

Annual Statement on Compliance with the *Concordat to support research integrity: 2020-21*

Background

This statement outlines the University of Salford's work to promote and comply with the Universities UK Concordat to support research integrity. Previously this report has been published in the autumn, but it is being brought forward to summer to better align with academic year reporting and sign off. The Academic Ethics Committee, a committee of Senate, reviews and approves the content of this statement for publication but it is also seen by the Research & Enterprise Committee for information and final comment.

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 those commitments, has been included as an appendix.

Commitment 1: upholding the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research

The University works with its researchers to ensure they are equipped with the skills and information required to conduct their research in accordance with expected standards of rigour and integrity. This means providing or seeking bespoke training for researchers in different disciplines and career stages, signposting to key news and updates including policy and legislative changes, and ensuring that staff providing advice are supportive and informed. It also means clearly stating and promoting the responsibilities of individual researchers for the purposes of self-educating and complying with those requirements.

As a University we wholeheartedly support our researchers living up to the expectations of the Concordat in difficult circumstances. We operate a dedicated email address for confidentially reporting allegations of, or concerns about, misconduct in research, through which confidential guidance can be sought and procedure for reporting allegations of research misconduct is followed. Similarly, there is an equivalent structure and procedure for allegations of misconduct in student research. The University has a Whistle Blowing Policy which 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. It has been proposed that there is a need to expressly permit postgraduate researchers to act as whistle-blowers. As such, it is intended to include this for discussion at the first meeting of the Academic Ethics Committee in the 2021-22 academic year, with a view to formally incorporating this position into the Whistle Blowing Policy.

The University recognises that sometimes in research things can go wrong and as such have developed and published an Incident Reporting Form through which researchers are requested to report unintended incidents that occur during their research. The Form is not designed to replace urgent or legal reporting routes but rather to allow researchers and the Research & Enterprise Department (R&E) to reflect on how the incident occurred and avoid reoccurrence.

By October 2020, the University had rolled out its in-house designed Ethics App for the review of ethics applications for research to all but one panel (to which it is hoped the App will also be extended for the academic year 2021-22). As of 1st April 2021, the App had received over 1800 applications from staff and student researchers at all levels. As part of the App's implementation, the Ethics Team in R&E has worked with the Chairs of Ethics and Chairs of School Ethics Approval Committees to develop a process for ensuring all taught module content also undergoes a process of ethics review. R&E is also working with Quality & Enhancement to agree a process for flagging new or changed modules that contain an ethical dimension. This has helped raise the profile of academic ethics as a practice, resulting in a rise in submissions of ethics applications for independent research projects by students. This has in turn encouraged discussion about process improvement, best practice and training needs for staff and students. The Ethics Teams have also noted markedly improved quality of ethics applications across many disciplines and a clearer awareness of the issues surrounding academic ethics and research integrity; we intend to build on this momentum over the next 12 months.

[Commitment 2: ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards](#)

The University has three primary policies to ensure that research is conducted to a high standard with integrity: the Research Code of Practice, the 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, PGR induction, supervisor training and in training for Academic Ethics panels. They are additionally supported by other policies such as the Academic Misconduct Policy (applying to students), Safeguarding Policy, Health & Safety Policy and the University Ethics Framework. These policies define researchers' responsibility for keeping abreast of ethical, legal and professional obligations and standards, and outline where they can seek advice.

As agreed at the start of the academic year, the Academic Ethics Committee (AEC) will now report annually into the University Ethics Committee (GNEC) to provide a high-level summary of its work and key issues. This will mirror existing relationships in other Council committees allowing the two to engage and inform one another more closely.

Over the course of the year, simple measures have been undertaken to increase awareness of academic ethics and research governance, and to encourage a dialogue in these areas. This has included the transfer of the previous "Ethics website" to two dedicated Academic Ethics intranet sites, one for students and one for staff. These sites have been developed to support the move of research projects online under Covid-19 restrictions, to increase engagement with training and development events, to ease and support the transition of ethics applications onto the Ethics App, and as a place to centralise discussion and awareness of policy, procedure, research practice and associated developments and changes. Since February 2021, the Ethics Team have been trialling a monthly Academic Ethics newsletter, circulated to all students and academic staff. Engagement with the newsletter has been good, with suggestions for content sought and received each month from outside the team and requests to be added to circulation broadening. The newsletter is being used as a source of sharing best practice, developments, and changes and for encouraging discussion and thought on the subject of academic ethics and research integrity.

Last year the University reported its work developing guidance on safeguarding in research. Legal & Governance, with support from R&E, produced official guidance on how to manage and report on safeguarding matters in research. Researchers are supported to develop a Safeguarding Plan as part of standard documentation produced for any research involving minors or vulnerable adults, which is reviewed as part of the ethics approval process.

Under Covid-19 restrictions, there has been a cross-sector effort to engage and partner with institutions to provide training and networking opportunities and to share good research practice. These efforts have been especially successfully managed for the University of Salford's postgraduate researchers, for whom the Doctoral School have arranged training and networking sessions on research skills, integrity and management with partner institutions. For research staff, we have shared online training and event opportunities and will work to sustain these new relationships.

Commitment 3: embedding a culture of research integrity

Higher engagement with the Academic Ethics process since the launch of the Ethics App has increased queries and requests for bespoke training. The R&E Research Governance and Ethics Team have produced supplementary guidance to answer repeat queries, building a library of FAQs and guidance resources for each discipline. The Team now also runs online monthly Q&A sessions for academic ethics and research governance matters. The sessions have seen steady attendance throughout the year, with an equal split of engagement from staff and students. These Q&A sessions also provide a useful learning opportunity for research governance and academic ethics administrative staff, supporting development and succession planning. The management of training for academic ethics and research governance has moved to the R&E Research Governance and Ethics Team, resulting in an updated training package for Academic Ethics Panel Members (reviewers) to be offered in the short term whilst a more comprehensive package is determined. Wherever possible, bespoke training needs (e.g. discipline or researcher stage relevant) have been met with online sessions, recorded for those who could not attend. Online delivery of training sessions has proven a valuable tool for recording and sharing more broadly with researchers with teaching commitments or who are unable to attend at a prescribed time (including due to caring responsibilities and time differences).

Many of the University's Academic Ethics Panels have undergone changes in management during this academic year, which has presented an opportunity to revisit the efficacy of research/academic governance processes through a unified approach. Out of this, the Research Governance & Ethics Team have also developed a series of actions to address with the support of these panels, other academic and professional services colleagues, and with input from research students, to address in the short-medium term (3-5 years).

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 the Research Governance & Policy Manager, who is also the Named Person for reports of allegations of misconduct in research, with contact details available on the University's public and intranet websites.

The Research Misconduct Policy outlines the process for reporting and investigating allegations of misconduct in research. The University also operates an Academic Misconduct Procedure, which outlines the process for reporting and investigating allegations of student misconduct.

Commitment 4: Dealing with allegations of research misconduct

The legal, ethical and professional obligations of the University of Salford’s researchers are outlined in the aforementioned policies, which are available internally and externally as well as being referenced at key induction and training points.

The Policy and Procedure for Dealing with Allegations of Misconduct in Research (Research Misconduct Policy) outlines a robust process for managing allegations of misconduct in research. Since 2017 the Policy has undergone minor updates and a major review in 2019, the outcome of which was discussed in the 2019-20 statement. Due to departure of senior staff and demands associated with working under the pandemic, the work intended for the reconvened Research Governance Review Group was deferred to 2021-22.

During the academic year 2020-21 there has been one allegation of research misconduct received; on investigation it was determined that the allegation did not meet the threshold for research misconduct therefore was not upheld.

Commitment 5 has been addressed through the content and production of this statement, which has been presented to the Academic Ethics Committee for sign off, the Research & Enterprise Committee for information (both committees of Senate) and will be published on the University’s internal and external websites.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The University has continued to work hard to promote and embed a culture of excellent research with integrity through regularly reviewing its existing policies and procedures, interconnecting departments and disciplines to share best practice, and by providing a connected approach to training, provision of advice and implementation of policy.

In our 2019-20 statement, we outlined objectives for the 2020-21 year and have provided responses to the actions taken towards these:

2019-20 Objective	2020-21 Action Taken
<p>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.</p>	<p>The University has particularly focused on reviewing Academic Ethics procedures throughout 2020-21. Closer monitoring of the back-end data on the App to follow up outstanding applications has helped identify and timely address any patterns of concern; also highlighted through this feature is good practice, which is shared and celebrated to support future development.</p>

	<p>The changes and expansions of the Academic Ethics Panels have supported methods for monitoring and ensuring compliance, such as by developing clear outcomes for non-compliance for academic staff by integrating reviewer responsibilities with the PDR cycle.</p>
<p>We will work to train our staff and students on responsible data handling and incorporating Research Data Management plans into the Academic Ethics processes.</p>	<p>The Research Data Manager and Library colleagues have produced a comprehensive programme of online guidance and training sessions, offering discipline-specific sessions on research data management practice. The Research Data Management Policy remains under review so that the next version might incorporate other major policy changes happening simultaneously. The Research Data Manager attended the Academic Ethics Committee to engage with the group and to discuss challenges and improvements, including future intentions to systematically incorporate Data Management Plans into the Academic Ethics process.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>The R&E Research Governance & Ethics Team have produced suite of best practice and guidance documents all made available through the Academic Ethics Hubs. This guidance has been additionally referenced and shared in the monthly Q&A Drop-in sessions, the Academic Ethics Newsletter and through direct sharing with research and professional services colleagues and students.</p> <p>Disciplines where previously engagement with academic ethics procedures was low have also liaised extensively with the Research Governance & Ethics Team and the Chairs of Ethics/Chairs of School Ethics Approval Committees to seek advice and develop bespoke guidance. This guidance has been signed off and agreed for annual review by the Research Governance Officer to ensure it remains current and in line with expectations.</p>
<p>We will start to arrange sharing of best practice between staff and students on matters of research integrity. We will use this 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.</p>	<p>This objective has been started but remains in early stages. There has been an effort to improve communication and lessons-sharing between colleagues sitting on the Academic Ethics panels, especially between the Chairs of Ethics and the Chairs of School Ethics Approval Committees, which has been met with success</p>

	<p>and reliable succession planning. Deputy Chair vacancies remain on one panel.</p> <p>Similarly, the Ethics Administrative Team has expanded to provide two administrators for each Taught Ethics panel. The Team meets weekly under the management of the Research Governance & Ethics Support Officer as a learning opportunity and to address any concerns for flagging to the Research Governance Manager.</p>
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Below we have outlined self-recommended next steps on which we intend to focus over the next 12 months and on which we will report progress in the 2021-22 statement.

- We will continue to share research best practice between staff and students on matters of research integrity. We will build on the relationships developed with external partners and institutions during 2020-21 to facilitate this and reach a wider audience and collective expertise.
- We will establish a renewed, sustainable training programme on research integrity and academic ethics that is accessible to researchers at all levels. This may initially need to build on existing resources, especially for training on use of the Ethics App and for reviewing Academic Ethics applications. We recognise that there is a pressing need to roll out suitable training to a large number of colleagues and students and will strive to find an easily implemented and managed solution that won't draw resource away from other areas.
- We will reconvene the Research Governance Review Group to undertake a major review and update of the Research Code of Practice, Academic Ethics Policy and Research Misconduct Policy.
- We will review the efficacy of existing forms of communication of academic ethics and research integrity (including the newsletter) and will also commit to communicating summary changes of policies and procedures via email and online channels.
- We will start to develop a process for the ethics review of time-sensitive commercial research applications as well as developing appropriate guidance around research integrity and ethics in enterprise.
- We will continue to record and address matters for resolution by users of the App and will work with the developer, Academic Ethics panels, and applicants to find workable solutions or alternatives.

Appendix

Summary of commitments ([full Concordat available through Universities UK](#))

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

Commitment 1. Employers of researchers are responsible for:

- maintaining a research environment that develops good research practice and embeds a culture of research integrity, as described in commitments 2 to 5
- supporting researchers to understand and act according to expected standards, values and behaviours
- defending researchers when they live up to the expectations of this concordat in difficult circumstances
- demonstrating that they have procedures in place to ensure that research is conducted in accordance with standards of best practice; systems to promote research integrity; and transparent, robust and fair processes to investigate alleged research misconduct

Commitment 2. Employers of researchers must:

- have clear policies on ethical review and approval that are available to all researchers
- make sure that all researchers are aware of, and understand policies and processes relating to ethical approval
- support researchers to adopt best practice in relation to ethical, legal and professional requirements
- have appropriate arrangements in place through which researchers can access advice and guidance on ethical, legal and professional obligations and standards

Commitment 3. Employers of researchers will:

- embed these features in their own systems, processes and practices
- reflect recognised best practice in their own systems, processes and practices
- implement the concordat within their research environment
- participate in an annual monitoring exercise to demonstrate that the institution has met the commitments of the concordat
- promote training and development opportunities to research staff and students, and encourage their uptake

- identify a named senior member of staff to oversee research integrity and ensure that this information is kept up to date and publicly available on the institution's website
- identify a named member of staff who will act as a first point of contact for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity, and ensure that contact details for this person are kept up to date and are publicly available on the institution's website

Commitment 4. Employers of researchers must:

- have clear, well-articulated and confidential mechanisms for reporting allegations of research misconduct
- have robust, transparent and fair processes for dealing with allegations of misconduct that reflect best practice. This includes the use of independent external members of formal investigation panels, and clear routes for appeal
- ensure that all researchers and other members of staff are made aware of the relevant contacts and procedures for making allegations
- act with no detriment to whistle-blowers who have made allegations of misconduct in good faith, or in the public interest, including taking reasonable steps to safeguard their reputation. This should include avoiding the inappropriate use of legal instruments, such as non-disclosure agreements
- take reasonable steps to resolve any issues found during the investigation. This can include imposing sanctions, requesting a correction of the research record and reporting any action to regulatory and statutory bodies, research participants, funders or other professional bodies as circumstances, contractual obligations and statutory requirements dictate
- take reasonable steps to safeguard the reputation of individuals who are exonerated
- provide information on investigations of research misconduct to funders of research and to professional and/or statutory bodies as required by their conditions of grant and other legal, professional and statutory obligations
- support their researchers in providing appropriate information when they are required to make reports to professional and/or statutory bodies
- provide a named point of contact or recognise an appropriate third party to act as confidential liaison for whistle-blowers or any other person wishing to raise concerns about the integrity of research being conducted under their auspices. This need not be the same person as the member of staff identified to act as first point of contact on research integrity matters, as recommended under commitment 3