Summary report on research integrity (2019-20)

1. General update

The UUK Concordat to Support Research Integrity was revised in October 2019, primarily in response to recommendations from the Parliamentary Science and Technology Committees’ report of that year, where concerns remained that universities were not taking misconduct seriously and calling for a national committee to promote and police implementation of the Concordat.

In reality very little has changed in terms of the recommended actions. The requirements on the University are that by October 25 2020 we have:

1. Identified a named point of contact who will act as a first point of contact for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity, and ensure that contact details for this person are kept up to date and are publicly available on our website (www.qmul.ac.uk/research/principles-strategy/policies).

2. Provided a named point of contact or recognised an appropriate third party to act as confidential liaison for whistle-blowers or any other person wishing to raise concerns about the integrity of research being conducted under our auspices (www.qmul.ac.uk/research/principles-strategy/policies).

3. Published an annual statement on how we are meeting the research integrity requirements of the revised concordat (by continuing to report details of research integrity and misconduct investigations).

Simply complying with the above is not our ambition. Over summer 2020, we workshoped ideas for improvements to provide the best environment for our researchers on research integrity. A range of actions are allocated to be implemented over 2020/21 (e.g. the advice and training provided to PhD students and researchers, bringing disparate information together in a coherent Code of Practice). We will continue to present a short annual statement to you as our governing body and publish them on our website.

2. Summary of research misconduct investigations (2019-20)

Cases of potential research misconduct reported to the end of July 2020: Five

The University was made aware in April 2019 of allegations of an article being published that did not properly acknowledge the contributions made by others. The issue was addressed in August 2019 with the redrafting the article as per the conditions of the underlying grant.

In November 2019, we received a complaint about a series of publications from a Queen Mary research group, seeking an investigation into whether the underlying data exists to support the publications. The complaint involved an overseas collaborator and a considerable body of technical data has been investigated. At this time, the investigation has not concluded, in part due to the different underlying policies and procedures that govern the work of the overseas collaborator. The case remains open until both the University’s and overseas institution’s investigations are concluded.

In November, Queen Mary was copied into a complaint made to the University of Sheffield about attempts by a researcher to confound the effects of a randomised clinical trial. The University of Sheffield concluded it would not investigate the complaint, as the member of staff was not aligned to them at the time of the allegation. Our position is the same.
In March 2020, a complaint of research misconduct was made against a PhD student. This was investigated and found not to be misconduct. The case was closed.

In April 2020, the University’s Ethics of Research Committee escalated a potential issue of research misconduct by a fourth year undergraduate. The advice of the Committee had been sought and given. The research would work with a vulnerable group and the research team were advised to submit their research topic and associated survey material to the Committee for guidance and approval. That did not happen and a week later the University’s research ethics team were advised the survey had already gone ahead. The research ethics team carried out an investigation and an independent investigator was appointed. The investigation concluded that no research misconduct had occurred, but good practice was not followed. The research team remedied the issues by following the Committee’s recommendations following these investigations so that the data was not used.

Cases with continuing ramifications: One

3. Other considerations

In last years, report I highlighted concerns that research funders are increasingly requesting information and details regarding investigations of any ongoing cases of misconduct before they are fully investigated. The issue has not progressed due to the ongoing pandemic and there is work happening through the Russell Group to explore with funders the inherent tensions and identify an appropriate way forward.

There will be further information provided by the UK Government in 2020 around their “Trusted Research” agenda. Trusted research aims to secure the integrity of the UK’s open system of research collaboration whilst improving understanding and safeguarding of critical national infrastructure, intellectual property generated by UK Institutions and protect research from undue interference from foreign nationals or governments. Working with the Queen Mary Global Engagement Team, a proposal is under development for the senior executive team over the autumn to improve our governance and overall awareness amongst academic colleagues of the risks and support that is available to them. We are also redesigning our approvals processes for high-risk partnerships, creating better signposting of the risks and proposing a new level of scrutiny at Partnerships Board.

Sharon Ellis, Director of Research and Business Development

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