Annual Statement on Research Integrity

1st August 2023 – 31st July 2024

A, Key Contact Information

1, This statement was prepared and coordinated by Lisa Fisher, Research Ethics and Integrity Officer and Jennifer Deaville, Research Development Manager.

2, This statement was presented and approved by the University Research Ethics Committee on 25th October 2024.

3, All queries relating to this statement or any of the University's activities undertaken in relation to the Concordat should be directed to one of the following contacts:

Professor Angela Hatton – Pro Vice Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange, Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee (Named senior member of staff to oversee research integrity).

Lisa Fisher – Research Ethics and Integrity Officer, Research, Business & Innovation (Named member of staff who will act as a first point of contact for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity).

Dr Jennifer Deaville – Research Development Manager, Research, Business & Innovation

4, If anyone reading this document has concerns relating to the conduct of an Aberystwyth University researcher, they should first consult the appropriate policy and procedure. If you are unsure which policy applies or if you are a participant in a research project, please contact the Research Ethics team who will be able to advise:

Aberystwyth University, Higher Education Institution
Research, Business and Innovation
ethics@aber.ac.uk
Research Ethics: Research, Business & Innovation, Aberystwyth University.

B, Background

Aberystwyth University is firmly committed to the principles found within the **Concordat to Support Research Integrity.** To improve accountability and provide assurances that measures are being taken to support high standards of research integrity, the Concordat advises that employers of researchers should produce an annual statement to be presented to their own governing body which provides:

- o A summary of actions and activities that have been undertaken to support and strengthen understanding and the application of research integrity issues.

- o A statement to provide assurance that the processes the institution has in place for dealing with allegations of misconduct are transparent, timely, robust and fair, and that they continue to be appropriate to the needs of the organisation.

- o A high-level statement on any formal investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken.

- o A statement on what the institution has learned from any formal investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken.

- o A statement on how the institution creates and embeds a research environment in which all staff, researchers and students feel comfortable to report instances of misconduct.

C, Purpose and Context

6, This is the University's Annual Statement on Research Integrity ("Annual Statement"). This annual statement sets out the University's position in relation to research integrity, including what actions are undertaken to achieve compliance, as well as assurances of the process for and full disclosure of any allegations of research misconduct. This statement has been approved by the University's Research Ethics Committee, Executive and Senate and will be made publicly available through the Aberystwyth University website, as recommended by the Concordat.

D, Period covered by this Annual Statement

7, This Annual Statement reports the actions and activities undertaken during the 2023/2024 Academic Year. This report also provides the required statement on research misconduct for the same time period.

E, Promoting high standards of research integrity and positive research culture. A description of current actions and activities undertaken.

Current systems and culture

8, Aberystwyth University is firmly committed to the principles found within the **Concordat to Support Research Integrity.** We strive to continually improve accountability and provide assurances that measures are being taken to support high standards of research integrity.

Policies and systems

9, The University hosts a number of policies and procedures to not only ensure that research is conducted appropriately, but to also ensure that effective mechanisms exist for the reporting of any concerns or queries. These policies are regularly reviewed and monitored by the appropriate University Governance committee:

- Research Ethics Framework
- Sensitive Research Policy
- Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research
- Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblowing) Policy
- Professional Integrity Protocol
- Data Protection, Processing & Retention Policies
- Research Data Management Policy

Communications and engagement

10, Researchers in the University are expected to maintain responsibility for understanding what standards are expected of them and how to undertake research with integrity and following best practice.

11, The University supports students and research active staff with this in a number of ways. Training is provided, clear guidance and information about policies and procedures and a clear process for ethical review is communicated and published on the Universities website. Contacts for further information are published online and new information and updates are communicated via e mail, online and via departmental contacts.

Training

12, Staff and students across the University have access to a range of courses, information and support from both academic departments and service departments. In a continual effort to promote good research practice, the Research Business and Innovation (RBI) department specifically hosts a number of events and training sessions on an annual basis:

- Research Ethics & Integrity workshops; *a combination of tailored sessions.*
- Research Ethics Induction sessions; *for all new staff.*
- Research Data Management/ Open Access sessions and induction.
- REF/ PURE training.

13, In addition to the above, we proactively offer *bespoke* sessions to departments and Institutes in an effort to offer tailored support and advice. The Research Ethics and Integrity Officer (REIO) works closely with departments on an individual basis to offer training, guidance and support which is tailored to their research areas and requirements. During this academic year, we have managed to successfully increase engagement and awareness around ethics and integrity which has become evident through the increasing numbers of requests received to engage with the ethics team and access training and guidance opportunities.

14, Postgraduate Research students must attend an Ethics and Integrity module in their first year in order to progress onto their next year of study. This module contains a number of tailored sessions around ethics and integrity, applying for ethical approval and discipline specific ethics management. These sessions are monitored through the Graduate School. The module is compulsory for all new research students (PhD and MPhil). This module is run every September and January. The content of these modules is continually reviewed and updated by the Research Ethics and Integrity Officer. All research students are required to complete a number of assessments after undertaking this module to ensure that they have a Favourable Ethical Opinion before proceeding with their research projects. These assessments also enable the REIO to identify any students who might be intending to undertake high risk research and offer support and guidance to them and ensure all of the appropriate processes have been followed.

15, Training for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught students is generally conducted by individual departments. Module co-ordinators and other departmental staff are encouraged to embed the appropriate University processes and procedures into their delivery of teaching. Training at this level is organised on a departmental level, however, the REIO is working directly with a growing number of departments to offer training, guidance and support for students.

Guidance

16, In order to maintain and build upon the university's successful research portfolio, the University acknowledges the need to remain responsible and professional within the research community. Whether research involves human participants or not, a number of procedures and guidance notes aims to support *ethical awareness, consideration* and compliance in all areas:

F, Culture, development and leadership

17, The University recognises the importance of maintaining a research environment which promotes good research practice and a strong culture of research integrity. We achieve this through underpinning our research with a number of quality processes and by providing relevant support, policies and guidance in a widely accessible format.

18, During this academic year the Research Ethics and Integrity Officer has prioritised working closely with departments to raise awareness about research good practice and increase the visibility of research ethics policies and procedures. Researchers have received increased support and training to try and facilitate their knowledge and awareness of ethical procedures and policies. It has become evident that there is a need for increased support for researchers who are moving into cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research areas.

Ethics and Integrity Structure

19, The University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) is a joint sub-committee of both the University Council and Senate. Its remit includes all policy and governance issues pertaining to ethics and integrity. UREC has two Research Ethics Panels feeding directly to it; The Research Ethics Panel (REP) and The Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Board (AWERB), the Panels act an operational level and review ethics applications from the research community.

20, The Animal Welfare & Ethical Review Board (AWERB) feed their minutes to UREC as a matter of reporting, in an effort to maintain good practice and links.

21, Operationally, *the Research Ethics & Integrity Officer* acts as a first point of contact for all related enquiries and provides advice for all levels of researchers.

22, Individual academic departments and faculties have *Directors of Research* who act as champions in creating an appropriate research culture.

23, Internally, the Concordat for Researcher Development Group meets throughout the year to consider issues pertaining to researcher development.

24, These best practice and development opportunities ensure that a culture of integrity and good governance is embedded within the research environment.

Monitoring and reporting

25, The University ensures that the Concordat for research integrity is implemented within its research environment and
all systems and processes reflect best practice. Following publication in September 2021 of UKRIO's self-assessment tool, the University Research Ethics Committee undertake an annual review of the University's research ethics and integrity practices and policies to identify areas which may need revision or enhancement to ensure ongoing compliance with the Concordat.

Ethical Review System

26, The University maintains ethical and professional standards in all of its research, whether funded or not, through a number of mechanisms throughout the life cycle of the project:

- ALL research within the University goes through, at the very least, a 'light touch' assessment. The assessment is carried out at a departmental level via the *AU online ethics*

assessment and application form.

- Assessments are usually assessed by the Faculty Director of Research, who determines whether an application to a relevant Research Ethics Panel (REP) is required.

- The system holds a central log of records for audit, quality assurance and monitoring purposes.

- The system provides a unique ethics ID to each assessment and this is required information as part of the internal approval process for research grant applications. This ensures that all funded projects have submitted an application for ethical review at the point of grant application which is then followed up if necessary with further review at the point of award.

Process Review

27, Processes and procedures at AU are continually monitored for quality assurance and enhancement purposes, examples include:

- ***Streamlining of ethics processes***: all research ethics assessments and applications are administered through a central online system.

- ***Audit Policy:*** The University has developed an audit review policy which undertakes an annual review of several research projects which have undertaken review by the Research Ethics Panel. Audits can also be triggered where a complaint/concern is raised around a research project.

- ***Review of policies and procedures****:* procedures under the remit of RBI are reviewed on annual basis to ensure that procedures meet national and professional standards/frameworks.

F, Changes and developments during the period under review

<u>**Training**</u>

28, The University Research Ethics Committee recognises the importance of training and development for all staff and students and has taken steps to ensure a universal level of training is provided for all researchers. During this academic year the University trialled a one year subscription to 2 online courses provided by Epigeum, offering a number of modules related to research ethics and integrity which were available for all staff and students. After reviewing this initiative it was decided that the University would not continue with the subscription, but it was recognised that this should be replaced by something specific to Aberystwyth University in the near future. The University is currently working towards developing more training modules to be delivered internally which will be available to all staff and students, in order to continually promote best practice and ensure that all researchers are aware of the Universities responsibilities under the Concordat and to keep abreast of any new emerging ethical issues.

29, The University ensures that researchers have access to updated training. In January 2024 a training session was held with David Carpenter, through UKRIO. All research active staff and research students were provided the opportunity to attend the training session via teams. Over 140 members of staff and students attended the ethics session. David also held a separate training session for all Research Ethics Panel members. This gave University students and staff access to training by an external provider and ethics consultant who was able to provide advice and guidance and answer any questions from an independent perspective.

30, The University held an external training session in October 2023with the Research Collaboration Advice Team who attended the University to provide researchers with advice on their responsibilities around Trusted Research.

Ethical Review System

31, Work has been ongoing to develop a new online ethics assessment form. The current online ethics review system was developed in-house in 2014. To ensure that we maintain best practice and a high standard of ethical review of research ethics applications a review of the current system has been in progress. Work is ongoing to develop an enhanced 'fit for purpose' system of review to integrate review of both human and animal research projects. A new system in APEX has been tested by a working group with an aim to launch before Christmas.

Research Governance Review

32, The University is committed to ensuring that processes are in place and strategies have been developed to successfully manage ethics and governance issues. After an ongoing review of systems, policies and procedures for both ethics and governance within the University, further review was undertaken for research governance. A University executive approved Task and Finish Group led by the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research, Knowledge Exchange and Innovation was set up in 2023 and reported to the Senior Executive and Vice Chancellor in December 2023.

 The task group provided recommendations which were presented to the Executive and Vice Chancellor in the 23/24 session. These recommendations were approved and the University is now working towards implementing the new changes during the 24/25 academic year

Research Ethics Panel

33, The Research Ethics Panel recognise the importance of ensuring there is a wide level of expertise across all panel members and aim to ensure that there is an ongoing opportunity for staff to enhance their experience and undertake work in this area. After a successful recruitment process in August 2023 which resulted in the recruitment of 26 new panel members, a further recruitment round was undertaken in June 2024 where a further 17 members joined the panel.

34, This recruitment also aims to ensure that the panel has representation from all academic departments across the University, in addition to considering equity, diversity and inclusion during panel recruitment.'

These representatives work closely with the REIO to ensure that each department is aware of current ethical processes and practices.

Policy Reviews

35, The University Research Ethics Committee has reviewed and updated policies relating to Research Integrity as outlined below.

Research Ethics Panel Appeals Policy

36, The University's Research Ethics Panel Appeals Policy is currently under review. This policy ensures researchers have a fair and transparent route to appeal an Unfavourable Ethical Opinion provided by the Research Ethics Panel.

Research Ethics Panel Terms of Reference

37, The terms of reference for the University's Research Ethics Panel is currently under review.

University Research Ethics Committee Terms of Reference

38, The terms of reference for the University Research Ethics Committee were reviewed and approved in October 2023.

Research Ethics Audit Policy

39, The University Research Ethics Audit Policy was reviewed and an amendment included and approved in October 2023.

G, Reflections on progress and plans for future development

40, The University has made good progress with the plans for future development as outlined in it's Annual Integrity Statement 2022/23.

41, As outlined above the main targets which the University wanted to achieve in the year 2023/24 were:

- To ensure that we build on our current programme of training for staff and students and to deliver a universal level of training, which incorporates new and emerging issues of research integrity which researchers should be aware of. This will be achieved through the introduction of new in house training sessions.

- To implement the recommendations from a review of the systems for ethics and governance (which were approved by Senior Executive in December 2023) across the University.

- To launch the new and enhanced on-line system for ethical review. This is currently in its testing phase and should be ready to launch to users before Christmas 2024.

- To continue to review the University's performance against the revised Concordat to Support Research Integrity. This was implemented in February 2023 as a mechanism for annual review for research ethics and integrity.

Future Developments

42, The University intends to continue building on their existing training programme for research ethics and integrity. The University will be hosting a further training session in November 2024 on Trusted Research from the Research Collaboration and Advice Team.

43, The University Research Ethics Committee have discussed the requirement for an extensive review of the University's procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research Policy. The aim is to set up a working group to discuss a way forward with this in the 2024/25 session. This will form part of the new governance implementation process.

44, The Research Ethics and Integrity Officer works annually with colleagues on a review of all current policies for research ethics, integrity and governance. The aim is to ensure that all policies are up to date and fit for purpose.

H, Research Misconduct: Statement on processes that the organisation has in place for dealing with allegations of misconduct

45, The University strives to maintain a culture which promotes good practice and encourages honest and ethical research. Researchers have a responsibility to report any allegations of research misconduct and the University has created a procedure which not only facilitates the investigation of research misconduct but allows people to feel comfortable in reporting any allegations.

46, All members of the University, particularly those involved in research, must be aware of the

following policies and understand how they operate in relation to their role at Aberystwyth. All of these policies are displayed clearly on the University website, with contacts for further information which can be treated confidentially if required.

Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research

47, The University has rigorous mechanisms in places for the **reporting** of any wrongdoing and for the **handling** of allegations of research misconduct. The University takes allegations of misconduct seriously and has developed a procedure to facilitate full exploration of potentially complex matters in research that can arise in situations where misconduct may have taken place.

48, This procedure follows the guidelines for a Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research issued by the UK Research Integrity Office in August 2008 and in accordance with guidelines from the Concordat. It's objectives are to ensure that issues of misconduct in research may be addressed appropriately and investigated effectively and enable an independent panel to produce a report on the basis of which the University may initiate appropriate action.

49, The procedure ensures openness, transparency and fairness in its proceedings, with clear stages, steps and timescales for all involved.

50, The University offers an informal process of managing such allegations to alleviate the worry some may feel when making a complaint. A complainant has three other options rather than a formal complaint:

A) Approaching the individual and seeking a way jointly to resolve the matter.
B) Approaching the faculty PVC/Head of Service Department and requesting that they act as an intermediary between the two parties to resolve the issue.
C) Seeking mediation through an ACAS trained mediator at the University.

51, If a researcher felt that they had no option but to report an allegation of research misconduct then the University has developed procedures as previously outlined, which not only provide a mechanism to investigate the allegation but to also support the researcher(s) involved.

52, As previously noted the University Research Ethics Committee have recommended an extensive review of this policy which is expected to be undertaken within the 2023/24 session.

53, Two cases of research misconduct have been reported and investigated. Both cases of reported research misconduct have recently concluded and a full review of lessons learned from the separate cases will be conducted.

Whistleblowing (Public Interest Disclosure)

54, The University is committed to the highest standards of openness, probity and accountability. It seeks to conduct its affairs in a responsible manner, taking into account the requirements of the funding bodies and the standards in public life. The University also wishes to ensure that anyone who discloses wrongdoing at work can do so without fear of sanction.

55, This policy is designed for all employees, students and contractors of the University to assist individuals who believe they have discovered wrongdoing at the University.

Dignity and Respect at Work Policy

56, Aberystwyth University is committed to providing a working and learning environment that enriches lives, and where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

57, The university will not tolerate bullying or harassment of any kind (this includes unlawful discrimination and victimisation). Those working or dealing with the university should not be treated unfavourably or be subjected to bullying or harassment.

58, All staff are required to treat colleagues with dignity and respect at work. We have a personal responsibility to treat each other the way we would wish to be treated ourselves and should raise with individuals directly, if possible, where our expectations in terms of their behaviour to us falls short.

59, This policy aims to:

- Provide guidance to colleagues about their responsibility to ensure the dignity and respect of others;
- Inform colleagues about their rights if they feel they are not being treated with dignity and respect by colleagues and signpost colleagues to the tools they can use in these situations
- To encourage positive behaviour and to use informal approaches to resolve issues where possible
- To emphasise commitment to AU values in respect of dignity and respect at work

I, Information on investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken.

Type of allegation	Number of allegations			
	Number of allegations reported to the organisation	Number of formal investigations	Number upheld in part after formal investigation	Number upheld in full after formal investigation
Fabrication	0	0	0	0
Falsification	0	0	0	0
Plagiarism	0	0	0	0
Failure to meet legal, ethical and professional obligations	0	0	0	0
Misrepresentation (e.g. data; involvement; interests;	0	0	0	0

qualification; and/or publication history)				
Improper dealing with allegations of misconduct	0	0	0	0
Multiple areas of concern (when received in a single allegation)	0	0	0	0
*Other**	0	0	0	0
Total:				**0**