

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 15th DECEMBER 2022

Present: Marion Campbell (Convenor), Simon Bains, Marlis Barraclough, Abbe Brown, Ed Chadwick, Matthew Clarke, Mirela Delibegovic, Andrew Dilley, Dawn Foster (Clerk), Brian Henderson, Jesper Kallestrup, Suk-Jun Kim, Ann Lewendon, Sam Martin, Graeme Nixon, Nir Oren (part meeting), Louise Phillips, Liz Rattray, Brice Rea, Tanja Schwanck, Tracey Slaven, Ian Stansfield, Donna Walker, Claire Wallace

Apologies: Keith Bender, Elena Giannaccini, Gary Macfarlane

Welcome:

Marion Campbell welcomed all to the meeting. Abbe Brown (School of Law) and Suk-Jun Kim (School of LLMVC) were welcomed to their first meeting as School Directors of Research (noting that Jun is an interim appointment, with a new SDoR due to commence in January). Tanja Schwanck (Research Ethics Officer) was welcomed 'in attendance' at the meeting.

1 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 28th September 2022 were approved.

2 MATTERS ARISING

URC noted that a written update on matters arising had been circulated as part of the papers for this meeting (URC22:15).

ACTION: URC agreed to continue with a written update for future URC meetings. This will include cross-referencing to the specific agenda items.

URC also noted the recent announcement from the SFC of an additional £1.39M flexible research formula funding for the University plus a further £199k I research capital funding, both to be spent by the end of March 2023. This funding can be used for research activities that have been underway from 21 November 2022 and has been provided as part of a package of additional support from the Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) in advance of a final decision on the UK's association with Horizon Europe.

Research Income:

3 RESEARCH FUNDING

3.1 Research Income – HESA Benchmarking and Contextual Data

URC noted the contents of the report, which was an updated version of a report previously submitted to RPC in September 2021 (updated to reflect HESA data on research income and staff numbers up to 2020/21). URC noted that institutional research income has increased since the previous report and is expected to continue to increase next year, albeit at a slower rate of growth. The distribution of funding awards/grants by value remains largely unchanged, with the vast majority of awards less than £100k, with only 1% of awards at more than £1M.

URC held a wide-ranging discussion on the various opportunities for growing research income, and the types of support required to do so. Key issues raised were as follows:

- The high level of ECR recruitment requires a lot of effort to support them in funding applications, and also it was not necessarily appropriate to expect them to apply for large

grants. At this stage in their careers, it was deemed important to focus on positive research culture, in order that as they mature as researchers they would then begin to apply for larger grants.

- Ongoing workload issues amongst staff, including the impact of high teaching workloads and the encroachment of PGT teaching into the summer period (which was previously available for research).
- The benefits gained from the introduction of improved peer review processes and staff mentoring within Schools was noted.
- The use of paid grant writers to assist staff was suggested.
- It was noted that the impact of the NECR cap was off-putting for ECRs, and this was seen as a difficult hurdle - to overcome.
- Lack of engagement by mid-career researchers was noted. Review of workload allocation was noted, and the introduction of School-based research workshops to bring together staff at different career stages.
- Opportunities for higher value funding applications arising from the interdisciplinary themes were also discussed, including the opportunities arising from the forthcoming appointment of 20 IDR Fellows and the need to clarify the associated grant expectations for these individuals. In addition, the IDR directors should be involved in bringing staff together to discuss CDTs.
- List of staff with experience of funding panels/funding streams should be prepared, including colleagues with links to international funding schemes e.g. DHPA and Templeton funding in USA.
- Suggested that a small number (2 – 4) key interventions should be introduced across a number of Schools to see what is successful. Additional blocks of time dedicated to funding applications and to complete the associated research, increased opportunities to apply for funding and also more support for capable applicants (identified via the academic line management networks) is required.
- Be more selective in the funding opportunities that are progressed

URC noted that two pilot sessions with external grant writers have been held with SBS and Geosciences and this will be rolled out to other Schools if this proves to be a successful initiative.

ACTIONS:

- **B Rea and M Barraclough to discuss Geosciences research funding figures.**
- **SDoRs to raise any further queries with M Barraclough.**
- **The suggestions made for increasing research income will be considered further by M Campbell, E Rattray and M Barraclough.**

3.2 Research Income Report

URC noted the contents of the research income report.

3.3 Applications & Awards Trends

URC noted the contents of the applications and awards trends paper.

ACTIONS:

- **M Barraclough to circulate School and discipline-level figures to SDoRs**
- **E Rattray to circulate post-implementation survey of Power BI to Heads of School in 2023**

Post REF2021 Action Plan:

4 REF STOCKTAKE

URC noted the proposed process for a REF stocktake (as previously discussed and agreed by SMT), and which had taken into account the feedback provided during related workshop sessions. The stocktake will take place in Spring 2023.

ACTIONS:

- **M Barraclough to circulate list of REF-eligible researchers to SDoRs. SDoRs to check their Research Fellows.**
- **SDoRs to contact M Barraclough with proposals/suggestions for obtaining external review/external advice on REF preparations, (particularly for panels C and D).**

5 IMPACT UPDATE

URC noted that an additional Impact Officer has been appointed to the team (commencing January 2023), with a further appointment anticipated in August 2023. URC were reminded that the impact team is a central resource that any of the Schools can call upon for support.

It was also noted that a series of meetings have been held between Gary Macfarlane (as nominated Dean for impact) and the Impact Team, and these will continue in January. The appendix to the accompanying paper provides further information on the number of Impact Case Studies currently in development, and this will be updated on a quarterly basis.

R&I have sought tenders from external providers for training on output assessment and also impact training and assessment. Three external quotes have been received, and these are currently being assessed to ensure the proposed services will fit our requirements. This will be agreed in discussion with the SDoRs. It is likely that separate training will be arranged for panels A & B and panels C&D training to address the different disciplinary cultures. The training programme will likely encompass ICS training, ECR training on introduction to impact, REF impact and also embedding impact. Training is planned to take place in early 2023 and again in October 2023.

It was also noted that external training support has also been sought for outputs, however the tenders did not include a convincing offering for this, particularly for disciplines in Main Panels C and D. Instead it is likely that we will need to contract previous REF panel members to provide training. Schools are invited to bring forward proposals for reviewers and REF support.

ACTIONS:

- **A Lewendon to include IMS impact case studies in the next iteration of this report.**
- **A Lewendon to ensure that Table 1, Potential Impact Case Studies by School – data to be disaggregated to discipline level.**
- **A Lewendon/D Foster to upload Table 1 to URC Sharepoint site as a live file.**
- **SDoRs to contact A Lewendon to discuss funding that can be made available for impact support e.g. inviting ex-panel members to the University.**

URC also received an update from M Barraclough and N Oren on the recent research assessment workshop organised by the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP) team.

This covered two main issues: (1) Can artificial intelligence be used to assess outputs? – the current view is not at the moment, however more modern AI is more efficient and this could be a possible pilot project. At the present time, AI appears to be skewed towards high impact journals and larger institutions; and (2) What is the general direction of travel for research assessment? (These issues are also covered in the CoARA paper, item 10 of this minute.) URC noted that UKRI are signatories to CoARA, as they view this as a blueprint of what

represents high-quality research, and that Research England promoted CoARA and its principles.

The next FRAP report is expected in February/March 2023, and is likely to include a broad outline of the requirements for the next REF.

ACTION: SDoRs to be aware of the further information on the funding bodies' current work on evaluating research assessment, in particular the 'Harnessing the Metric Tide' report <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme/evaluation-activities>

Research Governance, Policy and Concordats Developments:

6 REVISIONS TO RESEARCH GOVERNANCE HANDBOOK

URC received a copy of the draft revisions to the Research Governance Handbook. These mainly involve routine updates to reflect changes in University policy and procedures, and new sections have also been included on Trusted Research and the National Security and Investment Act (NSIA) 2021.

URC noted that information sessions on Trusted Research will be arranged in 2023 with colleagues from BEIS. Additional policy work will also be developed on this issue.

URC also noted that an issue had been raised at the May Senate meeting where the Code of Practice on Student Discipline had been amended to reflect the existing wording used in the Research Governance Handbook. Concerns were raised at the meeting by a Senator, followed by a proposed amendment from the Senator which would have introduced a difference in what constitutes research misconduct by staff and by students. This involved limiting research misconduct by PGRs around data management to 'serious inadequacy or inadequate preservation of data' and sought to exclude 'errors in the management/preservation of data' from the misconduct definition. The intention behind this was to protect PGR students from being found in breach of the Code of Practice because of minor errors in data management, and for failure to comply without being deliberately negligent.

URC agreed that the definition of research misconduct should not differ between staff and PGRs, noting that where an allegation of research misconduct is investigated, the process will allow disciplinary action to be dismissed if there is no case to answer, or in circumstances where the data breach is considered to be minor, to issue warnings and/or recommend further training.

It was recommended that further work be undertaken to clarify the interaction between research ethics and institutional governance and ethics issues. A diagram and additional commentary would be helpful to clarify these matters.

It was noted that 'reproducibility' will be added to our research principles in the next iteration of this handbook, and that the Research Misconduct Policy and Procedure will be reviewed again.

ACTIONS:

- **M Barraclough to prepare diagram for inclusion in the revised handbook.**
- **M Campbell to submit details of typos to be corrected.**
- **D Foster to accept all changes to the handbook, upload to the webpages and advise SDoRs so they can ensure a link is included within School induction processes.**

7 DRAFT – SAFEGUARDING IN RESEARCH & INNOVATION CODE OF PRACTICE

URC noted that this code of practice has been drafted in order to address a gap in the current University Safeguarding policy, which doesn't address research issues in sufficient detail. The code of practice clarifies the additional R&I requirements, including the roles and processes that are to be followed in our research practices. This draft code of practice reflects the requirements the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and has received feedback received from Pamela Abbott (an experienced researcher in this field). It is also compliant with the UKRI requirements on safeguarding, which places a statutory requirement on institutions to ensure that safeguarding principles and requirements are upheld.

Once finalised and approved, the code of practice will be submitted to HR for inclusion in the planned review of the main Safeguarding policy. Additional training will likely be required for researchers who will be involved in this type of activity.

URC welcomed the code of practice as a positive step, noting this will also be helpful in identifying any gaps in the core University policy. URC noted that understanding of safeguarding in research within the UK was less of a concern, with the main issues to be addressed involving research activities taking place overseas and when working with international partners.

It was also noted that safeguarding requirements would be assessed on an individual project basis i.e. if there are particular factors in the research that could trigger safeguarding concerns e.g. research involving children, vulnerable adults, and also power imbalances should be considered. PIs may be required to complete safeguarding plan which in turn will require institutional approval. Not all projects will require a safeguarding plan, however the researchers need to consider what should be done should a safeguarding issue emerge.

URC noted the requirement (under GCRF projects) to appoint an in-country Safeguarding Officer. URC were asked to consider if separate safeguarding officers should be appointed for research projects, and a separate structure be put in place to consider and approve safeguarding plans, or if this should be dealt with within existing safeguarding structures.

URC recommended that the Safeguarding Officer should not be appointed from within the research team member due to the potential conflict of interest.

It was suggested that parallel roles and structures would be a concern, and it was recommended that part of the existing Safeguarding Officer's role should be to extend research safeguarding issues too.

Further clarification is required on the boundaries of the types of research activities that would be covered by the code of practice.

ACTIONS:

- **D Foster and M Barraclough to revise and resubmit to March 2023 URC meeting, and if approved, submission to Senate thereafter.**
- **D Foster to share the current list of Safeguarding Officers with the SDoRs.**

8 PGR ENGAGEMENT MONITORING

URC discussed the proposals for dealing with lack of PGR engagement, which will introduce the use of the C6 and C7 processes as additional stages prior to commencing the formal withdrawal process.

URC noted that the frequency of contact between a PGR and their supervisor may differ, based on disciplinary norms, and this should be based on a mutually agreed timeframe with the student.

URC approved the proposal, subject to the following amendments.

ACTIONS:

- **G Nixon to provide additional clarification in section 4.2 Unsatisfactory PGR Engagement, to include the option for supervisor to contact the PGRS engagement team with concerns regarding student engagement.**
- **G Nixon to provide additional clarification in section 4.4 PGR Supervision Meetings, to clarify that the frequency of meetings between supervisors and students should be “at least once per month, or by mutual agreement”.**

9 EU FUNDING

URC noted the information provided in the paper. Researchers are advised to continue to apply for Horizon Europe funds and Schools should promote participation in Horizon Europe among their research active community. While the process of association to Horizon Europe is underway, any awards made to UK investigators are guaranteed by the UKRI Horizon Europe Guarantee scheme, and will be awarded under UKRI terms and conditions. Researchers are advised to contact the EU team within R&I for further information.

10 AGREEMENT ON REFORMING RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

URC noted that UKRI have committed to the Coalition for the Advancement of Reform of Research Assessment (CoARA) and are encouraging other HE institutions to do so.

URC were asked to consider whether the University should become a signatory to this agreement, noting that the overarching principles are included in DORA hence this is an extension to a number of principles that the University has already committed to. Whilst URC agreed in principle that this was an initiative that the University should support, some concerns were noted regarding the resources that would be required to properly implement CoARA.

URC agreed that further information on the required resources and level of commitment would be required, and this issue should be brought back to a future meeting for further consideration.

ACTION: M Barraclough to discuss with S Bains.

11 UPDATE ON THE CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT RESEARCHER DEVELOPMENT

URC received an update on the implementation of the concordat. Senate have approved the adoption of the high-level principles of the concordat, and this will be supported by the introduction of a number of initiatives such as improved teaching opportunities and greater access to funding opportunities for our ECR community. A steering group has been established to oversee this work, supported by three working groups, and preparations are ongoing for the submission deadline at the end of January 2023. Any further questions should be directed to Mirela Delibegovic (e-mail: m.delibegovic@abdn.ac.uk)

For Information/To Note:

12 ETHICS ADVISORY GROUP REPORT

13 R&I RISK REGISTER

URC noted that previous points made by I Stansfield on teaching and research were incorporated into the updated risk register.

14 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH

AOB:

15 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was raised.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Monday 13 March 2023, 2.05 – 3.55pm

MB/DF 12/22