

Staffordshire University annual statement on research integrity 2020/21

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 2020-21**.

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 Martin Jones (martin.jones@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). 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).

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. 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 2020-21), Staffordshire University has undertaken several actions and activities to support and strengthen understanding and the application of research integrity issues. These 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 2020-21.
- As a result of the integrity gap analysis undertaken in 2020, a detailed communications plan was developed and rolled out in academic year 2020-21, 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 has included a series of five minute 'conversation starters', annotated PowerPoints on topics including 'what is research integrity?' and 'what is research misconduct?' These were disseminated directly to academic staff and are also accessible as an on-demand resource on our new Researcher Development Teams Network.
- The Code of Practice for Research, which is the University's policy and guidelines on research integrity matters, is currently under a scheduled review to reflect best practice in the sector and will be revised and submitted for re-approval by Academic Board in the 2021-22 academic year.
- The Research Misconduct Policy, embedded in the Code of Practice, is under review, as per the University's policy review cycle. This policy is being revised against updated best practice in the sector, and in line with the updated and revised guidance for Research Misconduct in the Concordat on Research Integrity (2019).
- The details of the contact for confidential whistle-blowers should any person wish to raise concerns about the integrity of research being conducted under the auspices of the University has been reviewed this year. These are reviewed annually and were found to remain appropriate and transparent.
- The University ran CEDARS (Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey) for the second time in summer 2021. This survey provided us with a second 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. This includes work to continue to raise awareness of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity. These results feed into our HR Excellence in Research (HR EIR) Award, which was successfully renewed in January 2021.
- To support the next cycle of our HR EIR Award, 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. 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 2021-22 academic year. The programme includes training and awareness raising on matters of research integrity. This includes on-demand resources of recorded content introducing staff to research integrity and, separately, research misconduct.
- The University became members of UKRIO (UK Research Integrity Office) this year. 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 will be considered for approval in 2021-22, 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, 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, we feel these actions warrant mention here as important aspects in the development of our research environment, governance and culture of research integrity.

- The University undertook its second annual School Ethics audit in 2020-21, in line with the Research Ethical Review Policy.
- An annual institution publication audit was undertaken for the second time in March 2021 (reviewing publications produced in the calendar year 2020), to ensure publications produced under the auspices of Staffordshire University have undergone appropriate ethical review.
- The University's Research Ethical Review Policy has undergone a light touch review in summer 2021, and amendments to be considered for approval in September 2021. This review, after the Policy has been in place for two years, will ensure the Policy remains fit for purpose and in keeping with sector best practice. It will also seek to update the University's IPR (Independent Peer Review) process for NHS ethics.

5. Research Misconduct

The University's Research Misconduct 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.

The Research Misconduct Policy, and the Code of Practice for Research in which it is situated, was last revised in June 2018. It is due for a scheduled review in the 2021-22 academic year. This review is being overseen by RIC. Whilst this document is under review, we are confident that the current (2018) Research Misconduct Policy remains robust and appropriate to the needs of the organisation.

6. 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 Policy and are instead dealt with according to the relevant HR procedure, or via academic misconduct (in the case of a PGR).

Where there is an accusation or suspicion of research misconduct, these are addressed through the research misconduct 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 (2020-21)	Number of formal investigations completed (2020-21)	Number of allegations upheld (in whole or in part) (2020-21)
Fabrication	0	0	0
Falsification	0	0	0
Plagiarism	0	0	0
Failure to meet obligations (e.g. legal, ethical and professional obligations)	2	0	0
Misrepresentation (e.g. of data, results, interpretation)	0	0	0
Improper dealing with allegations of misconduct	0	0	0

Please note, a third investigation was instigated towards the end of the academic year under review. However, as this investigation is, at the time of writing, ongoing, it is not included in the data above as it is not 'completed'.

7. Reflection on misconduct investigations

Through undertaking these two 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 outcome (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. We will ensure that the review of the Research Misconduct Policy maintains this aspect, while taking account of best practice in the sector.

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

8. 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 Research, Innovation and Impact Strategy includes an ongoing commitment to ensure all researchers have an awareness of matters of research integrity and adhere to their commitments as outlined in the Concordat. 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, advice and training is provided centrally through Research Innovation and Impact Services (RIIS), and locally in Schools by the Associate Deans for Research and Enterprise (ADREs). The ADREs have within their remit the development and fostering of an environment and culture of research integrity in their Schools. 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 second time at the conclusion of the 2020-21 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 all of the relevant questions around our environment of research integrity.

In this year's survey, 76% of respondents reported that they were familiar with their institution's mechanisms to report incidents of misconduct (an increase from 58% in 2020). In addition, 84% of respondents felt comfortable reporting any incidents of research misconduct (increased from 77%), 75% would trust the institution to investigate any reported incidents fairly (increased from 67%) and 67% would trust that the institution would take action if appropriate after investigation (increased from 65%). It is important for the University to continue to build on these broadly positive results and to recognise the need to take actions institutionally and at School level to ensure that *all* staff feel comfortable in reporting instances of misconduct. The Director of Research and the ADREs will take ownership of further developing this supportive research environment, both institutionally and locally in Schools.

In addition, it was pleasing to note an increase of staff who reported that they had 'some understanding' of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity. However, we still have work to do to increase awareness of the Concordat amongst all staff.

Finally, as referred to in the previous annual report, 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	14/10/2021
Academic Board	03/11/2021
Board of Governors	

Dr Cathal Rogers, Research Policy and Governance Manager, September 2021