**Annual Statement on Research Integrity Activity 2020-2021**

1. **Introduction**

Northumbria University recognises that the pursuit of excellent research requires the maintenance of the highest standards of integrity and ethics and the fulfilment of our responsibilities to researchers, participants in research, research users and the wider community. Therefore, the University supports, and is committed to upholding, the principles set out in the [Concordat to Support Research Integrity](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-08/Updated%20FINAL-the-concordat-to-support-research-integrity.pdf). An integral part of that obligation is the presentation of an annual statement on research integrity to the Board of Governors for their review and approval. Compiling the annual statement offers a framework to evaluate our progress against the Concordat’s commitments, and this year we have been able to utilise the updated UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) Self-Assessment Tool.

This is the 8th annual statement published by Northumbria University and covers the academic year 1 September 2020, to 31 August 2021. The annual statement will be published on the University’s Research Ethics and Integrity [webpages](https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-integrity/) for accountability, and assurance on activities taken to support research integrity; and in compliance with the requirements of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity. The PVC (Research) has formal responsibility for research integrity within the University and is Chair of Research Ethics Committee. The PVC (Research) is responsible for providing academic leadership on research ethics and integrity. Our publicly facing [webpages](https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-integrity/) make clear that the PVC (Research) 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.

In summary the annual statement provides:

1. A description of actions and activities that have been undertaken to support and strengthen understanding and application of research ethics and integrity.
2. Assurance that the processes in place for dealing with allegations of research misconduct are transparent, robust, and fair, and continue to be appropriate to the needs of the organisation.
3. A high-level statement on any formal investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken.
4. **Supporting and Strengthening a Culture of Research Integrity**
5. **Institutional Strategy and Objectives to Strengthen Research Integrity**

Leadership for research integrity and ethics is formally the role of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research). The postholder is supported in this role by committees and their members, including University Research Ethics Committee (REC), which the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research) Chairs and which has responsibility for overarching policies, processes, training and assurance around research ethics. Each Faculty has a Faculty Research Ethics Director who is a member of REC and Chairs a Faculty Research Ethics Committee which ensures that agreed policy and procedure is operationalised effectively within the context of that Faculty and its disciplinary norms. Research ethics and integrity are a core responsibility of wider Faculty and Service Leadership roles with the following staff having specific leadership responsibilities in this area: Faculty Research Ethics Directors, Departmental Ethics Leads, Deputy Director of Research and Innovation Services and Research Ethics and Integrity Manager. The Head of Governance, Health and Safety Manager, and the Records and Information Manager (and Data Protection Officer) are also members of the Research Ethics Committee.

The University’s standards and norms regarding the ethical review process for staff and students are set out in the [Research Ethics and Governance Handbook](https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/research/documents/word/nu-research-ethics-and-governance-handbook-oct-2021.docx?modified=20211013095147) and [Ethics in Research Policy](https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/research/documents/pdf2/ethics-in-research-policy-statement-2019-20.pdf?modified=20191105131628). The [Ethics in Research Policy Statement](https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/research/documents/pdf2/ethics-in-research-policy-statement-2019-20.pdf?modified=20191105131628) explains the obligations on staff and students who undertake research activity and provides a framework for the implementation of good research conduct. This is supported by more detailed guidance in research ethics and good research practice (e.g., authorship) available in the University’s Research Ethics Handbook.

The [Ethics Online System](https://np-k2runtime.northumbria.ac.uk/Runtime/Runtime/Form/My%2BDocuments/) for research ethics approvals was introduced in April 2017 and is used for all research staff studies, Module Level Approval, and individual undergraduate and postgraduate taught/ research studies. There is a suite of training available to support the use of the system ([staff and PGR/](https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/research/documents/pdf/ethics-online-user-guide-staff-pgr-feb-2021.pdf?modified=20210219081653) [UG and PGT](https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/research/documents/pdf/ethics-online-user-guide-ug-pgt-feb-2021.pdf?modified=20210219081627)). The system enables effective reporting of management information which is used frequently to ensure that applications are managed consistently, from submission to approval. The system is also a keystone in ensuring a robust and consistent structure of review is in place.

The Research Policy team in Research and Innovation Services support and champion the research ethics and integrity agenda across the University. The team has seen a significant expansion and restructure which enabled the introduction of a dedicated leadership role supporting ethics and integrity. A Research Ethics and Integrity Manager has been appointed to this role. The team are responsible for ensuring that actions are taken to embed the commitments of the Concordat into the University’s research environment and culture by supporting Research Ethics Committee and the Faculty Research Ethics Directors and Departmental Ethics Leads. The team are responsible for ensuring that external approvals via the IRAS system are completed and maintained with appropriate university level authority; undertake institutional audits and support other audits (e.g., safeguarding, health and safety); provide advice and guidance on using the Ethics Online System. The team is a key point of contact for advice, support and guidance on research integrity and research ethics issues, and 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 wider Research Policy team are responsible for researcher skills and development, research information, culture, and quality. Bringing together these policy areas together will facilitate future work on research culture in which research integrity is embedded, and encourage collaboration, to fully utilise the synergies across researcher development and research integrity training.

1. **Process Review and Revision of Research Integrity Policy and Procedures.**

**The Ethics Policy Review Group**

Since the publication of the revised Concordat, there has been increased scrutiny of research integrity issues and how research misconduct is managed in the HE landscape. This includes:

1. Changes to the requirements of funders terms and conditions for award holders (e.g. UKRI’s anti-bullying and harassment [policies](https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-standards-and-data/good-research-resource-hub/preventing-harm-in-research/)).
2. The development of the UK Committee of Research Integrity in response to the Research Integrity [report](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmsctech/350/350.pdf) of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.
3. Funders and regulatory agencies requiring more detailed information around research misconduct and lessons learned from investigations. This includes the Office for Students, UUK, UKRI, Wellcome Trust and others.
4. Governance and research integrity as a component of the REF Environment statement.
5. ‘Research culture’ as become a touchstone of research evaluation, motivated by funders’ concern to rebalance the reward scheme away from outputs at any cost and towards fostering creativity, inclusivity, honesty, and integrity.

In response to the requirements of the updates made in 2019 to the Concordat, and the changing external landscape, the University Executive agreed the terms of reference for an Ethics Policy Review (EPRG) task and finish group to undertake a comprehensive review of processes and procedures for managing matters of research ethics and integrity. The EPRG’s remit is to:

1. Consolidate/ restructure existing policy and regulations, including the scope of research ethics review.
2. Review ethics business processes (including the procurement of a new ethics online system) and recommend revisions to key tasks and processes.
3. Clarify roles and responsibilities, within the ethics governance structure.
4. Establish an Ethics and Integrity Training and Development Framework.

The EPRG was convened in March 2021 with an academic lead, Dr Claire Thornton (who receives a workload allowance for her leadership of the Group), members from each Faculty, and support from Research and Innovation Services.

The EPRG will deliver recommendations on revised policy’s in and processes by January 2022 following wide consultation. However, already the EPRG has undertaken a review of the Module Level Approval process, which has provided updated guidance for academic staff; the purchase of sector leading research integrity training modules from Epigeum; an internal survey of staff needs focused on research ethics approval processes, and focus groups with staff, ECR and PGR cohorts to develop recommendations for revised ethics approval processes. The Group has reviewed the diagnostic ethical risk questions (which assist in the identification of the correct ethical risk level of an application). These questions have been updated to signpost where external review is necessary (e.g., the involvement of NHS patients). A monthly audit of low-risk ethics submissions continues to ensure that the diagnostic risk questions remain effective. A sample of applications are reviewed by the Research Policy Coordinator to ensure that medium and high-risk applications are not incorrectly classified. Any issues are referred to the Faculty Research Ethics Director for action.

Furthermore, the Research Policy team has worked closely with Human Resources to ensure that the University meets the new funder standards on anti-bullying and harassment as part of Northumbria’s updated *Unacceptable Behaviours* policy. An indication of how the review offers a significant opportunity to raise awareness of research integrity matters and their breadth beyond research ethics.

**Response to Covid-19**

During the academic year 2020/21 the University has continued its agile response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and this includes research ethics, and the management of face-to-face research with human participants. In March 2020 most face-to-face research activities were paused for all staff and students in line with the British government’s lockdown restrictions. As the government has eased restrictions the University’s guidance was updated throughout the pandemic to align with the NIHRs guidance on restarting research and provided a route, by exception for staff and postgraduate researchers, for face-to-face research to resume, with the appropriate safety measures in place and subject to approval from Departmental Ethics Leads, and Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor approval for research with participants vulnerable to Covid 19.[[1]](#footnote-2)

**IT Incident and Ethics Approval Workaround**

In September 2020 the University suffered an IT incident which resulted in several systems being taken offline. While IT services worked to restore functionality, the Ethics Online System was noted as a critical system and a digital workaround was agreed using the MyForms system. The system was utilised from September 2020 to January 2021 and processed 1221 completed applications. Additionally, the Research Policy team supported training and the development of guidance documentation, and online resources to support the use of the system.

**Strengthening Health and Safety in Research Ethics**

The operation of the Ethics Online 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 encourages compliance with these processes and provides opportunities to identify areas for further development and support. During this period the health and safety section within the Ethics Online System has been updated and remains mandatory for staff, PGR and PGT. Undergraduate students are supported to complete risk assessments by their module supervisors or tutors.

A beneficial outcome of the new ways of working due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has been the strengthening of links with the central Health and Safety team, and Faculty Technical Managers (who are responsible for Faculty health and safety matters, and risk assessments). The Health and Safety Manager is now a member of Research Ethics Committee and Faculty Technical Managers are now members of Faculty Research Ethics Committees. We have begun regular audits of approved applications for face-to-face research during the pandemic to ensure that our processes remained consistent and rigorous, as well as other high-risk health and safety areas.

An external ethical approvals [webpage](https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-integrity/external-approvals/) was developed which signposts staff and students when external approvals of research are required (e.g. HRA, NHS REC, MOD), Research Ethics training has also been updated to signpost where external review may be required, as well as specialist training in departments where external review is common (e.g. where there is collaboration with the NHS), or where staff may be unfamiliar with the requirements for external review (e.g. where new equipment purchases may mean external review is required). Furthermore, standardised guidance on health and safety during the Covid-19 pandemic was published and signposted to our ethics leads for dissemination.

**Strengthening Safeguarding Processes**

In 2020 a Safeguarding audit identified a gap in process when researchers made an ethics application and how the teams responsible for ensuring that DBS certification were notified. This was rectified with the development of an automatic email workflow, which is sent from the ethics Online System to the HR and Registry Services teams responsible for DBS compliance.

1. **Summary of Training and Development, Communication and Awareness Raising of Research Integrity Activities**

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. 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 continue to grow through the development of an online community of practice. As our use of online technologies continues to expand following from the Covid-19 pandemic, IT services have designed a Researcher Toolkit to embed the use of online technologies for research, whilst ensuring the proper research governance (e.g., GDPR) and ethical standards are maintained.

To enhance leadership and embed a culture of ethics and integrity, Faculty Research Ethics Directors and Departmental Ethics Leads have been able to take advantage of additional training on ethics and integrity from the UK Research Integrity Office (of which the University is a member). The Health and Safety Manager has convened training on risk assessment review as part of the research governance process. An annually updated ethics training module is mandatory for offered all ethics staff who conduct research in order 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. Completion details are shared with Departmental Ethics Leads who coordinate reviews for staff and PGR projects so that they can ensure that trained reviewers are used as part of online review panels got high risk projects.

The University provides mentoring for both new and existing staff and has renewed its HR Excellence in Research Award in 2020 as part of the eight-year review cycle. The HR Excellence in Research Award is granted to universities who can show their support of early career researchers and compliance with the principles of the 2019 Researcher Development Concordat (to which the University is also a signatory). It was identified that research integrity training is a priority area for improvement as part of the forward action plan for 2021-23. The University has already made a significant investment in online materials to support staff working from home, and which we continue to invest in. We successfully launched Nature Masterclasses on Publication, and recently increased our provision to including Managing Data; Effective Collaboration; Peer Review; and Narrative Research Techniques. We have also invested in specialist online training resources for research ethics integrity by purchasing the suite of Epigeum courses on Research Ethics and Research Integrity. These cover areas such as good research conduct, and export controls which we had identified as gaps. These training opportunities will be rolled out to our early career researchers and will be part of a wider project to renew our research ethics integrity training offer.

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 (which the Research Ethic and Integrity Manager will chair in 2021/22). This forum enables institutions to pool resources in training, as well as develop and share best practice in processes and policy. The Research Policy team continue to work with other universities and in particular NHS organisations to develop our clinical research processes. We have agreed training and process review and support with the Research and Development Offices at Northumbria Health Care Trust, the Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear Trust, and the Joint Research Office at Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals for 2021/22.

1. **Addressing Research Misconduct**

The University encourages a culture of openness and transparency where errors committed due to a lack of understanding, and without intent to deceive, are handled on a case-by-case basis as some unintentional mistakes have more serious outcomes. Cases are addressed through thorough investigation, 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.

The University is 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](https://one.northumbria.ac.uk/sites/peopleandpolicies/Pages/Policy.aspx?ID=45) 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. All investigations produce a final report and include recommendations for further action and lessons learned.

**For this reporting period zero investigations were carried out under the Academic Misconduct in Research Policy.**

Individuals seeking advice on the University’s misconduct procedure can contact the PVC (Research), 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](https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/leadership-governance/vice-chancellors-office/governance-services/university-policies-and-procedures/-/media/corporate-website/documents/pdfs/about-us-corporate/governance-services/public-interest-disclosure-policy.ashx) policy. Under the Whistleblowing policy disclosures may be made to the [Head of Governance](https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/leadership-governance/vice-chancellors-office/governance-services/university-policies-and-procedures/university-public-interest-policy-and-procedure/).

1. **Summary of Concordat obligations:**
2. The PVC (Research) has formal responsibility for research integrity within the University and is Chair of Research Ethics Committee. The PVC (Research) is responsible for providing academic leadership on research ethics and integrity. Our publicly facing [webpages](https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-integrity/) make clear that the PVC (Research) is the first point of contact for anyone who wishes to raise an allegation of research misconduct.
3. Mrs. Laura Hutchinson, Research Ethics and Integrity Manager in Research and Innovation Services, is the named point of contact on matters of research integrity.
4. This Statement was approved by the Board of Governors on 29 November 2021 and published on 14 December 2021.

**Policies and Procedures Supporting Research Ethics and Integrity are available at:** [**https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-integrity/**](https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-integrity/)

1. Following the removal of all British Government restrictions revised guidance undergraduate and postgraduate taught students may now also undertake face to face research with human participants, within [the scope set out here](https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/research/documents/word/resuming-f2f-research-guidance_october-2021.docx?modified=20211029133411). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)