Annual Statement on Compliance with the *Concordat to support research integrity*: 2019-20

Background

A revised concordat to support research integrity was published in October 2019, responding to the Science and Technology Committee's report on research integrity, published in July 2018. Signatories agreed there should be a 12-month implementation period to demonstrate commitment to the revised concordat, following which the annual statement from employers of research demonstrating how they are meeting the requirements of the concordat, should be published.

This report outlines the University of Salford's work both during the implementation period (the academic year 2019-20) and since the publication of its 2018-19 report.

Summary of Commitments

Below is included the summary of commitments from the Concordat, which sets out the ways and means in which researchers, employers of researchers and research funders are expected to meet these commitments.

As signatories to the concordat to support research integrity, we are committed to:

1. upholding the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research
2. ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards
3. supporting a research environment that is underpinned by a culture of integrity and based on good governance, best practice, and support for the development of researchers
4. using transparent, timely, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise
5. working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to review progress regularly and openly

Supporting and Strengthening Research Integrity

Policies and Procedures

The University of Salford has three primary policies to ensure that research is conducted to a high standard and with integrity: the Research Code of Practice, the Policy & Procedure for Dealing with Allegations of Misconduct in Research (Research Misconduct Policy) and the Academic Ethics Policy. These policies are available on both the internal and external University websites and are referenced at staff induction and at Academic Ethics and Supervisor training. The Academic Ethics Committee and Research & Enterprise Committee jointly oversee matters of research integrity on behalf of Senate.

The Research Governance Framework for the University is reviewed annually. At the request of Senate, in the 2019-20 academic year, a working group undertook a specific review of key policies

and procedures for research governance and ethics. The review highlighted areas for change and improvement which were presented to the Academic Ethics and Research & Enterprise committees for comment. Additional process changes have been identified whilst working under the pandemic and these will be incorporated into the refreshed policies during the 2020-21 academic year.

Throughout 2020, teams in Research & Knowledge Exchange (RKE) and Finance have worked in consultation with Associate Deans of Research to review the Research Funding Approval Policy and associated processes. As a result, a Research Funding Approval Policy and Research Bidding Code of Practice were produced to define University-delegated levels of approval for Research Applications and to aid colleagues with the development of high-quality research bids.

The Academic Support Team in the Library identified training needs around research data management, following the appointment of a Research Data Manager. Work towards improvements has involved producing a data management plan template for use in all data-handling research projects undertaken by staff and students.

The Research Governance Officer and Legal & Governance team have begun work to build on the recommendations of the Academic Ethics Committee to produce safeguarding guidance for research projects. This guidance will also promote the production of specific guidance for research projects involving children and vulnerable adults.

Finally, in consultation with academic and professional services staff across all schools and student-facing departments, the University has produced a position statement on acceptable practice around proofreading and peer review. This guidance will help students and supervisors avoid common pitfalls where proofreading and peer review might crossover into plagiarism and outlines expectations for formal contracts with third parties.

Guidance and Visibility

Beginning in early 2020, the University migrated its internal and external websites to new platforms, and RKE used this as a time to rationalise its content on Academic Ethics and Research Governance. The Continuous Improvement Project for Ethics presented an opportunity to consider where clearer guidance and more in-depth information was needed to facilitate better understanding and culture change. The internal-facing site for Academic Ethics, with content from panel review to training and policy, was updated and expanded.

A refreshed site structure allowed policies on ethical review and conduct to be highlighted, with integration into the University's Office 365 programme simplifying sharing, updates and management of policies and procedures. This proved especially valuable during the Covid-19 campus closure period, a time during which a number of temporary changes to policy and procedure for researchers and ethical applications were made and required rapid and widespread sharing.

The new external webpages for Research now offer an easily-navigable site with content that is relevant to external stakeholders and can be readily updated by local site administrators to ensure the content remains current, compliant and engaging.

Process Improvement

The Continuous Improvement Project for Ethics was launched in 2018 to review the Academic Ethics approval procedure and design a sustainable University process for Academic Ethics applications, review and governance. RKE and Digital Skills (Quality & Enhancement Office) developed an online

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assessment and application tool for Academic Ethics (the Ethics App). All four Schools and nine University departments were involved in testing, surveys, workshops and drop-in sessions to help shape the design and functionality of the App.

The Ethics App was soft launched in July 2020 for research ethics applications and is anticipated for extended pilot by all users in late October.

Through an online, standardised application form, the Ethics App has created an easily accessible, auditable academic ethics platform. Where the preceding "paper-based" process was administratively burdensome and allowed for unintended loopholes around ethics review, the App provides a semi-automated assessment on the appropriate level of panel review required before approval can be granted. The App includes a feedback form, through which users are encouraged to submit experiences and suggestions, all of which are routinely reviewed and considered for future development and to aid pilot review. The feedback has resulted in further discussion with staff and students, contributing to a collective responsibility for research integrity and Academic Ethics at the University.

Training and Supporting

Changes in team structure allowed the formation of an RKE Ethics Team with a dedicated Academic Ethics administrative lead, guided by the Research Governance Officer and managed by the project manager for the Continuous Improvement Project. Since the start of lockdown and campus closure, the team have dedicated their time to ensuring comprehensive guidance was available for staff and student researchers no longer able to gain in-person advice. To coincide with the launch of the Ethics App, the team arranged weekly Q&A drop-in sessions for staff and students with Academic Ethics queries, which the team has now committed to offering at least monthly to ensure that all researchers have an opportunity to be made aware of changes and to seek support in completing, reviewing and submitting ethics applications. These sessions have had a positive uptake and led to lively discussion, also contributing to a series of existing and planned handbooks, guidance documents and standard operating procedures.

Academic Ethics training is a module in mandatory training for staff and students; research programme students, research staff and supervisors are trained by RKE and taught programme students receive training on ethical conduct and procedure as part of relevant modules (often a Research Methods session). The RKE Ethics Team are available via email to respond to interim queries and provide signposting, as are the Q&A drop-in sessions, and the University uses a network of internal and external contacts to signpost our researchers to policies, guidance and relevant professional development (such as the UKRIO monthly webinar).

Research Integrity and Research Misconduct Reporting

Overall responsibility for research integrity, governance and ethics sits with the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research & Enterprise. Questions may be addressed in the first instance to Rachael McKittrick, Research Governance Officer, who is also the Named Person for reports of allegations of misconduct in research. The University's Whistle Blowing Policy allows staff to raise concerns about actions or behaviour when, owing to the nature or severity of the issue, it would be inappropriate to use normal channels and the reporting line is to the University's General Counsel, Andrew Hartley.

The Research Misconduct Policy outlines the process for reporting and investigating allegations of misconduct in research. As reported above, it has undergone review through a dedicated working

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group and is scheduled for secondary review and update in the 2020-21 academic year. This review will bring these policies in line with research lessons learned during the pandemic, especially around remote working and internet-mediated research. The University also operates an Academic Misconduct Procedure, which outlines the process for reporting and investigating allegations of student misconduct. The Academic Misconduct Procedure was updated in August 2020 to include an additional category of misconduct "failure to correctly obtain necessary approval"; this category directly addresses a gap identified in the policy for allegations of misconduct where ethics approval had not been sought prior to commencing research.

As part of the review of the Research Misconduct Policy, the timelines for reporting and investigating allegations of misconduct have been readdressed and a deputy Named Person has been appointed to ensure timely responses to allegations in periods of absence by the Named Person.

We have also launched an Incident Reporting Form for use by staff and students through which research-related incidents of any level should be reported to the Research Governance Officer. This form has been designed to fit into existing policy and procedure if additional lines of reporting are required. The University makes a clear statement to encourage openness in reporting when things go wrong and will support its researchers at any stage to make things right again. We recognise that reporting allows us to reflect on how to prevent the same mistake occurring again, and we take the same approach for reporting incidences of misconduct.

Allegations of Research Misconduct

During the academic year 2019-20 the University received two allegations of research misconduct. Both allegations were ultimately pursued through the Academic Misconduct Procedure as they directly concerned students.

To ensure that both the Research Misconduct Policy and the Academic Misconduct Procedure remain fit for purpose, a procedure must be designed for allegations of misconduct that involve crossover between the staff-facing (Research Misconduct) and student-facing (Academic Misconduct) procedures. This will be done in 2020-21 to ensure that robust investigation is undertaken, and further incidents of the same type are prevented from re-occurring.

Conclusions

The University continues to work hard to embed a culture of research integrity by fostering a shared responsibility for matters of research integrity and ethics. During periods of consultation we engage all impacted groups, from students to professional services and academic staff. We seek feedback on procedures work to find ways to fix things that aren't working for our stakeholders. This in turn translates into reporting matters of concern. We have robust processes in place for confidentially reporting concerns, raising allegations and investigating problems.

Below is outlined a series of self-recommendations for next steps on additional areas for improvement on which we intend to focus over the next 12-24 months.

- We will utilise the features of back-end data on the Ethics App to enhance the identification, monitoring and reporting on practice across Academic Ethics, celebrating successes and supporting development in areas requiring improvement

- We will work to train our staff and students on responsible data handling and incorporating Research Data Management plans into the Academic Ethics processes
  - This will include considering external sources of well-established academic ethics training provision and making better use of existing networks and resource banks
- We will produce a series of best practice documents to support high-calibre ethics applications (and supporting documentation) and steps for undertaking research with integrity. We will use the newly launched internal "Hub" sites to promote these documents and associated activities
- We will start to arrange sharing of best practice between staff and students on matters of research integrity. We will use these as a learning opportunity between junior and senior staff and students to create partnerships and support networks whilst building a data bank of expert knowledge.

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