

# University of Kent

## RESEARCH ETHICS & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

### Annual Report to Senate 2020-21

#### The Committee reports:

The Committee met on 15 October 2020, 5 February and 18 May 2021. All meetings were held via Teams, in line with COVID-19 measures. Despite being unable to meet in person, meetings had good attendance and we were able to hold our usual thorough discussions on all agenda items. Members were invited to training held online by the Research Ethics & Governance Manager.

Items discussed during the 2020-21 academic year include:

#### 1. **RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW PROCEDURES: CENTRAL RESEARCH ETHICS ADVISORY GROUP (REAG)**

It was reported that there had been a smooth transition from the Faculty REAGs to the new Central REAG, and Wendy Atkins, the Research Ethics Coordinator, had worked closely with the Faculties Support Office to make sure there was no detriment to applicants from the new administrative arrangements. Dr Dunstan Lowe was confirmed as Chair of the CREAG following a call for applications and interview process.

A secure SharePoint site has been established for reviewers to enable them to access application documentation and upload their responses. This has been working well, and as reviewers can see each other's responses, it helps with concurrence on review outcomes. The CREAG website has been developed to be a resource for applicants and reviewers, with a library of guidance documents that will be added to over time and as novel issues emerge.

Induction sessions have been held for all new reviewers and an inaugural meeting of the CREAG was held in April. The meeting was followed by a training session, led by the Research Ethics & Governance Manager, to which members of the Research Ethics & Governance Committee were also invited. The training included the ethical implications of use of the internet and social media in research, ethical recording of remote interviews, and a recap of the CREAG review process.

An interim report on activity was conducted for the May meeting of the Research Ethics & Governance Committee, setting out that between its establishment on 1 November 2020, and 28 April 2021, 58 applications were received, of which 53 were new applications and five were amendments to previously approved applications. It was noted that turnaround times, while generally good, were impacted by lockdown issues and the increased workload on reviewers during COVID. The CREAG website includes a warning to caution that applications may be delayed during this time, however, the report noted that 64% of applications were fully resolved within the promised ten working days, with an average review duration of eight days. Delays have mainly been with reviewers during this time, but recruitment of additional reviewers has reduced the review burden.

## **2. COVID-19 IMPACT ON RESEARCH**

The Committee has been kept up to date with information relating to the impact of COVID-19 on research, including the halting of review of student NHS research applications by the Health Research Authority during the pandemic; data protection issues with remote data collection and how to mitigate risks; ethical issues to consider with the use of the internet and social media in research; and risk assessment practices for research.

## **3. KENT AND MEDWAY MEDICAL SCHOOL AND ARRANGEMENTS FOR RESEARCH ETHICS AND GOVERNANCE**

The Research Ethics and Governance Manager has been working with KMMS and Canterbury Christchurch University on establishing procedures. It was originally decided that under the agreed administrative arrangements, the new KMMS REAG, once established, will report into the Kent reporting structure. However, unresolved uncertainties over resourcing and lines of responsibility have since emerged and this work has stalled. The lack of suitable research ethics and governance arrangements for the increasing numbers of KMMS research proposals has the potential to become a risk to the University.

## **4. UPDATES TO POLICIES FOLLOWING O4S**

Policies relating to research ethics and governance have been updated following the restructure. The substance of the policies remains the same, but wording has been amended, where necessary, to reflect the new University structure.

## **5. MISCONDUCT PROCEDURES**

Academic misconduct procedures for students have been revised under Annex 10 of the Credit Framework for Taught Programmes by the Quality Assurance and Compliance Office and there is now explicit reference to 'research' and 'failure to seek research ethics review where it is required' which will be investigated by Academic Misconduct Committees. Therefore, the Code of Practice for the Investigation of Allegations of Misconduct in Research has been amended to remove reference to undergraduate and PGT students.

Research misconduct by PGR students will continue to be investigated under the Code of Practice for the Investigation of Allegations of Misconduct in Research procedures.

## **6. ONLINE RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW SYSTEMS**

It remains the objective of the Research Ethics & Governance Committee to secure central funding for a proprietary online research ethics review system to bring the University into line with current best practice. However, in the absence of a commitment, some Schools and Divisions have been exploring their own solutions. It continues to be the recommendation of the Committee that Schools/Divisions wait until a decision is made on purchase of a bespoke proprietary online research ethics review module to run alongside the new Worktribe research information management system, should funding be forthcoming. Schools and Divisions moving ahead with this work on their own were reminded that they must ensure that the statutory elements of the template application documentation are included in any online research ethics review application systems that are adopted. These are:

- check on legislative/policy requirement for review by external REC;
- identification of proposed access/use of security-sensitive research material (to provide researchers with an auditable record that can be used in the event of a police enquiry in connection with the Terrorism Act 2006); and
- inclusion of a question to identify whether the research has the potential to radicalise people who are vulnerable to supporting terrorism or becoming terrorists themselves, under the Prevent Agenda (in compliance with the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015).

## **7. RESPONSIBILITIES OF REAGs IN RELATION TO ASSESSMENT OF RISK AND SCIENTIFIC/INTELLECTUAL QUALITY IN RESEARCH**

The Committee discussed responsibilities of REAGs in relation to assessment of risk and scientific/intellectual quality in research. While badly designed research can be unethical, and research ethics committees must ensure that risks to participants and researchers are minimised, it was agreed that it is not the responsibility of REAGs to carry out these assessments themselves. They must be able to reassure themselves that appropriate risk assessment and assessment of scientific/intellectual quality have been completed prior to submission of the ethics application. Where they have concerns, it is appropriate that they request sight of these, or request specific assessments to be undertaken, before reaching a decision on the ethics of the application.

The issue of risk assessment is particularly pertinent during the COVID-19 pandemic, and members were directed to the work on COVID-19 risk assessment that has been done by the Safety, Health and Environment Unit, covering requirements for safe working practices for face-to-face contact and University laboratories and research facilities. It was emphasised that while researchers may be frustrated at delays to their research activity, for potential participants who could be deemed vulnerable to serious effects of COVID-19, these risks would be likely to outweigh any potential benefit they may receive from participating in face-to-face research at this time.

## **8. ANNUAL REPORTS FROM RESEARCH ETHICS ADVISORY GROUPS**

Reports were received from the following REAGs:

- Animal Welfare & Ethical Review Body
- Brussels School of International Studies
- Centre for Professional Practice
- Centre for the Study of Higher Education
- Faculty of Humanities
- Faculty of Sciences
- Faculty of Social Sciences
- Kent Business School
- Kent Law School
- Medway School of Pharmacy
- School of Anthropology & Conservation
- School of Physical Sciences
- School of Politics & International Relations
- School of Psychology
- School of Sport & Exercise Sciences
- SSPSSR Staff & Research Centres
- SSPSSR Students
- Tizard Centre

## **9. RESEARCH MISCONDUCT**

There have been no formal investigations of research misconduct.