



# Research Integrity Annual Statement 2020 – 2021

## University Research Integrity Committee

### Background

The revised Concordat to Support Research Integrity was published in October 2019 and is a comprehensive national framework for good research conduct and governance. The Concordat's fifth commitment requires a Research Integrity Annual Statement that:

1. Provides a summary of actions and activities that have been undertaken to support and strengthen understanding and application of research integrity issues;
2. Provides assurances that the processes they have in place for dealing allegations of misconduct are transparent, robust and fair, and that they continue to be appropriate to the needs of the organisation;
3. Provides a high level statement on any formal investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken.

### Introduction

The University Research Integrity Committee met three times in the academic year 2020/21: 6 October 2019, 19 January 2020 and 27 April 2021.

The University Research Integrity Committee reports to the University Research and Innovation Committee and helps develop university-wide practices and policies.

Each school has its own Research Integrity Committee and Convenor to deal with research ethics at local level, primarily the approval of ethics applications. The work of each school committee is reported to the University Research Integrity Committee, including information on the number of applications submitted in total, as well as numbers approved, rejected, or referred. The University Research Integrity Committee also manages a cross-university ethical approval process for ethics applications submitted across the University, or where researchers involved are from two or more schools.

### Allegations of Research Misconduct

There were two cases of alleged research misconduct in 2020/21, but neither proceeded to a formal investigation. All cases were assessed in accordance with the University's Misconduct policy and RCUK Policy, the Code of Conduct on the Governance of Good Research Conduct and the UKRIO Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research.

The first allegation involved a legal dispute over use of a licensed software tool. It was deemed to be the purview of the University's lawyers, and no further action has been taken.



The second allegation was of a researcher's potential illegal method of data collection, but the case was agreed to not have significant substance and no further action was taken.

## Major Initiatives and Developments

In the academic year 2020/21, the following initiatives were addressed:

### 1. COVID-19 and Research Integrity

The ongoing pandemic remained a key focus of the committee throughout this academic year, through the introduction of tiered restriction levels in Trimester 1, the full lockdown for most of Trimester 2, and the subsequent gradual reopening plan. The committee resolved to maintain a policy of flexibility in response to the changeable situation, but no *ad hoc* meetings were necessary.

The Committee also acknowledged that remote data collection continued, until 17 May 2021, to be the only viable method of research. As such, the committee confirmed the status of Microsoft Teams and Webex as the University's approved video conferencing software for researchers but voiced their concerns to Information Services that enforcement of this exclusivity could inhibit the continuation of otherwise responsible remote research.

The easing of lockdown restrictions in Scotland on 17 May 2021 meant that a return to face-to-face data collection was possible for UK-based researchers. Some Schools were more eager to make this return than others given the infeasibility of their remote research, but all agreed that the necessity of remote data collection had offered new avenues for research. The Committee resolved that it would continue to support remote data collection where this suited the needs of researchers and subjects. Research Governance has established a method of recording any mid-project changes in the means of data collection and the accompanying ethical approvals in Worktribe, our Research Data Management system (RDMS).

Given the potential for COVID-related ethical considerations in the return to face-to-face data collection, the Committee agreed to seek further guidance from Health & Safety on the oversight of any necessary testing and PPE requirements and risk assessment.

The global nature of the University's researcher network and the variation in both local restrictions and the pandemic's impact outside of the UK led the Committee to determine that face-to-face data collection would only resume for researchers and subjects within the UK. Further guidance is being sought from the International Office on how a return to face-to-face data collection will be overseen for overseas researchers.

### 2. Code of Practice and Misconduct Policy

The University's Code of Practice was last amended in 2018 and the Misconduct Policy in 2015. Sector developments and a recent review of disciplinary procedure by Human Resources highlighted to the Committee that these two documents were in need of adjustment to maintain consistent procedure across the university and to keep Edinburgh Napier's policy up-to-date. Changes to the Misconduct Policy approved by the committee are as follows: the inclusion of former employees and students under



the remit of misconduct investigations, the inclusion of a section on safeguarding policy, and a clarification of connections between the Misconduct Policy and the Whistleblowing Policy. Final confirmations of these amendments are pending approval from HR and trade unions.

Similar sector-related amendments to the Code of Practice are underway and will be completed in the 2021/22 academic year.

In 2020/21, the Committee approved two additional changes to the Code of Practice regarding external requests for participation in research and approved survey software.

### **3. External Requests for Participation in Research**

The University regularly receives external requests for participation in research studies, chiefly by research students at other universities, and the Committee identified a need to adopt a consistent method of reviewing and potentially circulating these requests. To be considered, external requests must demonstrate ethical approval by their own institution, and they may only be circulated subject to approval by the committee convenor or School leads. This procedure is now included in the Code of Practice.

### **4. Survey Software**

The Code of Practice will also be updated to reflect the approval of Microsoft Forms as a survey software for researchers. Following the identification of a significant data protection concern with NOVI Survey, the University's only approved survey software, the committee worked with Information Services to ensure that this issue was resolved. The pandemic has increased the need for researchers to utilise online survey platforms, and so the committee also proposed Microsoft Forms as an alternative survey software for researchers. This was approved by Information Services with immediate effect. Guidance on the use of MS Forms was drafted and made available online, and information on its status as approved software will be appended to the Code of Practice for final approval in 2021/22.

### **5. Worktribe Ethics Module**

An ethics module was added to Worktribe which allows researchers to record the post-award ethics approval process on that platform. It also provides greater transparency by enabling convenors to oversee ethics activity within their Schools. The software was designed to mirror existing processes within each School and has now been rolled out to the School of Health and Social Care, School of Applied Sciences, and School of Computing. The University's Research Governance is currently in dialogue with Worktribe to resolve reported issues and improve the user experience. The roll out to remaining Schools will progress in the coming academic year, with training and exemplars to be made available to staff.

### **6. External Committee Membership**

Discussion of Research Integrity Committee practices at School level and in external organizations prompted the University committee to consider the inclusion of external members to provide non-academic perspectives. The Committee agreed that this addition would be good practice and bring



Edinburgh Napier's Research Integrity Committee in line with those of other institutions, as well as the guidance of the UKRIO. The openings will be advertised in the summer of 2021 through a variety of media with the intent of having new members join in the 2021/22 academic year.

**Janel Fontaine, Clerk to the University Research Integrity Committee, June 2021**