

Northumbria University

Annual Statement on Research Integrity Activity 2019/20

Introduction

The University recognises that the pursuit of excellent research and the fulfilment of our responsibilities to researchers, participants in research, research users and the wider community require the maintenance of the highest standards of integrity and ethics. Therefore, the University supports, and is committed to upholding, the Universities UK Concordat to Support Research Integrity, which was revised in 2019.

[This annual statement has been presented to and endorsed by the University's Board of Governors] in acknowledgement of the Concordat's requirement around annual reporting on research integrity to the University's governing body. This report covers the academic year 2019-20 and in summary provides:

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

Commitment 1

We are committed to upholding the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research.

The University continues to be committed to upholding high standards of integrity and rigour for all students and staff.

- The PVC (Research and Innovation) has formal responsibility for research integrity within the University and is Chair of Research Ethics Committee. The PVC (Research and Innovation) is responsible for providing academic leadership on research ethics and integrity. Our publicly facing [webpages](#) make clear that the PVC (Research & Innovation) is the first point of contact for anyone with concerns or questions regarding research integrity and research misconduct at Northumbria and contact details are provided.
- The Ethics in Research Policy Statement clarifies the obligations on staff and students who undertake research activity and provide a framework for their implementation. This is supported by more detailed guidance which is available in the University's Research Ethics Handbook.
- The Research Policy team in Research and Innovation Services are tasked with supporting the research ethics and integrity agenda and policy area. An additional professional support post for this area of work has been agreed for the forthcoming academic year. The Research Policy team ensure that actions are taken to embed the commitments of the Concordat into the University's research environment and culture by supporting REC and the Faculty Research Ethics Directors and Departmental Ethics Leads.
- In order to enhance leadership in this area and embed a culture of ethics and integrity, Faculty Ethics Leads and Departmental Ethics Leads have been able to take advantage of additional training around Ethics and Integrity which we commissioned an external consultant to deliver as well as REC member training delivered by the UK Research Integrity Office.
- The Research Policy team ensure that the ethics online system, 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.
- The Research Policy team also provide students and staff with a point of contact for advice, support and guidance on research integrity and research ethics issues.
- During 2019/20 we have taken a highly inclusive approach to reviewing and improving our guidance, training, process and systems. All Departmental Ethics Leads and Faculty Ethics leads have contributed to the development of training, processes and systems informed by best practice, expectations set out in the Concordat internal and external audits. We are confident in our compliance with the concordat but have identified a number of areas of focus for further improvement during 20/21.

Commitment 2

We are committed to ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal, and professional frameworks, obligations, and standards.

- The University's standards and norms regarding the ethical review process are set out in several documents for staff and students including, the Research Ethics and Governance Handbook and Ethics in Research Policy. An online system for research ethics approvals went live in April 2017 for staff and postgraduate research projects and is now also used across all undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts. The system enables management information reporting to ensure that applications are managed consistently, from submission to approval. The system is also a keystone in ensuring a robust system of review is in place. As a one University system it has also helped to identify areas for upskilling and support such as developing a diagnostic tool for ethical risk levels.
- A revised and updated training module has been offered to all ethics reviewers to ensure awareness of the University's policies and processes, as well as the key areas of ethical risk and use of the ethics online system.
- An audit during the year revealed that there was some variation in understanding of ethical risk levels across the University and corresponding processes of review. In response to this issue, we have: reviewed our on-line ethics process; developed a fuller question set for researchers to engage with at the start of the process to ensure that ethical submissions receive the right level of review and scrutiny; and provided additional training for those with key responsibilities for ethics within the Faculties.
- Research Ethics training has also been updated to highlight this change in the system and to support staff reviewing projects.
- Furthermore, we have implemented a new monthly audit of low risk ethics submissions. A sample of applications will be reviewed by the Research Policy Coordinator to ensure that medium and high -risk applications aren't incorrectly classified.
- Health and safety section within ethics online form updated and made mandatory for staff, PGR and PGT.
- All research ethics related policies are reviewed annually and changes made considering developing practice or external developments

Commitment 3

We are committed to 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.

- Cultural leadership for research, is formally the role of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research and Innovation). They are supported in this role by committees and their members, including Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (the central university research committee), Research Ethics Committee, Faculty Research Ethics Committees, and the Research Policy team which support the governance of research ethics committee. Additionally research ethics and integrity is supported by Faculty, Research Ethics Directors (who meet monthly to progress ethics related business) and by other key staff including, Deputy Director of Research and Innovation Services, Research Policy Manager, Head of Governance, Records and Information Manager, and Departmental Ethics Leads.
- The University provides mentoring for both new and existing staff and holds an HR Excellence in Research Award for its support of early career researchers and work aligned to the principles of the 2019 Researcher Development Concordat (to which the University is a signatory).
- During 2019/20 we reviewed our research ethics and integrity offer across all disciplines and at all levels. We identified that research integrity training is a priority area for improvement in 2020/21 and have developed a research ethics and integrity training framework for academic staff. To date we have added authorship guidance to the Ethics and Governance handbook and training. We have also launched Nature Masterclasses on Publication. Over the next academic year, we plan to deliver specialist training on NHS governance, working with international partners, and safeguarding.
- The University is working with other institutions through forums such as the North East ethics and integrity group to pool resources in training, as well as develop and share best practice in processes and policy.

The University is also a member of the UK Research Integrity Office who delivered REC member training in 2020 for Northumbria.

- The operation of the online ethics system has provided an opportunity to integrate governance processes, as far as possible into the system, e.g. DBS clearance, Health and Safety Risk Assessments. This ensures better levels of compliance and our ability to identify areas for further development and support.
- The review and updates planned for 2020/21 include the Ethics in Research Policy, which, as well as the relaunch of the Concordat, offer further opportunities to raise awareness of research integrity matters, and their breadth beyond research ethics.

Commitment 4

We are 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. However we have recognised that the revised Concordat places new obligations on us in this area, and the policy will be updated in the light of these.
- The University encourages a culture of openness and transparency where errors committed due to a lack of understanding, and without intent to deceive, are addressed through 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.
- All investigations produce a final report and include recommendations for further action and lessons learned. For this reporting period this has resulted in updating authorship guidance (now included in the Ethics and Governance Handbook) and the delivery of publication training via Nature Masterclasses.
- Individuals seeking advice on the University’s misconduct procedure can contact the PVC R&I, 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, 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.

Investigations carried out under the Academic Misconduct in Research Policy from 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2020

Staff

- **One investigation conducted.**

Type of Allegation	Stage Reached	Investigation Result
Unsupported data and plagiarism.	Screening Panel - stage 2	Non-disciplinary process (Training needs identified)

PGR

- **One investigation conducted.**

Type of Allegation	Stage Reached	Investigation Result
Plagiarism.	Informal – Stage one	Non-disciplinary process (Training needs identified)

Commitment 5

We are committed to working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to reviewing progress regularly and openly.

- Compiling the annual statement has offered a framework in which we can evaluate our progress against the Concordat's commitments. Aligned to the Concordat this reporting year we have undertaken additional training for REC members and ethics reviewers. We have updated our authorship guidance and delivered publication training via Nature Masterclasses. We have also undertaken a comprehensive audit of the ethics online system, as well as dip stick audits for Health and Safety reviews and Insurance documentations. This work sits alongside our other internal review processes such as our training and development review, and annual update to the Ethics and Governance Handbook.
- The Faculty Research Ethics Directors continue to meet regularly with key staff in Research and Innovation Services, and the Governance team, to review processes and procedures for research ethics, making recommendations to University and Faculty Research Ethics Committee as appropriate.
- 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, and we are eager to work with other universities and relevant organisations in this area.
- Working virtually during the Covid-19 lockdown and beyond, has provided us with a unique opportunity to work more collectively with Departmental Ethics Lead, and develop a network of support we will continue to grow through the development of an online community of practice.

Summary of Concordat obligations:

- The PVC (Research and Innovation) has formal responsibility for research integrity within the University and is Chair of Research Ethics Committee. The PVC (Research and Innovation) is responsible for providing academic leadership on research ethics and integrity. Our publicly facing [webpages](#) make clear that the PVC (Research & Innovation) is the first point of contact for anyone who wishes to raise an allegation of research misconduct.
- Mrs Laura Hutchinson, Research Policy Manager is the named point of contact on the website for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity.
- Annual Statement published: 27 November 2020

Policies and Procedures Supporting Research Ethics and Integrity are available at:

<https://northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-governance/>