would not disadvantage staff who were in the process of submitting an application for external funding.

9.6   The committee approved the proposals contained within the paper (the revised Research Governance Handbook, the revised Research Data Management Policy, and the proposal to further review the handbook once the Self-Assessment tool for the Concordat to Support Research Integrity has been published). The committee also endorsed the proposal that the Research Governance webpages be considered for further review and redesign by the working group previously established to review the research support webpages.

9.7   The committee recommended that information on the separate ethics committee approval processes be more clearly set out on the website, including clearer guidance on the types of research activity that require ethical approval.

10   RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK – REF UPDATE AND TIMETABLE

10.1   Marlis Barraclough provided the committee with a summary of the key elements of the REF Update. She confirmed that the University's REF Code of Practice had been approved by the SFC. She noted that a series of REF Equality & Diversity training courses had taken place in September – October, and that an online training course will be available in the near future. This must be completed by staff involved in REF decision-making who were unable to attend the earlier training sessions. Staff who require to undertake this training will be contacted by R&I, and completion of the online training will be monitored.

10.2 She also noted that applications for 'Staff Circumstances' to be taken into account in the REF submission had begun to be received. She confirmed that any staff with queries about their eligibility to submit an application should be advised to contact the REF team (refcircumstances@abdn.ac.uk) in order that this could be discussed further.

10.3 She confirmed that the number of staff eligible for REF submission continued to increase, and she anticipated that around 660 FTE would be returned in the REF submission by the census date (31st July 2020).

10.4 School Directors of Research were reminded that feedback was awaited from some UoAs regarding the identification of independent researchers. A finalised list will be submitted to the next meeting of the REF Steering Group for approval (16th December).

10.5 She also confirmed that the number of predicted 4* outputs has increased. This was due to reviews being undertaken of outputs from former members of staff, and also further reviews of outputs from UoA 1 (Clinical Medicine). The predicted GPA is currently 3.21. A small number of ungraded outputs have been recorded on Pure, but these were mainly from recently appointed members of staff and required review. There is a very small number of staff with zero REF-eligible outputs. It is hoped that as the output review processes continue, that we should be able to significantly increase the predicted GPA.

10.6 She confirmed that impact case studies will be the main focus of the current REF review meetings with the Principal. A lot of work has been undertaken over the summer and subsequently to develop the draft case studies, and a number of re-drafted ICS have been received for consideration within the review process. However, there are still a number of other ICSs that will require significant development.

10.7 School Directors of Research were thanked for the recent submission of their initial draft REF environment statements. Support for REF Environment will become the focus of the REF team's efforts once the current review meetings have been completed.

10.8 The draft REF timetable was discussed, noting a great deal of activity during December and January. It was suggested that it would be useful to include a final date for all staff to be informed once the decision had been taken regarding which of their outputs would be submitted to the REF.

10.9 Marlis Barraclough also confirmed that an 'Impact Boot Camp' (provisional dates 26 & 27 February 2020) will be arranged. These will provide additional support for impact case study authors and are expected to be structured as half-day sessions for cognate groups of UoAs (i.e. these will not require two full days of staff attendance).

For Information

The committee received the following reports for information:

11   THE CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT RESEARCH INTEGRITY (2019), RPC19:25

12   INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE SCOTTISH FUNDING COUNCIL'S RESEARCH POOLING INITIATIVE, RPC 19:26

13   TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION UNIVERSITY IMPACT RANKINGS SURVEY, RPC 19:27

13.1 The above report was circulated for information, however School Research Directors were asked to encourage their researchers to respond to this survey (which assesses the University's performance against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as the University has previously performed well in this survey. R&I are reviewing the associated metrics and issuing emails to researchers who have e.g. been involved in SDG projects or in SDG policy development, to request further information and evidence in support

of the metrics. The deadline for responses is **Friday 13th December.** Where relevant information has already been collated for REF5 environment, this should be submitted to Nykohla Strong or Marlis Barraclough.

13.2 The paper also mentioned a **request from the AURORA Network** for researchers to complete a mapping survey to enable the Aurora team to improve the calibration of the SDG search queries and keyword classification models, which will in turn enhance the University's mapping capabilities in support of e.g. networking, REF and in support of funding applications.

14 NEXT MEETING

14.1 The next meeting of the Research Policy Committee will take place on 9th March 2020.

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