

University of Staffordshire Annual Statement on Research Integrity 2023/24

1. Introduction

University of Staffordshire 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 2019 Concordat to Support Research Integrity, which provides a national framework for high standards and governance of research conduct. In line with the Concordat, University of Staffordshire 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 publishes a statement on research integrity on an annual basis, which is presented to its governing bodies (Academic Board and the Board of Governors). **The current statement covers the academic year 2023-24.**

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 Concordat expectations. It also provides a high-level summary of investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken by the University during the academic year.

2. Named contacts for research integrity matters, in accordance with the Concordat

Research integrity at University of Staffordshire is overseen by 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 the Research Policy and Governance Manager, Dr Jane McKay (jane.mckay@staffs.ac.uk). Should any person wish to raise concerns about the integrity of research being conducted under the auspices of University of Staffordshire, 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 to Support Research Integrity, the contact details for the above points of contact are kept up to date and are publicly available on University of Staffordshire's external facing website: <https://www.staffs.ac.uk/research/research-governance/integrity>

The institution's annual statements on research integrity are also compiled on this webpage, in accordance with the 2019 Concordat.

3. Governance and Policies

The governance of research at University of Staffordshire is overseen by the Research, Innovation and Enterprise Committee (RIEC), chaired by the Vice Chancellor, reporting directly to Academic Board. The RIEC'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 University of Staffordshire is overseen by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), which reports as a sub-committee to the RIEC.

The main policies governing research integrity and research ethics at the University are:

- [Code of Conduct for Research and Research Integrity](#) (updated annually)
- [University of Staffordshire Research Ethical Review Policy \(2019\)](#)

The University’s Research Misconduct Policy is embedded within the Code of Conduct for Research and Research Integrity (Section 7.0) and the procedure for investigating allegations of research misconduct can be found in Section 8.0 of that document as well as on the University’s research integrity web page [University of Staffordshire Research Integrity](#) along with other associated policies and guidance.

4. Embedding a supportive environment for reporting potential misconduct

The University’s procedure for investigating potential cases of misconduct comprises a process that is transparent, timely, robust, and fair. The procedure adopted by the University draws on the principles set out in the UKRIO’s Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research (2023) and comprises five possible stages: 1. Report/receipt of allegation (where the named person gathers initial information and determines whether the allegations fall under the remit of the misconduct investigation process). 2. Initial investigation (where the named person determines whether there is sufficient evidence to warrant a full investigation or whether alternative action should be taken). 3. Full investigation (carried out by a panel to conclude whether the allegation of misconduct is to be upheld). 4. Outcome and reporting of findings (ensuring that all necessary actions are taken). 5. Where relevant, an appeal stage, according to the requirements of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity.

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 stipulates that an initial investigation should take no more than 30 days, and a full investigation should take no longer than three months. Whilst the outcome and reporting stage may vary in terms of required timescale, the aim should be to complete any required actions within three months of the report being issued. Any appeal should be heard within two months of being submitted.

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 Vice Chancellor to the RIEC and UREC, ensuring transparency.

Fairness and robustness are ensured at several stages of the process. The Vice Chancellor may seek the advice or views of external experts to ensure independent, expert input into the investigation, ensuring robustness. The policy enables allegations that have some substance— but which are capable of being resolved without further investigation—to be resolved as such. The investigation panel (where needed) is composed of individuals drawn from a School that is different to the complainant or respondent to ensure the 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.

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 reporting instances of suspected misconduct. University of Staffordshire's Research, Innovation and Enterprise Strategy includes an ongoing commitment that "in all that we do, we will demonstrate the highest levels of integrity and ethical behaviour." This includes awareness of what constitutes research misconduct and how this can be reported in confidence. Research misconduct guidance in our Code of Conduct (Section 7) makes clear that the identity of a complainant will not be disclosed at any stage during any misconduct investigation. This encourages a supportive framework in which to report any potential misconduct.

Support is provided centrally through Research Innovation and Impact Services (RIIS), and locally within Schools by the Associate Deans for Research and Innovation (ADRI). The culture within Schools is one where staff, researchers and students are assured that an allegation of misconduct will be handled in confidence.

This is reflected by the most recent iteration of the CEDARS survey (completed July 31st 2022), as outlined in the previous annual statement for 2022-23.

5. Summary of actions and activities undertaken to support and strengthen understanding and the application of research integrity issues

The action plan for addressing and strengthening our provision against the Concordat to Support Research Integrity is monitored on a continual basis by the RIEC and research integrity is a standing agenda item for the RIEC throughout the academic year.

During the period under review (2023-24), University of Staffordshire has undertaken a number of actions and activities to support and strengthen understanding and the application of research integrity issues and to reflect and embed sector best practice, and to ensure that researchers are aware of their responsibilities under the Concordat, along with clearly defined institutional support.

The revised Code of Conduct for Research and Research Integrity enables mainstream understanding of the term 'research integrity'. The document is now live on the University's internal and external research pages.

During the academic year 2023-24, RIIS has provided opportunities for staff to increase their awareness of the various policies and frameworks to support research integrity through a range of ethics and integrity training sessions (in person and online) delivered by RIIS staff supporting an overall positive research environment at University of Staffordshire. These sessions have been focused on internal ethics and integrity processes and have been enhanced by the opportunity to participate in the UKRIO integrity training pilot, which has provided capacity for 100 research staff to take part in free online integrity training.

The transition from the IRIS online platform to Workvivo has been completed and dedicated pages for research ethics, integrity, trusted research and export control have been established as a one-stop location where policies, guidance, process documentation and links to supporting organisations can be found. This platform is available to all staff and visiting titleholders.

The University also introduced a new policy on Export Control as part of the wider focus on trusted research and research integrity in an international context, approved at committee in December 2023. The export control process is managed by the Research Policy & Governance Manager, comprising review documentation, a dedicated email point of contact, and a cross-university working group. Staff briefing sessions have been provided to introduce the new process, and the

University has joined the Higher Education Export Control Association (HEECA), which provides free online training. Staff are required to complete this training in order to conduct funding bids where there is international collaboration with partners in government-identified risk areas.

With rapid developments in artificial intelligence (AI) across the sector and throughout society, the University has sought to ensure that our support for researchers continues to reflect sector best practice with the development of a policy and procedures in relation to the governance and implementation of AI in Learning and Teaching and Research; notably an AI Ethics policy and an AI policy working group, in order to delineate reasonable/unreasonable use.

The University continues its membership of the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO). The regular programme of webinars and events are publicised to staff, as are the resources available through UKRIO. The Research Policy & Governance Manager regularly attends these webinars and disseminates best practice to colleagues.

Actions undertaken to strengthen research ethics

In addition to the above listed actions to strengthen research integrity, and as reported in previous annual statements, 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, these form important aspects in the development of our research environment, governance and culture of research integrity.

Actions undertaken this year include an annual audit of ethics processes (this year focusing on the ethical support and review provided for L6 and L7 students at course/module level), and the appointment of new School-level ethics coordinators (necessary following a restructuring process across the University that resulted in the formation of a new two-school structure). The ethics coordinators (4 per school) sit on the UREC, together with the school Associate Deans for Research and Innovation (ADRI) and the Human Tissue Advisors, to support the review process at school-level and to report to the UREC on school-level ethical matters. Internal training has been provided to new coordinators and reviewers throughout the year, in accordance with the recommendations of the Concordat to Support Research and Research Integrity.

6. Research Misconduct

The Procedure for the Investigation of Research Misconduct, and the Code of Conduct for Research in which it is situated, were reviewed and revised to align with most up-to-date best practice in the UKRIO 2023 guidance. Final approval for the revised documents will be sought from the RIEC and Academic Board in Autumn 2024.

7. Formal investigations of Research Misconduct

Concerns that arise concerning poor research practice can often be addressed through existing competency, education, and training mechanisms. Some concerns fall outside of the scope of research misconduct, as outlined in our Research Misconduct Investigation Policy, and are instead dealt with according to the relevant HR procedure, or via academic misconduct or fitness to practice regulations.

Where there is an accusation or suspicion of research misconduct, these are addressed through the research misconduct investigation policy and an initial investigation is instigated, led by the 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 (2023-24)	Number of formal investigations completed (2023-24)	Number of allegations upheld (in whole or in part) (2023-24)
Fabrication	0	0	0
Falsification	0	0	0
Plagiarism	0	0	0
Failure to meet obligations (e.g., legal, ethical and professional obligations)	1	0	0
Misrepresentation (e.g., of data, results, interpretation)	0	0	0
Improper dealing with allegations of misconduct	0	0	0

8. Reflection on misconduct investigations

The investigation held in this academic year (involving a member of staff) fell under the ‘failure to meet ethical, legal and professional obligations’ category according to the Concordat to Support Research Integrity. Following an initial investigation, it was determined that alternative actions would be put in place to support the individual to improve their awareness and therefore it was not necessary to progress to a full investigation.

In addition, there were three cases where academics external to the University plagiarised or misrepresented themselves or their work in such a way that there was a risk of negative impact on University of Staffordshire’s reputation. Whilst not being actual cases of ‘misconduct’ in terms of our own researchers, it is important to highlight these cases as they indicate the need to consider the increasingly complex context in which research activity takes place. Having robust policies and processes means that we are able to offer support services that are fit for purpose in line with new policies and rapidly changing research practices (such as AI).

9. Approval of annual statement

Approving Committee	Date of approval
Research Innovation and Enterprise Committee	03.09.2024
Academic Board	14.11.24
Board of Governors	26.11.24

Dr Jane McKay, Research Policy and Governance Manager, August 2024