

Annual Statement on Research Integrity Activity 2022-2023

1. Introduction

Northumbria University recognises that the pursuit of high-quality research requires the highest standards of research integrity and ethics and the fulfilment of our responsibilities to researchers, participants in research, research users and the wider community. Therefore, the University supports, and is committed to upholding, the principles set out in the [Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#). An integral part of that obligation is the presentation of an annual statement on research integrity to the Board of Governors for their review and approval. Compiling the annual statement offers a framework to evaluate our progress against the Concordat's commitments, and to raise the visibility of our commitment to research integrity.

This is the 10th annual statement published by Northumbria University and covers the academic year 1 September 2022, to 31 August 2023. Annual statements are published on the University's Research Ethics and Integrity [webpages](#) for accountability, and assurance on activities taken to support research integrity; and in compliance with the requirements of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity. The Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange (PVC R&KE hereafter) has formal responsibility for research integrity within the University and is Chair of Research Ethics Committee. The PVC for RKE is responsible for providing academic leadership on research ethics and integrity. Our publicly facing webpages provide contact details for the PVC for RKE who is the first point of contact for anyone with concerns or questions regarding research integrity and research misconduct at Northumbria.

In summary the annual statement provides:

- I. A description of actions and activities that have been undertaken to support and strengthen understanding and application of research ethics and integrity.
- II. Assurance that the processes in place for dealing with allegations of research misconduct are transparent, robust, and fair, and continue to be appropriate to the needs of the organisation.
- III. A high-level statement on any formal investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken.

2. Enabling, Supporting and Strengthening a Culture of Research Integrity

i. Institutional Strategy and Leadership

Leadership for research integrity and ethics is formally the role of the PVC for RKE. The postholder is supported in this role by the University Research Ethics Committee (REC) and its members, which the PVC (R&KE) Chairs, and which has responsibility for overarching policies, processes, training and monitoring research ethics and academic misconduct in research. Each Faculty has a Faculty Research Ethics Director who is a member of REC and Chairs a Faculty Research Ethics Committee which ensures that agreed policies and procedures are operationalised and socialised effectively within the context of each Faculty and disciplinary norms.

Research ethics and integrity are also a core responsibility of wider Faculty leadership roles including Departmental Ethics Leads, the College of Ethics Reviewers (implemented in 2022/23), for which academic colleagues are work loaded for undertaking the ethics review

process in recognition of this essential task. Many professional service staff also have key roles to play in developing and implementing ethics policy. These include the university Risk Manager, Insurance Manager, Health and Safety Manager, and the Records and Information Manager (and Data Protection Officer) who are members of the Ethics Steering Group and Research Ethics Committee.

The Research Policy team in Research and Innovation Services support, enable and champion the research ethics and integrity agenda across the University. The Research Policy Team are responsible for research ethics and integrity processes and policy, researcher skills development and training, research culture activity, ensuring compliance with the Concordats for Research Development and Research Integrity, as well as REF preparations and research quality activity, and our research management information systems. Bringing these areas of activity together enables the development of our research culture in which research integrity is embedded, and encourages collaboration to fully utilise the synergies across researcher development and research integrity training.

A dedicated Research Ethics and Integrity Manager, and Research Policy Coordinator are responsible for ensuring that actions are taken to embed the commitments of the Concordat into the University's research environment and research culture. A key function of the research ethics team is the operational delivery and strategic management of the research ethics online review system. They manage the triage process and are responsible for checking that applications are complete, and are appropriately allocated to reviewers, as well as ensuring that applications will have the right level of ethics review according to our [Ethical Governance in Research Policy](#). During 2022/23 the University committed additional resource to research ethics processes by appointing a second Research Policy Coordinator to support the administration of the new online research ethics review system, as well as develop our ethics training offer. This is a key investment in our research ethics infrastructure and demonstrates Northumbria's commitment to delivering a robust ethics review process and high quality research ethics training.

The team also provide secretarial support to Research Ethics Committee, Faculty Research Ethics Committees and Ethics Steering Group, and are responsible for ensuring that external approvals (e.g. HRA, NHS) via the IRAS system are completed and maintained with appropriate university level authority. The team is a key point of contact for advice, support and guidance on research integrity and research ethics issues, and ensure that ethical review systems, research ethics training, and practices and processes across the University are fit for purpose and reviewed regularly so that they reflect best practice in the sector and align with external frameworks.

ii. Strengthening Research Ethics and Integrity Policy and Procedures

In response to the requirements of the updates made in 2019 to the Concordat, and the changing external landscape, the University Executive agreed the terms of reference for an Ethics Policy Review task and finish group (EPRG) during 2021/22 to undertake a comprehensive review of processes and procedures for managing matters of research ethics and integrity. The EPRG was convened in March 2021 and completed its tasks in June 2022. EPRG reported its recommendations to Research Ethics Committee in March 2022, for implementation over the academic year 2022/23:

- a. The restructure of existing policy and regulations and updated ethical review categories and revised scope of ethical review.
- b. Recommended a College of Ethics Reviewers with an ethics reviewer workload

- and role description.
- c. Establish monthly Faculty or Departmental Ethics Review Subcommittees with new terms of Reference.
 - d. Establish an Ethics and Integrity Training and Development Framework from Undergraduate student, to Ethics Reviewer.

The University's ethical review process and guidance documentation for all staff and students has undergone a substantial review and subsequent revisions in 2022. A new policy document [Ethical Governance in Research Policy](#) has brought together external regulatory frameworks and legislation (e.g., NHS, HTA, GDPR), as well as funder requirements (e.g., ESRC ethics framework), internal ethical review categories and processes, and good practice in research ethics (e.g., authorship). This one document replaces three documents (the Research Ethics and Governance Handbook, Ethics in Research Policy, and Ethics Policy Statement) providing an easier route for colleagues to access information and guidance on research ethics policy.

The EPRG recommended the utilisation of the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) endorsed tiered review system which includes proportionate review by maintaining clear and consistent standards. This approach refers some low-risk applications, through a form of devolved review, to review panels or single reviewers. The EPRG also recommended revised categories for proportional and full committee review including removing 'risk' labels i.e. medium and high risk ethical research, and instead refer to full and proportionate review; including a category of research that does not require review (e.g. normally has no ethical risk); and rationalisation of review categories in line with external frameworks, and illustrated in the Table One below:

Review Category	Research Activity <i>Researchers, both students and staff, should reflect upon their individual project, and the potential risks to both themselves, participants, or the environment. These should be acknowledged and assessed as part of their application, and in any project proposal.</i>
Full Review (Committee review or Two lead reviewers and Sub-committee/ Chair moderation)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussion (e.g. interviews) of highly sensitive topics that may cause undue stress to participants, and researchers, including, but not exclusively: sexual behaviour, drug use; abuse or exploitation; trauma; pornography. 2. Funding from a source that may be controversial (e.g. due to the nature of the funder, or a conflict of interest). 3. Covert methods of investigation or deception. 4. Research with international partners, or research undertaken outside of the UK where there may be issues of local practice and political sensitivities. (In these instances, it will be necessary to act in accordance with the legal and ethics review requirements in the countries included in the research and demonstrate awareness of these.) 5. Access to records of personal or sensitive confidential information, including genetic or other biological information concerning identifiable individuals. 6. Intrusive interventions including the use of drugs or other substances (e.g. food, drink, placebos or drugs); and, or, procedures involving physical distress (e.g. prolonged testing) or emotional distress (e.g. stress or anxiety), that are greater than those you would encounter in everyday life. 7. Work that involves direct observation of, or participation in, activities during which it is anticipated that illegal activity, or regulatory breach is likely to occur (e.g. hunting, drug dealing, accessing the dark web, hacking). 8. Access to or collection of data, information, materials (e.g. magazines, publications, websites, and social media) relating to extremism, radicalisation or terrorism (including extreme or terror groups). 9. Funding/ sponsorship from, or the involvement of, the UK Ministry of Defence, Military (UK and International), and or, EU Security funding call. 10. The collection of data/information that might be confidential or classified (e.g. protected by the Official Secrets Act). 11. Direct testing on animals or materials derived from animals (which may require additional licencing). 12. The funding body e.g. ESRC funded projects require REC review. 13. Research with potentially vulnerable participants or groups, including people under 18 (which may require DBS clearance)

	14. The collection of bodily tissue e.g. blood, saliva, urine samples from living persons (which may require licence under the HTA and additional training)
Proportionate review (reviewed by one reviewer from the College of Ethics Reviewers)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gathering data or information from human participants (e.g. via questionnaire / interview/survey/experiment/ VR). 2. Collecting personal data, i.e. name, email, home address, computer IP address, phone number etc. 3. Analysis of secondary data not in the public domain (e.g. archive material that require organisational membership). 4. The collection or use of information which is 'commercially sensitive'. 5. Financial inducements other than expenses and compensation for time. 6. Gathering data/information at a physical location external to Northumbria University campuses, franchised locations, and not your normal place of work. 7. Collection of samples such as plants, soils etc, that might disturb the environment or archaeological remains. 8. Individuals or groups where permission of a gatekeeper is normally required for initial or continued access to participants (e.g. NGOs, community leaders). 9.
Research that does not normally require ethics review.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Secondary data that is in the public domain (e.g. financial data bases). 2. Systematic Reviews. 3. Meta-analyses of secondary data. 4. Black Letter Law.
Research which requires external review (e.g. HRA, NHS, MOD, NOMS).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Research with those who might lack capacity to consent, for example, a learning disability, dementia, or cognitive impairment. 2. The use of ionising radiation 3. Recruitment or collection of data from patients, via the NHS, and some social care settings (e.g., home, or residential care). 4. The collection of bodily tissue from deceased persons. 5. A health-related study or clinical trial of an investigational medicinal product or a medical device. 6. The prison service, offenders or participants on probation.

Table One: Ethical Review Categories (approved by Academic Board July 2022)

The approval of this new framework for ethical review was agreed in parallel with the development and purchase of a new ethical review system, has enabled the alignment of policy and process effectively. Additionally, the synchronisation of this work has facilitated a broad training programme (section 2.5 below) that covers both the new policy and new system (section 2.3 below).

iii. Implementing new Ethical Review Processes

The procurement of a new ethics online review system to manage ethical reviews has brought efficiency benefits for reviewers, as well as improving the robustness of our process. The new system delivered by Infonetica was implemented in October 2022, following a procurement process from February to July 2022. The software is sector leading, customisable and scalable and functions as a cornerstone for the University's Ethical Governance in Research policy.

This new system includes the capability to support cross Faculty/ Department review for complex-interdisciplinary projects. This is part of the futureproofing of our ethical review system. As Northumbria's research quality continues to grow our research activity becomes more complex and our systems and process need to match our ambitions and the demands of inter/multidisciplinary research conducted and delivered with external partners. The Infonetica ERM system also facilitates review by committee and online providing Northumbria with the efficiency and flexibility of online review for lower ethical risk studies, or for projects that require expedited review.

A key feature of the system is the use of ethical review categories that are mapped directly

form the Ethical Governance in Research policy. This means that users no longer chose the ethical review category they require but are directed through the system to the correct form of review they should use. This is a key feature that facilitates consistency and rigour in Northumbria’s ethics review policy and process. The system has also supported the ability for a triage step in the ethical review process. This is undertaken by the team in RIS who check ethics applications are complete, including the submission of any required documentation (e.g. consent documentation, health and safety risk assessments). The RIS team also introduced a governance workflow to the system in 2023 which allows the team to share applications with colleagues who may need to assess applications from a governance perspective (e.g. the Risk Manager and the Due Diligence Manager).

To implement the system and policy effectively a communications plan was drawn up with advice and support from Northumbria’s Change Management and Transformation Teams. The socialisation of the policy and system was multifaceted with new web and intranet pages developed; intranet articles and student Knowledge Base articles; online and in-person training; emails from different levels of research leadership (e.g. PVC R&KE, Faculty Research Ethics Directors, Departmental Ethics Leads, Heads of Department and Faculty Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellors for Research and Knowledge Exchange). As well as a significant effort to communicate with academic staff and all students, professional support staff who have key roles within the ethics system (e.g. Governance Services, Health and Safety team) were also invited to attend training and briefings on the new system.

Another benefit of the system is its reporting ability which enables RIS to provide real-time data on the ethics review process. Included below (Table Two) is an overview of the completed research ethics reviews in 2022-2023 academic year.

FACULTY	FULL REVIEW APPLICATIONS	PROPORTIONAL REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS	TOTAL NO. OF APPS
ARTS, DESIGN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES	195	313	508
BUSINESS AND LAW	43	218	261
ENGINEERING AND ENVIRONMENT	113	422	535
HEALTH AND LIFE SCIENCES	567	1264	1831
OTHERS	1	5	6
TOTALS	919	2222	3141

Table Two: Completed application data 1 October 2022 – 31 August 2023.

iv. The College of Ethics Reviewers: Developing a team of trained, work-loaded Ethics Reviewers.

A second significant challenge identified by the EPRG was the consistency and proficiency of ethical review. Northumbria previously utilised a core academic staff of around 500 reviewers supplemented by postgraduate researchers and associate lecturers (in some Departments). However, as any academic staff member could be asked to undertake a review the University could not easily monitor reviewer training or expertise. Additionally, reviews could be delayed because people were unfamiliar with the process or did not have adequate workload, and reviewer feedback could be of uneven quality and rigour. These

challenges were compounded by uneven workload allocation across Faculties with reviewing belonging in both the research and administration workload.

The EPRG recommended the creation of a College of Ethics Reviewers with a workload and role description. The College was created during July – September 2022 to ensure a trained and competent reviewers would be ready for the launch of the new system, with broad disciplinary and methodological expertise. The College is an agile group with EDI concerns managed through Departments who facilitate the number of ethical reviewers they require considering the number and breadth of ethics applications they receive.

An agreed workload for reviewers has been agreed by Research Ethics Committee of between 10 and 30 applications per year (mindful that the number and complexity of reviews will differ by Department). RIS now maintain a database of ethics reviewers and now allocate reviewers according to their expertise and workload as part of a revised workflow in the new ethics online system. Research Ethics Committee regularly review the training needs of the college of reviewers, and have developed a role description with agreed review expectations (e.g. timescales for review, constructive tone of review, routes to escalate any issues). The new system now provides its users a reviewer profile, real time dashboards support reviewers and the new ethics review processes at Northumbria.

v. Training and Development, Communication and Awareness Raising of Research Integrity Activities

The implementation of the new ethics online system and promotion of the new Ethical Governance in Research policy has meant a significant amount of training and development opportunities have been delivered in 2022/23. The operationalisation of the new ethics online system has been a useful tool to encourage staff and student attendance at training. User training has been broadened to include content on the policy framework that underpins the ethics review process. The College of Ethics Reviewers now has several types of additional training which includes disciplinary training, user training and best practice in ethics review. The first away day for our college of ethics reviewers and DELs and FREDs was held in June 2023. A suite of [online training](#) both user videos and handbooks has also been developed and are continually refreshed. This is supported by the investment in an additional coordinator role in the RIS team.

The Faculty Research Ethics Directors and Departmental Ethics Lead meet regularly with key staff in Research and Innovation Services, the Governance team and the Health and Safety team, to review processes and procedures for research ethics, making recommendations to University and Faculty Research Ethics Committee as appropriate. This has now been formally constituted as the Ethics Steering Group which meets every two-months and reports to Research Ethics Committee. Ethics Steering Group supports the implementation of ethics processes and the dissemination of good research practice through Departments.

To enhance leadership and embed a culture of ethics and integrity, Faculty Research Ethics Directors and Departmental Ethics Leads have been able to take advantage of additional training on ethics and integrity from the UK Research Integrity Office (of which the University is a member). An annually updated ethics training module is mandatory for all staff who conduct research to ensure awareness of the University's policies and processes, and the use of the new ethics online system. Completion details are shared with Departmental Ethics Leads who encourage completion.

The University provides mentoring for both new and existing staff and has renewed its HR Excellence in Research Award in 2023 as part of the ten-year review cycle. The HR Excellence in Research Award is granted to universities who can show their support of early career researchers and compliance with the principles of the 2019 Researcher Development Concordat (to which the University is also a signatory). The University has continued to make a significant investment in online materials to support staff and students at all levels. This includes specialist online training resources for research ethics integrity delivered by Epigeum courses on Research Ethics and Research Integrity. A Research Integrity Training framework was approved by Research Ethics Committee in June 2022 to enable students and academic staff to access relevant training, both online and in person.

The University contributes to sector-level initiatives to develop common standards and respond to external developments (e.g., via UKRIO and ARMA). Furthermore, we benefit from the shared expertise of such forums as the North-East Integrity Forum. The Research Ethics and Integrity Manager chaired the regional forum in 2021/22, and has recently been appointed as Co-Chair of the Research Ethics and Governance Special Interest Group for ARMA.

vi. Growing our Research Culture

At Northumbria we recognise that a key part of delivering research integrity is an open and honest research culture. As part of Northumbria's commitment to grow a positive research culture a research culture survey was conducted in summer 2022 and from which emerged four research culture principles that are currently being socialised across the university.

In July 2023 Prof Matt Baillie-Smith was appointed to the new role of Dean of Research Culture, and a new Research Culture Committee was established with representation across all faculties, and includes reserved member spaces for traditionally underrepresented groups (e.g. people with lived experience of being from the global majority, disability, and LGBTQ+). The committee also includes representation from professional service staff and technical staff. As part of its Terms of Reference the committee will monitor research integrity activity where it intersects with research culture activity, for example reviewing a proposed Code of Good Conduct in Research.

3. Addressing Research Misconduct

The University encourages a culture of openness and transparency where errors committed due to a lack of understanding, and without intent to deceive, are handled on a case-by-case basis as some unintentional mistakes have more serious outcomes. Cases are addressed through thorough investigation, support and training. We encourage researchers to seek advice where they become aware that behaviour, including their own, may have fallen short of the expected standards. The University also ensures that, when allegations are made, there are appropriate levels of confidentiality and safeguards to protect those making allegations in good faith, as well as ensuring that individuals who are exonerated have their reputations protected and suffer no adverse consequences.

The University is committed to using transparent, robust, and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct when they arise. The University has an [Academic Misconduct in Research](#) policy which reflects best practice in the sector and clearly outlines the procedures, roles and required activities and behaviours of all those involved in an

allegation of academic misconduct and any ensuing investigation. The policy and processes continue to provide a proportionate, timely and transparent way for the University to deal with such allegations that is both fair and robust. The policy is applicable to both externally and internally funded research projects. All investigations produce a final report and include recommendations for further action and lessons learned.

For this reporting period two investigations were carried out under the Academic Misconduct in Research Policy. There were zero postgraduate research student investigations.

	Allegation/ Complaint	Outcome
Staff	Authorship An allegation was received that questioned the number of authored articles attributed to a member of academic staff.	Malicious allegation An investigatory meeting was held, and it concluded that the authorship was legitimate and therefore there was no case to answer.
Staff	Primary Affiliation An allegation was received that a member of academic staff had credited their primary affiliation to an international university, rather than Northumbria University where the research activity was undertaken.	Concluded at Preliminary Stage Two investigatory interviews with the member of staff were conducted. The outcome would have concluded there was a case answer, however the member of staff was leaving the University on the day of the second investigatory interview. Therefore, this case did not progress further.

Following the conclusion of the above investigations it was agreed at Research Ethics Committee (21 June 2023), that a review of the Academic Misconduct in Research policy would be appropriate. This work is currently under way, and is reviewing our alignment with new UK Research Integrity Office guidance, developments in AI and streamlining the process, and document.

Individuals seeking advice on the University's misconduct procedure can contact the PVC R&KE, their Faculty Pro Vice Chancellor and/or the relevant HR Advisor for the Faculty/ Service concerned. Researchers can also access support from Heads of Departments, Directors of Research and Knowledge Exchange, mentors, and research colleagues as well as staff in Research and Innovation Services.

Whistle-blowers receive specific protections under the University's [Whistleblowing](#) policy. Under the Whistleblowing policy disclosures may be made to the [Head of Governance](#).

4. Summary of Concordat obligations:

- A. The PVC (Research and Knowledge Exchange) has formal responsibility for research integrity within the University and is Chair of Research Ethics Committee. The PVC (Research and Knowledge Exchange) is responsible for providing academic leadership on research ethics and integrity. Our publicly facing webpages make clear that the PVC (Research and Knowledge Exchange) is the first point of contact for anyone who wishes to raise an allegation of research misconduct.
- B. Mrs. Laura Hutchinson, Research Ethics and Integrity Manager in Research and Innovation Services, is the named point of contact on matters of research integrity.

Policies and Procedures Supporting Research Ethics and Integrity are available at:
<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-integrity/>

