Review of Research Centres Report and Recommendations June 2022

Contents

Executive Summary

This report provides information on the outcomes and recommendations from the Research Centre Review.

Between September 2021 and November 2021, a review of Research Centres across the University was undertaken to establish the Research Centres which exist within each School. The review sought reports from each Centre outlining areas of work and strategy, short and medium term aims, and information on published materials listing the Centre and grant awards related to the Centre's activity. The new inter-disciplinary centres were not included in this exercise as these were, at the time of the review, in the set-up phase.

From the review, three broad types of Research Centre were identified. Centres which:

- brought together researchers, and who together shaped the research which was pursued.
- represented areas of common research interests, and which provided a network for researchers to have an informal exchange of ideas and hold seminars.
- were primarily a vehicle for the dissemination of research in a specific area, through lectures and exhibitions.

Key features of Research Centres were considered to be: a research strategy; critical mass of researchers; events and outputs to deliver on their strategy; and demonstration of the benefits of Centre status (such as leverage of funds).

Recommendations from the review are around:

- Awarding of Centre Status
- Staff affiliated to Centres
- Presentation of Centres to external audiences
- Update reports from Centres

The review involved 54 Research Centres across the University. While many demonstrated the key features of Research Centres, there were also some which involved only a small number of staff and/or appeared to have low levels of activity. In implementing the recommendations of this report, there will be a cost associated with each centre, and some Schools may consider that a smaller number of vibrant centres with critical mass would be more appropriate.

Following this report, meetings will be arranged with Heads of School and School Directors of Research, to present the report recommendations, discuss issues in relation to individual Schools and the tasks, responsible persons and deadlines to implement the report recommendations.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation		Responsible persons	Timescale
Award of Centre Status (Section 3.1)			
Recommendation 1a	Centres will submit applications (on forms provided) for consideration for Centre status	Centre Directors	Nov 2022
Recommendation 1b	Schools will evaluate submissions against expected key features of a Centre. They will propose a set of Research Centres which will be submitted to the review group for approval.	HoS; DoR	Feb 2023
Recommendation 2	Centre in Development Status should be used for groups of researchers in the process of establishing a Centre, or for current Centres where there is a major change in focus planned, or which do not meet Centre criteria but wish to work towards this status. A timeframe for holding this status will be agreed, after which, on review of activities, a decision is taken on whether status of "Centre" should be conferred.	HoS; DoR	Feb 2023
Recommendation 3	Research centres are required to demonstrate that they have the resources to maintain their activities or specify which resources are needed from the School	Heads of school	Ongoing
Recommendation 4	Centres which were invited to take part in this review but did not submit a review form will be requested to clarify their current status and made aware of the requirement to submit an application if they wish to maintain centre status.	Directors of Research	Aug 2022
Recommendation 5	The default naming of Centres should be "The (Aberdeen) Centre …." or variations thereof. In cases where an alternative is used then a case would need to be made and approved by the School.	Centre Directors	Oct 2022
Staff affiliated to Centres (Section 3.2)			
Recommendation 6	Centres draw up a list of affiliated staff with the agreement of individual staff members as to their inclusion.	Centre Directors	Oct 2022
Recommendation 7	We recognised advantages of working across disciplinary boundaries. In cases where a member of staff is affiliated to more than one research Centre, we recommend that they indicate one primary affiliation.	Centre Directors	Oct 2022
Recommendation 8	In instances where there is a very small number of staff affiliated to a Centre, that Schools consider their sustainability and, specifically, whether there are additional staff who may contribute to the work.	DoR; Centre Directors	Oct 2022
Presentation of Centres to external audiences (Section 3.3)			

Recommendation 9	Centres develop a consistent approach to the use of the Centre name, such as in research outputs, by members undertaking work within the Centre .	Centre Directors	March 2023
Recommendation 10	Centres use the current University branding guidelines for their webpages and review the content to ensure it reflects current activity.	Centre Directors	March 2023
Recommendation 11	Centres consider how they interact with external stakeholders and to include this information in their webpages.	Centre Directors	Ongoing
Update reports from Centres (Section 3.4)			
Recommendation 12	Centre status results in access to common resources (such as IT support for establishing the structure of web pages). Our infrastructure software to support research (e.g. Pure and Worktribe) should allow activities, such as publications and grants, to be linked to Centres.	R&D; IT	Mar 2023
Recommendation 13	Each Centre should submit an annual report to their (lead) School Director of Research. Schools will then prepare a summary report for the review group. These reports would form the basis of an annual paper by the Dean of Interdisciplinary Research and Research Impact for the University Research Committee It is intended that this annual report primarily be based on routinely collected data from Pure and Worktribe of activities linked to the Centre but would also include a brief text report from the Director(s) on main activities and any relevant changes.	Centre Directors and School Directors of Research	Ongoing (first report autumn 2023)

1. Background:

Research Centres can have many benefits; they bring together staff working in a specific area and act as a focus for their collaborative working. The visibility which they bring to an area can also help identify other researchers with relevant skills to contribute, thus promoting interdisciplinary research and helping establish a critical mass of researchers. They signal both internally and externally that the University of Aberdeen has substantial interest and specific research skills in these areas. They can be used to attract external funding, be the precursor of seeking "Research Centre" status from an external body such as research councils, and provide a consistent image for engaging with external stakeholders.

It is important however to regularly review Centres which exist to ensure that they have critical mass, provide a vibrant research environment, and have a strategy to ensure they are sustainable. Such an exercise can also identify opportunities for new Centres and overlap in existing Centres.

2. Review Process:

In this context, a review of Research Centres across the University was undertaken which commenced in May 2021 and which collected information from existing Centres in November 2021, to:

- Establish Research Centres which exist within each School

- Receive a report outlining: their areas of work; their strategy and recent activities towards achieving the strategy; their short and medium term aims
- Receive information on published materials listing the Centre and grant awards related to the Centre's activity

The review group was chaired by Professor Gary Macfarlane (Dean of Interdisciplinary Research and Research Impact), and members were Professor Marion Campbell (Vice-Principal for Research), Professor Mirela Delibegovic (Dean for Industrial Engagement in Research & Knowledge Transfer), Dr. Liz Rattray (Director of Research and Innovation) and supported by Nykohla Strong (Research and Innovation)[1]. The proforma which Centres were asked to complete is detailed in Appendix A. Centre directors were mailed mid-September 221 and asked to return the completed proforma by the beginning of November 2021. In the case of Research Centres which crossed Schools, we nominated a lead School for the purposes of the review. In collaboration with School Directors of Research we identified 60 Centres which were thought to be currently active. The new inter-disciplinary research Centres, established in the context of Aberdeen 2040, were not considered to be within the scope of this review.

The work of compiling the list of active Centres and current directors took a considerable amount of time – there was uncertainty within many Schools about which Centres were active and who was leading the activity. In the conduct of the review, 2 "Centres" informed us that they were no longer functioning as such and thus 58 Centres were eligible to participate in the review. A total of 54 Centres returned the review proforma. The Centres are detailed in Appendix B together with information on whether the Centre participated in the review, and if so the number of staff reported within the Centre.

The distribution of number of Centres by Schools (or nominated lead School) is shown in Table 1. It is noted the very large variation in the number of Centres in Schools, ranging from 0 to 13, and the number of Centres was not strongly related to the size of the School.

Table 1: Distribution of Centres across Schools and Staff within Centres

School (Lead School)	Number of Centres	Number of staff from School in Centre	Number of staff in more than one Centre	Number of staff from other Schools in Centre
Psychology	0	2	0	0
Biological Sciences	1	12	0	2
Geosciences	1	9	0	0
Natural and Computing Sciences	1	7	3	3
Education	2	15	0	1
Social Science	2	5	0	2
Business School	5	52	12	4
Law	5	55	18	0
Engineering	6	41	4	25
Divinity, History, Philosophy, & History of Art	11	32	11	22
Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition	11	167	10	31

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[1] Dr Andrew Dilley (Dean for Academic Research Partnerships & Research Governance), appointed after the review had taken place, will join the review group for future activities.

Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture	13	67	31	17

We considered how many staff were common across Centres, in the context of considering the opportunity for cross-Centre working. Staff identified in the review proforma were analysed for School affiliation and mapped against the associated Centre. Staff working across multiple Centres within the School, and Staff from other Schools working with the Centre were also identified (Table 1).

Across the institution, 464 staff were listed in at least one research Centre, 89 staff were identified as working in more than one Centre within a School and 107 staff worked in Centres outside of their affiliated Schools. Nine staff were identified as working in more than four Centres.

For the Business School, DHPA, LLMVC, Law and NCS, more than 20% of staff (who were affiliated to a Centre) contributed across more than one Centre within the School structure. For DHPA, LMVC, Social Science, Engineering and NCS more than 20% of staff contributors to their Centres were from outside the School.

Volume indicators for Centres were also analysed by Centre and within Schools; the number of staff involved in any single Centre ranged from 3 to 39[2], and the number of staff involved within schools ranged from 2 to 167.

3. Summary of Review group discussions and recommendations

The rationale for and the function of Research Centres varied widely and to a large extent this related to the Schools in which they were based. We noted three broad types of research Centre:

1. Centres which brought together researchers, and who together shaped the research which was pursued. They had a research strategy, specific areas of research focus and specific events planned to pursue their strategy. Such Centres were most common in Medicine and Medical Sciences.
2. Centres which represented areas of common research interests, and which provided a network for researchers to have an informal exchange of ideas and hold seminars.
3. Centres which were primarily a vehicle for the dissemination of research in a specific area, through lectures and exhibitions and were often the way in which research impact was achieved. Such Centres were most common in Arts and Social Sciences.

It is important to acknowledge this diversity and although we note some general conclusions based on reviewing the Centre returns, some observations will apply more to specific types of Centres. We concluded that we have many Centres which are highly successful, with critical mass in their specific area, producing high quality research and achieving substantial grant income. However there are also many centres with a low number of staff affiliated and low levels of activity. In implementing the recommendations of this report, there will be a cost associated with each centre, and some Schools may consider that a smaller number of vibrant centres with critical mass would be more appropriate.

3.1 Awarding of Centre Status

The purpose of this review was not to evaluate individual Centres and we therefore did not do so. However, we did review the returns of all Centres and made some observations which may be helpful

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[2] One centre did not list any staff as it was "in the process of being re-developed"

to Schools as they consider how to implement the recommendations. In considering the award of Centre status, it is important that centres fit within the overall research strategy of the School.

The Chair of the Review will arrange a meeting open to all Heads of School and School Directors of Research where we present the report recommendations. Meetings will also be arranged with individual School Directors of Research/ Heads of School to discuss issues in relation to their School. For some Schools we identified potential opportunities for consolidating Centres which seem to be undertaking work in similar areas, with the possibility of different themes within combined Centres. In others there were issues around the level of current activities and/or sustainability of Centres.

Schools should consider this feedback (together with other Schools when the Centre is based in more than one School) and by November 2022 have finalised a list of Centres in their School (or for which they are nominated as the "lead" School), the Directors of these Centres, and the list of staff affiliated to each Centre. The review group will be available during this process to discuss and provide guidance. This list of Centres will be proposed to the review group for approval and the final list across Schools will constitute the agreed list of Research Centres within the University.

Schools should review their Centre structure every 5 years at which time they will repeat the process of proposing Research Centres for approval. Centres which are proposed for formation within a five-year period will have a shorter initial period for which they are approved, so that they align with the 5 year review cycle of other Centres.

Schools should ensure that they devote sufficient resources to their centres to allow them to flourish. This includes a budget to support them fulfilling their objectives, but also time allocation for Centre leads in the workload model.

We have noted above three different types of Research Centre. Irrespective of the type, Centres are expected to have key features in common: a research strategy; a critical mass of researchers; events and outputs to deliver on their strategy; and the demonstration of the benefits of Centre status (such as leverage of funds).

Where Centres are a loose grouping of researchers working in a common area but without any regular collective aims and objectives or research activities that might characterise a Centre, Schools should consider the use of the descriptor "network" rather than Research Centre.

Some Centres in their return indicated that they were still in the process of being established or were in the middle of a consultation which may result in a major change of focus. For such Centres, we considered that "Centre in development" might be a useful status. This would give Centres an agreed amount of time to develop or change their aims/themes/web presence before "going live", particularly in relation to the external environment. This status would also be appropriate for current Centres who did not meet criteria for a Centre but wished to work towards meeting the criteria. After the end of the agreed period a review should be undertaken by the School to establish whether criteria for Centre status is met (and if so Centre status should be proposed to the review group for approval) or not (in which case Centre in Development status should be withdrawn).

In a small number of Centres the range of activities and number of persons involved did not seem to be consistent with Centre status, and we will feed this back to Schools. However, in some instances we noted that there may be political reasons for establishing a Centre and Schools will need to consider this.

Naming conventions: Most Centres either used the terminology "Centre…" or "….. Centre" (or "Aberdeen Centre") and we considered that this should be the default. There was a small number of

"Scottish …." and "International …" Centres, but we felt in such cases it should be a requirement to make a case for such. In the small number of Centres using these alternative names in the review, the rationale was clear.

Recommendation 1: Centres will submit applications (on forms provided) for consideration for Centre status by November 2022. Schools will evaluate submissions against expected key features of a Centre. They will propose a set of Research Centres which will be submitted to the review group for approval by February 2023.

Recommendation 2: Centre in Development Status should be used for groups of researchers in the process of establishing a Centre, or for current Centres where there is a major change in focus planned, or which do not meet Centre criteria but wish to work towards this status. A timeframe for holding this status will be agreed, after which, on review of activities, a decision is taken on whether status of "Centre" should be conferred.

Recommendation 3: Research centres are required to demonstrate that they have the resources to maintain their activities or specify which resources are needed from the School.

Recommendation 4: Centres which were invited to take part in this review but did not submit a review form will be requested to clarify their current status and made aware of the requirement to submit an application if they wish to maintain centre status.

Recommendation 5: The default naming of Centres should be "The (Aberdeen) Centre ….. " or variations thereof. In cases where an alternative is used then a case would need to be made and approved by the School.

3.2 Staff affiliated to Centres

It appeared that some Centres adopted a very "inclusive" approach of naming everyone interacting with a Centre whereas others named only those who were key personnel in the Centre. Indeed, we did not know whether academic staff would have been aware, in some instances, whether they were listed as a member of a specific Centre.

In some Schools it seemed that staff members were affiliated to most Centres, in others, staff (if they were a member of a Centre) were usually a member of just one. We felt it was unrealistic that, in general, staff could contribute to a large number of Centres. We recommend if staff are a member of more than one Centre, they should have a primary affiliation.

For some Centres there were only a small number of staff and/or it seemed that most of the activity was driven by a single person. In considering the recommendations of the review, Schools will wish to carefully consider whether Centre status is appropriate and if so, how to ensure the sustainability of the Centre.

Recommendation 6: Centres draw up a list of affiliated staff, with the agreement of individual staff members as to their inclusion.

Recommendation 7: We recognised advantages of working across disciplinary boundaries. In cases where a member of staff is affiliated to more than one research Centre, we recommend that they indicate one primary affiliation.

Recommendation 8: In instances where there is a very small number of staff affiliated to a Centre, that Schools consider their sustainability and, specifically, whether there are additional staff who may contribute to the work.

3.3 Presentation of Centres to external audiences

Centres were inconsistent in how they presented themselves to external audiences. Many Centres did not use the Centre name in publications (or at least the use was inconsistent within and between staff members) and the aims/ themes submitted to the review frequently did not correspond with that presented on their website. We felt it was important to use the Centre name to promote its existence and activities, and all Centres should consider this aspect.

Website: Most Centres had designed informative web pages. Some were using old style University branding or "ad-hoc" colour schemes and we felt it important that all followed the current branding requirements. Some Centres had social media accounts which were little used or "dormant" and on occasion these fed through to their website, which gave the impression of little recent activity.

Stakeholders: while the importance of external stakeholders is often acknowledged, there is rarely information given on how Centres liaise with such stakeholders. This is particularly true in relation to patients for Centres with health or medical focus, even although they may be engaging in such activities.

Recommendation 9: Centres develop a consistent approach to the use of the Centre name, such as in research outputs, by members undertaking work within the Centre.

Recommendation 10: Centres use the current University branding guidelines for their webpages and review the content to ensure it reflects current activity.

Recommendation 11: Centres consider how they interact with external stakeholders and include this information in their webpages.

3.4 Update reports from Centres

The consequence of no formal mechanism for Schools to receive regular information from Centres was evident in undertaking this review. It took several months to determine the full list of current Research Centres, and the review itself highlighted that even this information proved to be inaccurate. Specifically, there was uncertainty about whether a number of Centres were still in existence and who was the current director. The review also identified some Centres that were in the midst of major redevelopment (for example where there had been staff departures). Several Centre directors told us that it was difficult for them to give us information on publications linked to a Centre or grants awarded because they did not seek to collect it and University systems did not routinely record it. In some cases we could only be provided with information on grants linked to people in the Centre (rather than to the work of the Centre itself). We therefore considered it important that there was a requirement for regular reports from Centres to be submitted but we did not want this process to be onerous. It was important therefore that affiliation of a grant, output or other activity could be linked to a Research Centre in the software we used for such activities. We also considered it important that the award of Research Centre status gave the Centres access to common resources to discharge their functions.

Recommendation 12: Centre status results in access to common resources (such as IT support for establishing the structure of web pages). Our infrastructure software to support research (e.g. Pure and Worktribe) should allow activities, such as publications and grants to be linked to Centres.

Recommendation 13: Each Centre should submit an annual report to their (lead) School Director of Research. Schools will then prepare a summary report for the review group. These reports would form the basis of an annual paper by the Dean of Interdisciplinary Research and Research Impact for the University Research Committee. It is intended that this annual report primarily be based on routinely collected data from Pure and Worktribe of activities linked to the Centre but would also include a brief text report from the Director(s) on main activities and any relevant changes.

4. Summary of Action points and resource implications:

Heads of Schools/School Directors of Research should have considered the recommendations of the review and working with staff and Directors of Research Centres have, by November 2022, an agreed a list of Research Centres within their School (or for which they are lead Centre for Centres which are cross-School). This will be submitted to the review group for approval.

Directors of Centres will, working with Schools, have developed a research strategy and list of staff affiliated to their Centre. They will prepare annual reports for submission to the School (and which will form the basis of a School report to the Dean of Interdisciplinary Research and Research Impact) beginning in the Autumn of 2023.

Web and IT teams will work with Research Centres to ensure a presentation and structure of web pages consistent with University design from 2023 onwards.

Research and Innovation will ensure reporting systems (such as Pure and Worktribe) allow activities and outputs to be linked to a Centre, thus facilitating the production of annual reports from 2023 onwards.

Centre review team will work with Schools to finalise the list of Research Centres (and on an ongoing basis) and will receive annual reports from Schools which the Chair will use to produce an annual paper for Research Policy Committee.

Appendix A:

The proforma which Centres were asked to complete.

University of Aberdeen

Research Centre Review 2021

Name of Centre: _____

School(s) in which Centre is based: _____

Year when the Centre was established:	
Director(s) of Centre:	
Web Address:	

A short description of the Centre including "added value" of the Centre (max 250 words)
Aims of the Centre (max 150 words):

Staff affiliated to the Centre:		
Name	Start Date/Year	Job Title

Grants (2018 onwards) affiliated to the Centre:					
Project Title	Reference number	Year of Award	Name(s) of any joint Partners	Grant Value	Funding Body

Other income (2018 onwards) affiliated to the Centre:				
Description of income	Year	Name(s) of any joint Partners	Income value	Income Source or provider

Research publications (2018 onwards) with Centre affiliation listed:
e.g. *Lecocq, T., Hicks, S. P., Van Noten, K., et al.. (2020). Global quieting of high-frequency seismic noise due to COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures. Science, 369(6509), 1338-1343. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abd2438*   •   •   •

PGR students Completed (2018 onwards)		
Name	Degree programme	Date of Completion
External recognition of Centre		
• • •		
Detail key external (academic or non-academic) stakeholders:		
• • •		
Any other relevant information:		

Appendix B

Eligible Centres detailed with the number of staff listed against the Centre, and whether the Centre participated.

	School (or lead School)	Centre	Staff Numbers	Participated Y/N
1	Biological Sciences	Scottish Fish Immunology Research	14	Y
2	Business School	Aberdeen Centre for Research in Energy Economics and Finance (ACREEF)	15	Y
3	Business School	Africa-Asia Centre for Sustainability (AACS)	13	Y
4	Business School	Centre for European Labour Market Research (CELMR)	14	Y
5	Business School	Centre for Real Estate Research (CRER);	15	Y
6	Business School	Scottish Experimental Economics Laboratory (SEEL).	8	Y
7	DHPA	Aberdeen Centre for Protestant Theology	5	Y
8	DHPA	Centre for Autism and Theology	5	Y
9	DHPA	Centre for Knowledge and Society	9	Y
10	DHPA	Centre for Ministry Studies	9	Y
11	DHPA	Centre for Polish-Lithuanian Studies (formerly the Aberdeen Centre for Russian and East European History (ACREEH))	5	Y
12	DHPA	Centre for Scandinavian Studies	7	Y
13	DHPA	Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability	0	Y
14	DHPA	CHPSTM (Centre for the History and Philosophy of Science, Technology and Medicine)		N
15	DHPA	RIISS (Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies)	6	Y
16	DHPA	The Centre for Global Security and Governance		N
17	DHPA (interdisciplinary)	Centre for Early Modern Studies	20	Y
18	Education	Centre for Global Development	7	Y
19	Education	The Bounds Counselling Research Centre	8	Y
20	Engineering	Aberdeen High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) Research Centre	4	Y
21	Engineering	Centre for Applied Dynamics Research	6	Y
22	Engineering	Centre for Micro and Nanomechanics (CEMINACS)	12	Y
23	Engineering	Centre for Transport Research	8	Y
24	Engineering	Leverhulme Centre for Doctoral Training in the Sustainable Production of Chemicals and Materials	20	Y
25	Engineering	National Decommissioning Centre	31	Y
26	Geosciences	Northern Rivers Institute	4	Y
27	Law	Centre for Commercial Law	21	Y
28	Law	Centre for Constitutional and Public International Law	16	Y

29	Law	Centre for Energy Law	14	Y
30	Law	Centre for Private International Law	7	Y
31	Law	Centre for Scots Law	19	Y
32	LLMVC	Centre for Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Studies	8	Y
33	LLMVC	Centre for Citizenship, Civil Society & Rule of Law	not provided	Y
34	LLMVC	Centre for Linguistic Research	7	Y
35	LLMVC	Centre for Modern Languages Research	19	Y
36	LLMVC	Centre for Modern Thought		N
37	LLMVC	Centre for the Novel	16	Y
38	LLMVC	Centre for Translation and Interpreting Studies	9	Y
39	LLMVC	Elphinstone Institute	5	Y
40	LLMVC	George Washington Wilson Centre for Art and Visual Culture	15	Y
41	LLMVC	Sir Herbert Grierson Centre for Textual Criticism and Comparative Literary History	10	Y
42	LLMVC	Walter Scott Research Centre	11	Y
43	LLMVC	WORD Centre for Creative Writing	34	Y
44	LLMVC (cross-institute)	Ionad Eòghainn MhicLachlainn: National Centre for Gaelic Translation: Ewen MacLachlan Centre	3	Y
45	Natural and Computing Sciences	Marine Biodiscovery Centre	8	Y
46	SMMSN	Aberdeen Biomedical Imaging Centre	26	Y
47	SMMSN	Aberdeen Cancer Centre	33	Y
48	SMMSN	Aberdeen Cardiovascular and Diabetes Centre	19	Y
49	SMMSN	Aberdeen Centre for Women's Health Research	9	Y
50	SMMSN	Centre for Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Health	14	Y
51	SMMSN	Centre for Bacteria in Health and Disease	33	Y
52	SMMSN	Centre for Health Data Science	33	Y
53	SMMSN	Centre for Healthcare Education Research and Innovation		N
54	SMMSN	Centre for Healthcare Randomised Trials (CHaRT)	43	Y
55	SMMSN	Centre for Rural Health	8	Y
56	SMMSN	International Centre for Aquaculture Research and Development (ICARD)	19	Y
57	Social Science	Institute for Conflict, Transition, and Peace Research (ICTPR)	3	Y
58	Social Science	Scottish Centre for Himalayan Research (SCHR)	6	Y