

## **Aston University: Annual Statement on Research Integrity**

Reporting period: 01 Jan 2024 – 31 August 2024

### **Forward:**

The Concordat to Support Research Integrity seeks to provide a national framework for good research conduct and its governance.

In compliance with the Concordat Aston University is committed to:

1. upholding the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research
2. ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards
3. 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
4. using transparent, timely, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise
5. working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to review progress regularly and openly.

The Concordat recommends that Institutions make a publicly available annual statement on research integrity which provides details of activities undertaken to enhance research integrity within the University during the reporting period.

It should be noted that the University has historically published its annual statements to align to a calendar year. It is considered more beneficial to adopt the academic year as a baseline for reporting to better align to university activities and reporting cycles.

This statement covers the interim period between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024 and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2024. The next statement will be published at the end of the 2024/25 academic year and will cover the period from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2024 – 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025.

## Section 1: Key contact information

1A. Name of organisation	Aston University
1B. Type of organisation:	Higher Education Institution
1C. Date statement approved by governing body (DD/MM/YY)	University Research and Enterprise Committee 05/02/2025
1D. Web address of organisation's research integrity page (if applicable)	<a href="https://www.aston.ac.uk/research/integrity-ethics/integrity">https://www.aston.ac.uk/research/integrity-ethics/integrity</a>
1E. Named senior member of staff to oversee research integrity	Name: Yvonne Henderson Research Governance and Integrity Manager  Email address: <a href="mailto:y.henderson@aston.ac.uk">y.henderson@aston.ac.uk</a>
1F. Named member of staff who will act as a first point of contact for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity	Name: Matt Richards Research Integrity Officer  Email address: <a href="mailto:research_governance@aston.ac.uk">research_governance@aston.ac.uk</a>  <a href="https://www.aston.ac.uk/research/integrity-ethics/misconduct">https://www.aston.ac.uk/research/integrity-ethics/misconduct</a>

## **Section 2: Promoting high standards of research integrity and positive research culture.**

The University expects the highest standards of research integrity from its researchers, irrespective of the sources of their funding, their area of research, their experience as researchers, whether they are lone scholars or members of a research team or where the research is to be conducted.

Researchers can expect the University to have:

- a strong commitment to research integrity from its senior management;
- clearly stated standards and expectations;
- support to help researchers comply with standards of good research conduct;
- support to develop excellent researchers;
- oversight of the implementation of the Research Misconduct Policy; and
- a robust and fair approach to dealing with allegations of research misconduct

### University Research Integrity and Ethics Committee

The University Research Integrity and Ethics Committee (URIEC) is responsible for oversight and maintenance of research integrity and research ethics policies, establishes the University's process and procedures for providing oversight of research integrity and college level ethics review, provides quality assurance of such procedures, and advises the Research Committee and Senate on the development, implementation and review of institutional procedures and guidelines relating to research integrity and research ethics issues arising from research and other related activities, considering emerging issues of institutional, national, or international significance.

In this reporting period, the URIEC oversaw the full implementation of the delegated authority process for UG and PGT student ethics applications. This process allows for, with College Research Ethics Committee approval and oversight, the delegated approval of low risk UG and PGT ethics applications to identified named (and registered) individuals within Schools/Departments/Module.

An audit of the University's process for ethical approval was completed by PwC (the University's independent auditors). The final report will be published outside of this reporting period, but any actions arising from the audit will be monitored through URIEC, reporting to University Research Committee (URC) as appropriate.

Additionally, the role of Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research Integrity was removed from the University structure as part of a wider review of senior leadership roles across the University. The functions of this post were redistributed across a number of existing and new senior leadership roles within the University, ensuring a

wider engagement with research integrity matters across all university research functions. This included the appointment of a new Chair of URIEC, a highly experienced researcher and previous Deputy Chair of a College Research Ethics Committee, ensuring continuity of service. The changes to leadership positions and roles within the University have strengthen and further embedded a culture of research integrity across the University and afforded more opportunities to proactively support researchers.

In recognition of the changing research environment and the need for a responsive ethical approval process that balances the needs of the researcher with the need for compliance with integrity matters, URIEC reviewed and approved a '*Rapid Response Research Ethics Approval*' process, a policy for the '*Consideration of Retrospective Ethics Applications*' and a policy for '*Research Using data from Social Media*'.

Additionally, guidance was developed by the Research Integrity Office, and approved by URIEC, to support researchers in their decision making when determining the type of ethical approval needed and in determining the requirements for risk assessments.

#### College Research Ethics Committees

The College Research Ethics Committees (CRECs) receive and review applications from postgraduate research students and staff (and considers ethics applications at UG/PGT level which have been escalated due to complex or material ethical issues with the proposal). Following the creation of the CRECs in 2022 and further developments in 2023, CREC's have focussed on widening engagement with the work of the committee and further improving the quality of the applications received. Key areas of note include the recruitment of a larger pool of reviewers from within each College, additional bespoke training and mentoring and regular meetings between the CREC and Research Integrity Teams to enable best practice to be more readily shared. The quality of applications received continues to improve.

In response to feedback from members of the CREC and from those submitting an ethics application work has commenced to automate and digitise the process where appropriate. It is expected that this will enhance engagement with a more transparent and streamlined process.

#### Human Tissue Authority (HTA) Compliance Oversight Group

Aston University's HTA Compliance Oversight Group has the following key objectives:

- To ensure that the "Aston University Quality Manual: Acquisition, Storage, Use and Disposal of Human Tissue" and associated policies, procedures and processes support compliance by the University with the Human Tissue Act 2004.
- To monitor the effectiveness of operational structures that support compliance with the Human Tissue Act 2004.
- To review any adverse events in relation to the use of human tissue.
- To review internal and external monitoring visit and audit reports relating to projects using human tissue.

Notable changes during this reporting period include the appointment of a new Designated Individual. Concurrently, the Executive Dean of the College of Health and

Life Sciences was appointed as the Research License Holder, ensuring the University's obligations in relation research integrity in matters pertaining to the HTA are fully embedded at all levels of the University.

The Quality Manual and associated SOP's were reviewed, and minor edits approved by the HTA Compliance Oversight Group following the successful HTA inspection in September 2023. The new documents were published on the university human tissue in research webpages.

New software was successfully rolled out to further enhance inventory management, ensuring more efficient and auditable tracking and monitoring as well as supporting the University should an emergency response be required.

### Animal Welfare and Ethics Review Body (AWERB)

Aston University's AWERB has the following key objectives:

- a) Helping to promote a "culture of care" within the University and, as appropriate, in the wider community promoting the awareness and importance of animal welfare and the value of the 3Rs (replacement, refinement and reduction).
- b) Monitoring the University's fulfilment of its obligations under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act and providing a forum for discussion and development of ethical advice to the Named Compliance Officer on all matters related to animal welfare, care and use at Aston University.
- c) Supporting named officers and other staff dealing with animals, on animal welfare, ethical issues and provision of appropriate training.

The University's guidance, processes and access to online training relating to research involving animals are provided through the Animals in Research webpage.

Notable changes during this reporting period include the implementation of new software to enhance the efficiency of colony management and breeding protocols, reducing the number of animals being used and a positive inspection of a new fish facility by the Health and Safety Executive.

### Collaborations with professional services departments

- In collaboration with Legal Services, the Aston University Research Integrity Office (AURIO) provides enhanced guidance on matters including data protection and lawful use of data to enable the research ethics committee processes.
- AURIO contributes members to a new institutional committee concerned with data quality and responsible data use.
- Working with the insurance team, AURIO provides enhanced guidance to specific departments on conducting research overseas.

### Training Opportunities

In addition to informal, ad-hoc support, training and mentoring opportunities provided by members of the College Research Committees and The Research Integrity Office, the University is committed to upholding and improving standards through the provision of formal, targeted training opportunities. Examples of the training offered include:

- The provision of Mandatory Training modules for all research active staff and Postgraduate Researchers ('Good Research Conduct' and 'Irresponsible Research Practice')
- Access to a broad range of optional online training modules ('Research Integrity' and 'Ethical Research')
- Introduction to Research Integrity and Introduction to NHS Research (provided by the Research Integrity Officer)
- A comprehensive programme of bespoke training for Postgraduate Researchers and Early Career Researchers (provided by the Graduate School)

Additionally, during this reporting period, the University's Research Integrity webpages were further updated with content and guidance on the ethics approval and Sponsorship processes. This included an expanded selection of guidance on Research Ethics, Trusted Research, research using animals and human tissue, and Sponsorship (for studies involving research within the NHS).

Bespoke training on research ethics, research integrity and the human tissue act provided, either through proactive engagement or on request, to departments/cohorts.

Lastly, the research integrity office has continued its circulation of a monthly newsletter, highlighting to all academic staff and PGR students internal and external updates regarding research integrity.

## **Reflections on progress and plans for future developments**

Turnover of staff in the reporting period posed a number of challenges with a loss of institutional knowledge and expertise. The essential aspects of the service were maintained throughout albeit at the expense of a number of planned engagement and training activities and new service development initiatives were placed on hold.

The University took the opportunity to reflect upon and review the position of research integrity across the University, implementing a revised approach to strengthen the senior leadership support for research integrity and to more comprehensively embed a culture of research integrity across all colleges. Recognition of the work of the College Research Ethics Committees in the new workload model for academics was a welcome step.

We move into the next reporting period in a position of relative stability in terms of key staff supporting research integrity. This will enable us to move forwards with planned developments including;

- Digitisation of the ethics process workflows to better support applicants and the work of the College Research Ethics Committees

- Implementation of actions raised from the PwC audit
- The development of a risk-based approach to ethical approval processes, ensuring a proportionate approach is taken
- The development of a 'Researcher Handbook' to improve accessibility of research related policy and procedures.
- Increased focus on wider engagement activities and improved visibility of both the College Research Ethics Committees and the University Research Integrity Office
- Exploring opportunities to maximise routes for the reporting of allegations of potential research misconduct

### **Section 3: Addressing research misconduct**

#### **Statement on processes that the University has in place for dealing with allegations of misconduct**

The guiding principles underpinning research integrity are described on the Research Integrity Policy (available on the website: [Research Integrity Policy | Aston University](#)).

The University Research Misconduct Policy (formally known as the Research Integrity Assurance Procedures and available here: [Research Misconduct Policy | Aston University](#)) ensures the University's compliance with the Research Integrity Policy.

The University strives to create an environment which supports individuals to raise concerns in a safe and supportive way. Monitoring of trends in allegations made and outcomes of formal investigations takes place on an annual basis. Anonymised reflections are reported to URIEC to enable discussion of practice and lessons learnt.

#### **Information on investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken**

There have been no formal investigations into alleged research misconduct which completed during this reporting period