

## **Staffordshire University Annual Statement on Research Integrity 2021/22**

### **1. Introduction**

Staffordshire University expects high standards in the conduct of research undertaken by staff, students, honorary and emeritus titleholders, associates, and consultants. The University aims to uphold the commitments outlined in the [Concordat to support research integrity](#) first published in 2012 and revised in October 2019, which provides a national framework for high standards of research conduct and its governance. As per the Concordat, Staffordshire University is committed to:

- upholding the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research
- ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards
- 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
- using transparent, timely, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise
- working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to review progress regularly and openly.

In compliance with the Concordat, the University is publishing a statement on research integrity on an annual basis, which is to be presented to its governing bodies (Academic Board and the Board of Governors). This statement covers the **academic year 2021-22**.

This statement outlines the actions and activities undertaken throughout the course of the academic year, and the frameworks in place to foster and strengthen a culture of research integrity in line with the expectations within the Concordat. It also provides a high-level summary of investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken by the University.

### **2. Named contacts for research integrity matters, in accordance with the Concordat**

Research integrity at Staffordshire University is overseen by Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor Kevin Hetherington ([kevin.hetherington@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:kevin.hetherington@staffs.ac.uk)). The University's first point of contact, should anyone require more information on matters of research integrity, is Research Policy and Governance Manager, Dr Cathal Rogers ([cathal.rogers@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:cathal.rogers@staffs.ac.uk)). Should any person wish to raise concerns about the integrity of research being conducted under the auspices of Staffordshire University, they can contact, in confidence, the Head of Research Environment and Development, Mrs Emma Davies ([E.J.Davies@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:E.J.Davies@staffs.ac.uk)).

In accordance with the Concordat on Research Integrity, the contact details for the above points of contact are kept up to date and are publicly available on Staffordshire University's external facing website: [Research integrity - Staffordshire University \(staffs.ac.uk\)](#)

The institution's annual statements on research integrity are also compiled on this webpage, in accordance with the Concordat.

### **3. Governance and Policies**

The governance of research at Staffordshire University is overseen by the Research and Innovation Committee (RIC), chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor, and reporting directly into Academic Board. RIC's terms of reference include the "development and implementation of institutional policy, procedure and guidance in respect of Research Governance, Environment, Ethics [and] research integrity". Research Ethics at Staffordshire University is overseen by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), which reports to RIC.

The main policies governing research integrity, and research ethics, at the University are:

- [Staffordshire University Research Ethical Review Policy](#)
- [Staffordshire University Code of Practice for Research](#)

- The University's Research Misconduct Policy is embedded in the Code of Practice for Research (at section 13). The process for investigating allegation of Research Misconduct forms section 14 of this Policy.

All of the above policies are publicly available on the University's website:

<https://www.staffs.ac.uk/research/opportunities-for-academics/research-governance/research-integrity>

#### **4. Embedding a supportive environment for reporting potential misconduct**

As described in detail in previous annual reports, the University is committed to maintaining and strengthening a research environment in which all staff, researchers and students feel comfortable to report instances of suspected misconduct. Staffordshire University's new Research, Innovation and Enterprise Strategy includes an ongoing commitment that "in all that we do, we will demonstrate the highest levels of integrity and ethical behaviour". This includes awareness of what constitutes research misconduct and how this can be reported in confidence. The Research Misconduct Policy makes clear that the identity of a complainant will not be disclosed at any stage during any misconduct investigation. This encourages a supportive framework to report any potential misconduct.

Support is provided centrally through Research Innovation and Impact Services (RIIS), and locally in Schools by the Associate Deans for Research and Enterprise (ADREs). The culture in Schools is one where staff, researchers and students are assured that an allegation of misconduct will be handled in confidence.

Having run the CEDARS survey for the third time at the conclusion of the 2021-22 academic year, we have evidence that we have a supportive environment for researchers to report potential misconduct, and indeed that we are continuing to strengthen this culture. It is pleasing to note an increase in some of the relevant questions around our environment of research integrity since our baseline survey in 2020.

In this year's survey, 71% of all respondents (and 74% of respondents on teaching and research (TRI) contracts) reported that they were familiar with their institution's mechanisms to report incidents of misconduct (an increase from 58% in the baseline survey in 2020). Amongst all respondents, 69% (and 78% of TRI staff) would trust the institution to investigate any reported incidents fairly (a slight increase from 67% in 2020) and 66% (70% if TRI staff) would trust that the institution would take action if appropriate after investigation (a slight increase from 65% in 2020). However, it was disappointing to note that only 68% of all respondents felt comfortable reporting any incidents of research misconduct (a decrease from 77% in 2020), although the response from TRI staff was comparable at 76%.

In all of these measures, respondents on teaching and research contracts responded with more awareness and confidence in the misconduct processes than colleagues on other contracts (teaching, or professional support staff), suggesting that awareness raising on the processes around reporting misconduct should be widened to those not employed primarily to undertake research. It is also disappointing to note that, while progress has been made since the baseline survey in 2020, several of these results are lower than last year's survey (2021). Clearly there is much work to be done on awareness raising. The suite of dissemination activities planned to coincide with the launch of the revised Code of Conduct for Research, as outlined below, will go some way to addressing this.

The Director of Research and the ADREs will take ownership of further developing this supportive research environment, both institutionally and locally in Schools.

#### **5. Summary of actions and activities undertaken to support and strengthen understanding and the application of research integrity issues**

In the period under review (academic year 2021-22), Staffordshire University has undertaken several actions and activities to support and strengthen understanding and the application of research integrity issues. The most significant of these is the revision of the university's Code of Conduct for Research. The revised document (now entitled the Code of Conduct for Research and Research Integrity, to mainstream understanding of the term 'research integrity') has been approved by the Ethics Committee, Research and Innovation Committee, and

Academic Board (subject to minor amendments). The review and revision process were significant and considered all sections of the document.

Significant changes include the restructure of the document to include a shorter Code of Conduct (outlining broad principles, definitions, and expectations), and a longer 'Framework for Good Research Practice' which offers guidance and support to colleagues on a wide range of topic including research with human participants, consent, research design, publications and authorship, and research data management. The revised document aims to ensure that our support for researchers continues to reflect sector best practice, and that researchers are aware of their responsibilities under the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, as well as what they can expect from the institution.

The Research Misconduct Investigation Procedure has also been revised, in line with sector best practice and harmonising with the updated and revised guidance for Research Misconduct in the Concordat on Research Integrity (2019). The revisions aim to make clearer the role and expertise of staff at each stage of the investigation procedure, as well as including more detail on the support for the Deputy Vice Chancellor at the initial investigation stage, the inclusion of an optional 'screening panel' if the case is particularly complex or specialised, the option for an outcome of 'informal action' after the initial investigation, and the inclusion of an appeals process.

The process for revising these key documents sought to be as inclusive as possible, and a wide consultation was undertaken with different staff groups to try and ensure buy-in from the research community. Following final approval in Autumn 2022, there will be a series of communication activities with different stakeholder groups to ensure awareness and understanding of the new policies.

Other actions taken in the review period include:

- The action plan for addressing and strengthening our provision against the revised Concordat is monitored on a continual basis by RIC. Research integrity remained a standing agenda item for RIC throughout 2021-22.
- To coincide with the consultation on the revised Code of Conduct, communications activities were undertaken to refresh and update knowledge of staff (academic and support), and PGRs around matters of integrity, their commitments, and the support and resources available. This included a series of five minute 'conversation starters', annotated PowerPoints on topics including 'what is research integrity?' and 'what is research misconduct?' These are accessible as an on-demand resource on our new Researcher Development Teams Network.
- The University ran CEDARS (Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey) for the third time in summer 2022. This survey provided us with a third year of data to understand staff knowledge and awareness of matters of research integrity, and where gaps in knowledge exist. An action plan has been compiled in response to the results, overseen by RIC.
- To support the next cycle of our HR EIR Award, which is due for its four-year review in January 2023, a working group to oversee the implementation of the action plan and work towards the requirements of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers was established in summer 2021 and met regularly in academic year 2021-22. The first meeting of this focussed on 'culture and environment' and one of the three topics of discussion was embedding a culture of research integrity.
- The University's annual research development and training programme has been revised and updated for the 2022-23 academic year, including a review of our provision by SCOLPP (Staffordshire Centre of Learning and Pedagogic Practice). The programme includes training, awareness raising, and permanent resources on matters of research integrity and research misconduct.
- The University remains a member of UKRIO (UK Research Integrity Office). The regular programme of webinars and events are publicised to staff, as are the resources available through UKRIO. The Research Policy & Governance Manager regularly attend these webinars and disseminates best practice to colleagues.
- Working with the University's Human Tissue Advisor, a Human Tissue Policy has been drafted and was discussed at UREC, RIC, and Academic Board in 2021-22. Subject to minor amendments, it will be

considered for final approval in autumn 2022, to strengthen our governance in this growing area of the University's research.

### Actions undertaken to strengthen research ethics

In addition to the above listed actions to strengthen research integrity, and as reported in previous annual statements, the University continues to undertake considerable work to strengthen the processes and awareness around research ethics in the period under review. While distinct from research integrity, these form important aspects in the development of our research environment, governance and culture of research integrity.

Actions undertaken this year included continued annual audits of school ethics processes, an annual institutional publications audit, an update of the university's IPR (Independent Peer Review) process for NHS ethics to continue to reflect best practice, and the engagement of an external consultancy firm to review our research data management policies and processes.

## **6. Research Misconduct**

The University's Research Misconduct Investigation Policy, and processes for investigating potential cases of misconduct, are embedded in the Code of Practice for Research. The processes in place are transparent, timely, robust, and fair. The procedures adopted by the University draw on the principles set out in the UKRIO's Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research.

The policy is publicly accessible on the University's external facing website, aiding transparency. Where a formal investigation into allegations of research misconduct is undertaken, the investigation panel's report will be provided to the complainant and the respondent, who will have the opportunity to request amendment of any factual errors. The outcome of any investigation of research misconduct will be reported by the Deputy Vice Chancellor to RIC and UREC, ensuring transparency.

The investigation process is timely, with the subject(s) of an allegation being given a written response to the allegation(s) within ten working days. The policy stipulated that a formal investigation should take no longer than thirty working days.

Fairness and robustness are ensured at several stages of the process. The Deputy Vice Chancellor may seek the advice or views of external experts to ensure independent, expert input into the investigation, ensuring robustness. The policy provides for allegations that have some substance, but which are capable of being resolved without further investigation, to be resolved as such. The investigation panel, where one is needed, is composed of individuals not drawn from the same School as the complainant or respondent, to ensure impartiality and robustness of the investigation. The respondent will be interviewed by the investigation panel to allow them to respond in person to the claims. Similarly, the complainant will be interviewed by the panel, for robustness.

As outlined above, the research misconduct investigation policy, and the Code of Conduct for Research in which it is situated, were revised in 2021-22. This review took into account best practice in the sector, guidance from UKRIO, and the requirements of the updated Concordat to Support Research Integrity. The revised policy is awaiting final approval from Academic Board in Autumn 2022 and once approved, will become the new procedure in operation for any allegations that emerge.

## **7. Formal investigations of Research Misconduct**

Where concerns are raised about poor research practice, these can often be addressed via competency, education, and training mechanisms. Some concerns fall outside of the scope of research misconduct, as outlined in our Research Misconduct Investigation Policy and are instead dealt with according to the relevant HR procedure, or via academic misconduct.

Where there is an accusation or suspicion of research misconduct, these are addressed through the research misconduct investigation policy and an initial investigation is instigated, led by the Deputy Vice Chancellor.

The instances of each category of research misconduct investigated in the period under review are indicated in the below table.

|   | Number of initial investigations completed (2021-22) | Number of formal investigations completed (2021-22) | Number of allegations upheld (in whole or in part) (2021-22) |
|---|--|---|--|
| Fabrication   | 0  | 0   | 0  |
| Falsification   | 0  | 0   | 0  |
| Plagiarism  | 0  | 0   | 0  |
| Failure to meet obligations (e.g., legal, ethical and professional obligations) | 3  | 0   | 0  |
| Misrepresentation (e.g., of data, results, interpretation)                      | 0  | 0   | 0  |
| Improper dealing with allegations of misconduct                                 | 0  | 0   | 0  |

### 8. Reflection on misconduct investigations

One of the accusations included in the table above related to the conduct of a student and, while raised with the research misconduct contact (and as such included above), was also raised simultaneously through several different routes at the University. While an initial investigation into potential research misconduct was duly started, it was agreed that the matter was more appropriately dealt with via other student conduct procedures overseen by Registry.

One accusation was retrospective in nature and highlighted that there is work to be done on raising awareness of how to raise concerns about potential research misconduct and good research practice. This is a key learning point from this investigation and targeted training to relevant groups of staff is being prepared for autumn 2022.

Through undertaking these initial investigations, we are again reassured that the University's processes are robust and entirely fit for purpose. In particular, the 'initial investigation' stage with its three possible outcomes (the allegation was unfounded; the allegation had some substance but was capable of being resolved without further investigation; or the allegation merited a full formal investigation) allowed for the correct level of intervention from the University in each case. The revised Misconduct Investigation Procedure has maintained these elements, while strengthening and clarifying the options available to the Deputy Vice Chancellor at this initial stage, including the constituting of an optional 'screening panel' if required if the case is particularly complex or specialist. Moreover, the revised procedure formalises and codifies the outcome of 'informal action' which may be appropriate in many cases.

As one of the investigations was instigated by concerns raised confidentially by an external whistle-blower, we have confidence that our processes and contact details for raising concerns are transparent and accessible.

Finally, as referred to in the previous annual reports, in May 2020 we reviewed and updated the contact for confidential whistle-blowers to the Head of Research Environment and Development. This senior position affords a good knowledge and understanding of matters of research integrity, in order to properly understand the matters at hand, without being directly involved in the development and implementation of relevant policies and processes. The nomination of a contact independent from the operational detail aids transparency and should give confidence to any potential whistle-blowers, further fostering a supportive environment for reporting potential misconduct.

### 9. Approval of annual statement

| Approving Committee               | Date of approval |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Research and Innovation Committee | 4/10/2022        |
| Academic Board                    | 19/10/2022       |
| Board of Governors                | 16/11/2022       |

Dr Cathal Rogers, Research Policy and Governance Manager,  
September 2022