

Research integrity champions, leads and advisers:

Case study from the University of Keele

Institutional context

The University of Keele is a multi-faculty research university first established in 1949 and based in Keele, near Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire. The university has approximately 8,500 undergraduate and 2,500 postgraduate students.

The Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research and Enterprise, Director of Research Strategy Delivery and the Academic Lead for Research Integrity and Improvement together have introduced a system of Research Integrity Champions for each faculty.

The role of the champions

- To contribute to policy development and to act as a conduit to aid the implementation of new and existing policies relating to good conduct of research.
- To communicate on matters relating to research integrity in both directions.
- To help foster a collaborative research culture and environment.
- To undertake a first point of contact/gatekeeper role with issues and queries.
- To support and enable research integrity and good conduct.

Development and maintenance of the network

The development of the network has taken place gradually over a period of two years, with a year spent gaining academic buy-in at senior level and across the university. The original impetus initiated in part from the UK Reproducibility Network. Once the decision was taken to proceed, it was necessary to gain support from each Faculty to agree to the allocation 0.2 FTE for the role. There is now a research integrity champion in each of the three faculties at the university. There is a role description and champions were recruited and interviewed prior to appointment.

As the network has been implemented relatively recently, the training of the new champions is ongoing but all three integrity champions have had the opportunity to take part in the university's Transition to Leadership Programme hosted by Keele but delivered by AdvanceHE.

Features of the system and monitoring

The champions, led by the Academic Lead for Research Integrity and Improvement, work collaboratively with professional services colleagues to develop strategies, policies and training in the area of research integrity. For example, the research integrity champions work with the Faculty Deans for Research to inform the faculties' research strategies. The team work on action plans with a specific topic in mind, such as open research and progress against delivery is reported by the Academic Lead for Research Integrity and Improvement to the University Research Committee. Monthly meetings of academic colleagues and professional services colleagues are held on Microsoft Teams to discuss current matters. Within the faculties, drop in sessions for staff are planned, the champions also contribute to blog posts and help maintain the internal Sharepoint resource around research integrity, and there is an email address through which people can seek advice which is administrated by professional services colleagues within the Research and Innovation Support team. The champions sit on their faculty research committee.

They have an important role in developing and improving communications across the institution in the area of research integrity, ensuring that it is tailored to different groups such as postgraduate research students, early career researchers, research only and academic staff.

The system is being evaluated to ensure that it is proving beneficial through annual surveys to assess researchers' awareness of research integrity and related matters. Feedback is also provided via the research leadership network.

Benefits

One important benefit of having faculty integrity champions is their ability to translate broad issues surrounding research integrity, open research, reproducibility, and research culture to a local level. Disciplines are at vastly different stages in their engagement with—and often knowledge of—research integrity issues. The champions provide the ability to apply a discipline-specific interpretation of these critical issues, which is essential for widespread engagement.

Faculty champions also enable the continued visibility of research integrity issues at all levels of faculty planning. The champions sit on faculty research committees and are therefore ideally situated to influence strategic planning and engagement directly. It affords the opportunity for champions to inject consideration of integrity issues into all aspects of the research pipeline discussed at committees, making sure integrity is always on the agenda—both figuratively and literally. The continued visibility at strategic level also helps to signify the importance of authentic engagement with research integrity.

Challenges

The roles present some challenges. For instance, champions have noted varying levels of enthusiasm for engaging with research integrity, open research, reproducibility, and culture more broadly. One champion described it as “continuously pushing on doors”: In some cases, the door is open, but in others it is firmly closed. Finding ways to engage those behind the firmly closed doors remains a challenge. But so too does engaging colleagues who are just ambivalent to the issues: those who do not see either the importance or relevance of these issues to their disciplines.

Another challenge relates to the distribution of the work across the academic year. Whilst the champions have formally workload allocation for their roles, the activity associated with the role is often discontinuous, which means the time allocated to work on integrity gets lost to other academic work.

Academic colleagues can be ‘fearful’ of the term ‘integrity’ thinking it means they’ve done something wrong or relates to ethics and open access only.

One piece of advice for institutions looking to implement a Champion/ Adviser network

Have patience, it can be frustrating when things don’t move as quickly as you want them to, but these times can take time.

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