

# Annual Statement on Research Integrity 2023-24

## Name of Organisation

University of Sunderland.

## Type of Organisation

Higher Education Institution.

## Date statement approved

04/03/2025

## Research Integrity webpage

[Research governance and integrity.](#)

## Named senior member of staff to oversee research integrity

Professor Matthew Campbell, [matthew.campbell@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.campbell@sunderland.ac.uk)

## Named member of staff who is the first point of contact for research integrity

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# Promoting high standards of research integrity and positive research culture

## Description of actions and activities undertaken

The University of Sunderland is fully committed to advancing high-quality academic research and ensuring that all research activities undertaken by our University community, in our name, and on University premises, are done in a way that safeguards the dignity, rights, health, safety, freedom of expression, and privacy of those involved. The University takes responsibility for ensuring that our researchers have rigorously considered ethical implications, and that research is conducted to the highest standards of integrity.

## Policies and Systems

The University of Sunderland has a dedicated governance structure, comprehensive policies, and supporting systems that govern research integrity and ensure our commitment to the Universities UK Concordat to Support Research Integrity.

## Governance

- The University Research Ethics Committee (REC) provides oversight and accountability for all matters relating to research integrity, reporting to the University Executive and University Governing Board via the Research and Innovation Committee.
- REC meets on a termly basis with a membership comprising senior members of the academy and professional services. The secretariat function of this committee is delivered by a dedicated team of expert practitioners situated in the Research & Graduate School.
- REC works in conjunction with the Research & Graduate School on the implementation of institutional policies and processes to support compliance with statutory, legal, regulatory, and professional requirements.
- As of 2025, REC delegates the responsibility of reviewing individual ethics applications to Faculty Research Ethics Committees (FRECs).

## Policies and supporting guidelines

Our full list of policies and guidelines can be found on our [Research Ethics](#) page.

- Auditing and Monitoring of Research Guidelines
- Authorship and Publishing Research Guidelines
- Autoethnographic, Heuristic, or Practitioner Research Guidelines
- Children, Young People, and Vulnerable Adults Policy
- Code of Good Research Practice
- Ethical Involvement of Human Participants and Personal Data in Research Guidelines
- Export Controls in Research Policy
- Incident Procedures for Research Ethics
- Internet-Mediated Research Policy
- Low Risk Observation Research Guidelines
- Managing Conflicts of Interest in Research Guidelines
- NSI Act in Research Guidelines
- Research Complaints Procedure
- Research Data Management Policy
- Research Ethics Process
- Research Requiring HRA Approval Policy
- Research with Potential Environmental Impact Policy
- Researching or Handling, Sensitive, Extreme or Radical Material Policy
- Safeguarding in Research Policy
- Sponsorship Review Guidelines
- Trusted Research Policy
- Use of Animals in Research Guidelines

## Systems

- All researchers are expected to read and comply with the University's Research Code of Practice and its underpinning policies, and, to maintain high standards and behaviours in conducting research. The University has mandated Research Ethics and Research Integrity training for staff; this is monitored by ensuring staff complete a disclaimer which confirms that they have read and understood the information presented to them.
- The University has rigorous academic misconduct, research misconduct, and whistleblowing procedures to enable individuals to raise concerns and report incidences of misconduct, in line with our broader institutional policies (Complaints Handling Procedure, Whistleblowing and Public Interest Disclosure Policy).
- Templates are available for all forms that are required to be submitted for ethical review, which includes comprehensive guidance text to ensure adherence to ethical best practices; the form(s) ensure users specify the handling of research data (including Data Management Planning and GDPR).
- All applicants can seek advice/support from a dedicated research ethics mailbox or REC Chair for more complex matters.
- Funder terms and conditions specifically relating to ethical, legal and research integrity issues are regularly reviewed, and changes are identified by our pre- and post-award contracts team to ensure compliance.
- Our external engagement activities are underpinned by a shared ethical engagement practice as part of our social responsibility to increase trust in research, being accountable to the public as research funders, and making research understandable and relatable to a broad audience.

## Support and Training

- The Research and Graduate School and the Chair of REC provide support to research staff and students on matters of research integrity in the form of bespoke training and advice across ethics, governance, and integrity. The team also provide training on areas of regulatory compliance, as well as our dedicated data protection team; the University is also redeveloping in-house training provision across research ethics and integrity to enhance delivery and better support researchers.
- The University has mandated Research Ethics and Research Integrity training for staff, providing access to online training via the Epigeum package and UKRIO resources, as well as in-house provision made available to staff and students. Detailed advice and guidance, alongside signposting to legislative and regulatory requirements and related University policies and procedures are made available via our dedicated Research and Graduate School SharePoint web pages which are reviewed and updated regularly.
- Support mechanisms are in place to foster compliance and our dedicated research governance and ethics SharePoint pages guide researchers on research ethics issues and matters of research integrity.
- We have an online repository (SURE) which progresses the development of our open research environment; this makes available outputs which are open-access compliant. Our Open Access Policies, researcher development training and individual support, have been used to increase staff engagement in open research practices.
- The University is engaging with Open Research practices and supports the principles of the Concordat on Open Research Data. Our Research & Scholarly Communications Librarian monitors and supports compliance and best practices via our research repository.
- Development needs for staff are identified via the annual appraisal process, which aims to support and develop staff to achieve both career development objectives and performance improvements. The University also has a dedicated 'Talent Development Team' who publishes development opportunities open to all staff and career stages.
- The Research Team and the Research Scholarly Librarian team provide a range of researcher development workshops including: i) SURE and Open Access Workshops, ii) Open Research Data – Gathering to Sharing iii) Copyright and your research, iv) Internal Research Funding drop in, v) Read and Publish deals, vi) What is Impact?, vii) Group Impact Coaching.

## Culture, development and leadership

- The University is committed to creating a positive research environment that enables all researchers and research enablers to thrive and deliver high-quality, impactful research, within a culture that encourages the highest standards of rigour and integrity. This area of work is led by the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Research and Global Engagement.
- The University supports research culture enhancement through significant investment and via UKRI Enhancing Culture funding; this has supported a Vice-Chancellor-led institution-wide research culture fellowship pilot and grassroots initiatives across a broad range of areas relating to research culture.
- Additionally, the University supports staff-led development offers including journal clubs, discipline and interdisciplinary networks, and the researcher network.

## Monitoring and reporting

- Research misconduct allegations for students are treated seriously and handled directly via the module team and the student casework investigation team. Academic misconduct involving staff is managed via the Academic Research Misconduct Policy for Academic Staff.
- REC submits an annual report to the Research and Innovation Committee, which includes an overview of the number of research ethics applications received. During the 23-24 academic year, REC received a total of 3754 new research ethics applications, of which 2517 were considered via the proportionate model for lower-risk projects.
- The University maintains a database of completion of mandatory training in Health and Safety, Data Protection, Equality and Inclusion, Research Ethics and Research Integrity.
- Postgraduate Research including MPhil, PhD, Higher Doctorate and Doctor of Business Administration engagement with research ethics and data management are reviewed as part of the progress review milestones; where applicable confirmation of ethical review is required as part of the examination process.

# Changes and developments during the period under review

Summary of changes made during review period (1 September 2023 to 31 August 2024):

- In July 2024, the University of Sunderland enhanced its commitment to research integrity and quality by establishing and implementing a new research governance structure. This new structure is intended to enhance the oversight, assurance, and strategic development of research ethics and integrity across the institution. The proposed structure will comprise of a centralised University Research Ethics Committee (REC), along with three Faculty Research Ethics sub-committees (FRECs) and replaces the University's Research Governance, Integrity, and Ethics Committee (URGIE). The goal is to ensure compliance to the highest levels of research ethics and integrity, streamline approval processes, and foster a positive research culture underpinned by the principles of research integrity.
- The University has recently undertaken a comprehensive review of its research policy provision and developed a revised Code of Good Research Practice alongside several supporting policies. In addition, the University is reviewing its online research system and review process to increase effectiveness and efficiency; this includes a streamlined submission and proportionate review process to reduce the administrative burden on researchers and reviewers and enhance scrutiny and our reporting and auditing capability.
- The University has developed new research integrity and research ethics online training which has been launched, and we plan on developing this further using an interactive format using our e-learning platform. The training is mandatory for all staff and students who engage in, or support, research activity at the University.

The Graduate School have local supervisor training resources which signpost, and inform supervisors of, the Research Integrity Concordat. It is expected that PGRs have integrity discussions with supervisory teams since it underpins how researchers conduct research in our policy context. They provide links to the Research Ethics Sharepoint page from Canvas, which details information on ethics and wider governance and links to the principles of the research concordat. Ethical approaches are checked by the monitoring processes, and examiners naturally consider ethical considerations in the thesis. Furthermore, the ethics clearance form can be included in the appendices when it is useful to do so.

## Reflections on progress and plans for future developments

- The review of systems and processes relating to research ethics review and approval has now been completed and a new University Research Ethics governance structure has been approved and implemented. Further review and development of research ethics and integrity will be driven by the newly constituted REC, comprised of senior University office holders.
- The Terms of Reference for REC will be regularly reviewed to ensure that the Committee remains aligned and operates effectively within the new governance framework.
- The review of ethics applications will transition to the responsibility of Faculty Research Ethics subcommittees (FRECs) from REC.
- The University's proposed new ethical decision-making framework will provide further guidance to support the processing of ethics applications more proportionately and sustainably.
- Following a suspension due to COVID-19 and resourcing, annual audits of approved research ethics applications will resume in 2025; FRECs will be responsible for providing subject-level auditing and monitoring.
- The University has enhanced the online ethics application system to reflect updated requirements, and a large proportion of the staff body have participated in the UKRIO 'An introduction to Research Integrity'.
- Work to develop a short online training module with an overview of requirements across integrity, culture, governance, ethics and compliance, is underway.
- The University is keen to ensure that good research practices and behaviours are shared across our academy. Therefore, our newly created faculty Research and Innovation Leads will be responsible for promoting a positive research culture and enhancing research integrity in their respective areas. This work will be overseen by the University's Research and Innovation Committee under the accountability of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Commercial (Chair of RIC).

The University has continued its membership with UKRIO and will work with them to review and update research integrity policies, processes, and training courses.

# Addressing research misconduct

## Policies and Processes

- Research misconduct allegations are treated seriously and handled directly via the relevant policy. There are two policies/processes relevant to misconduct specific to research, one concerned with Postgraduate Research and the second concerned with staff undertaking research. These policies were last reviewed in the academic year 2021-2022 and are at present being reviewed as part of the policy review. In future, all policies will be reviewed on an annual basis by the Research and Innovation Committee. The University has, in addition, more general policies concerned with whistleblowing, and bullying/harassment which are available via the University's SharePoint. The University has recently developed new policies on reporting and monitoring of research as well as a new complaints procedure.

## Research Environment

- The Research Ethics and Integrity Coordinator deals with online enquiries, and this often is the first line of expression of concern; complex queries are handled by the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee. If any concern is expressed around ethics or integrity the matter is initially examined and screened by an independent party, appointed by the Chair of the University's Research Ethics Committee. The screener will recommend if there is a prima facie case and if so, the Misconduct Policy is implemented.
- As a baseline, all staff undergo specific ethics training mainly to prepare them as supervisors for undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes which involve projects where the students undertake research. Additionally, postgraduate researchers are given additional information and training.
- The University maintains a database of completion of mandatory training across several relevant areas including research ethics and integrity, health and safety, data protection, professional behaviour and relationships, and equality and inclusion. For PGRs, engagement with research ethics and data management are reviewed as part of the progress review milestones, including formal progress reports.

## Key Lessons

- In the past academic year, all research misconduct cases have involved students on taught programmes. There were 9 reported incidents involving undergraduate students collecting data without ethical approval.
- There has been a drive to ensure that staff supervising students receive the required training, and our online system is set up so that only those who have undertaken training can access the online system and supervise projects which emphasizes the process and importance of ethical approval; thus, ensuring students undertake ethically sound research. In 2025, the University is launching a new research ethics check procedure for summative assessments involving a research component.
- All cases are investigated and only those where a deliberate attempt to defraud has been established proceed to formal investigation and if upheld, a specific penalty would then be imposed.

The University is keen to always seek, where possible, to learn lessons from any cases that have arisen to improve or enhance our processes and has formalised mechanisms in place (e.g. staff forums and surveys).

# Information on investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken

There were no reported allegations of research misconduct during the reporting period.