THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

RESEARCH STRATEGY GROUP

6th November 2023

GOVERNANCE OF RESEARCH STRUCTURES (RESEARCH PLATFORMS, INSTITUTES AND CENTRES)

SPONSOR: Professor Nigel Hooper, Associate Vice President Research

AUTHOR: Professor Chris Taylor (Associate Vice-President for Digital Strategy and Business Engagement), Claire Faichnie (UMRI Board secretary)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UMRI Board (October 2023) asked RSG to refresh the definitions of and distinction of research structures. This paper expands on the role of research structures, specifically, research platforms, institutes and centres. The paper clarifies:

(i)   Expectations relating to platforms to establish a shared understanding and facilitate interactions.

(ii)   Definitions and governance processes relating to research institutes and centres at Faculty and University level.

DECISIONS REQUESTED

Members of Research Strategy Group are asked to:

1. Discuss and note the role and expectations of research platforms.

2. Note the distinction between research groups, centres and institutes.

3. Note the current governance arrangements.

4. Recommend the continued approach to the University of Manchester Research Institute (UMRI) Board and confirm definitions and expectations of each research unit.

APPENDICES

A: Faculty Processes relating to Research Structures

Introduction

Research collaborations enables us to develop a critical mass around pressing questions; helps to generate research resource (including funding), profile and impact; and adds value to the intellectual life and research environment of our Schools, Faculty and University. Collaboration takes many forms, from informal activity (e.g. in research groups and networks) through to more formally constituted units (e.g. research centres, institutes and platforms).

University of Manchester Research Institute (UMRI) was established to foster interdisciplinary research and provide a governance framework for research institutes and other interdisciplinary structures. Research platforms, beacons and institutes report annually to the UMRI Board as part of the established UMRI governance process. The governance of research centres is at Faculty-level.

UMRI Board (October 2023) asked RSG to refresh the definitions of and distinction between research platforms, institutes and centres. The paper aims to clarify:

(iii)   Expectations relating to platforms to establish a shared understanding and facilitate interactions.
(iv)   Definitions and processes relating to research institutes and centres at Faculty and University level.

Research Platforms

Platforms "*provide forums, focus and resources to connect, drive and amplify interdisciplinary collaborations across our institutes, research centres and individual academics. They support research, external engagement, impact and inform teaching.*"

Platforms aim to enhance opportunities for diverse forms of research, funding and impact by facilitating interactions at the intersections of traditional disciplines, and making connections to businesses and other organisations, both of which can prove challenging for individual academics.

Each platform supports a strategically important field of interdisciplinary research through the interrelated areas of activity, outlined below. There are differences in emphasis between platforms and over time, but the combination of internally and externally facing activity is essential to their success. In pursuing their mission, platforms build new academic communities and work closely on supporting emerging research communities with the relevant research institutes, centres, schools, departments/divisions and Professional Service teams from across the University.

Catalysing and Supporting Interdisciplinary Research Communities

Platforms play an important role in helping to create and develop the research strategy, environment and infrastructure for excellent interdisciplinary research and impact. Platforms play a key role in creating opportunities for interdisciplinary research by bringing together communities of academics who work in different parts of the University but share a common interest.

Platforms provide a forum to build research capacity and support the development and delivery of high-quality interdisciplinary research funding bids. They provide a mechanism for rapid mobilisation in response to new funding opportunities, working closely with the relevant research institutes, centres, etc that are 'affiliated 'with a particular platform. Strategic University-wide activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Providing coordinated input, at the request of University or Faculty Research Strategy Groups, to inform strategic planning for research funding bids, for investment in research facilities and for academic appointments.

- With the agreement of the Vice-President for Research, coordinating cross-faculty review of specific research funding proposals which require an internal selection because either the funder has restricted the number of submissions per institution or because this coordination will enhance team building and the quality of the submission to large and interdisciplinary funding calls.

Platforms generally build communities around strategically important themes or challenge areas. For each of these, activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Establishing a multidisciplinary leadership team to ensure breadth of coverage.

- Mapping research strengths, activity, impact and collaborations.

- Developing forums (online, on-campus and externally) to connect researchers and to foster synergies and collaborations.

- Developing and maintaining an internally facing online presence (through website, newsletters and social media) to raise awareness of funding opportunities and platform resource.

- Leading institutional bids for strategic funding and, where appropriate, supporting delivery.

- Supporting research communities to address specific research opportunities. This can include facilitating the formation of multidisciplinary teams, providing contextual data/analysis, brokering external partnerships, and documenting synergy with institutional priorities.

- Identifying opportunities to plan and embed research impact into research projects from the outset.

- Introducing interdisciplinary methods and platform themes to students through UCIL courses and placement opportunities with partners.

Shaping the Profile and Impact of UoM Interdisciplinary Research

Platforms have a key role in projecting an accessible, coherent view of the University's research strengths in strategically important areas of research, with a view to creating new opportunities for collaboration locally, nationally and internationally and by increasing awareness of our strengths.

To *amplify our research strengths* platforms work closely with University and Faculty Communications and Marketing teams. Activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Curating attractive and engaging online and social media presence.

- Issuing timely externally facing newsletters and campaigns.

- Driving key platform agendas by organising large showcase events including platform-relevant conferences.

- Working with affiliates on developing public engagement and understanding.

- Engaging with key external stakeholders.

To *develop our external relationships*, platforms work closely with teams in University and Faculty Business Engagement and Knowledge Exchange, Internationalization, Alumni & Philanthropy, Policy@Manchester and other impact teams from across the University. Activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Allying with strategically important businesses, charities, and cultural institutions to develop joint activities.

- Convening a Strategic Advisory Board to gain an external view of University activity and raise our profile.

- Participating in or lead on network and showcase events to connect with businesses, academics, public sector and 3rd sector.

- Engaging with regional government (GM Combined Authority, local authorities, components of the health and care system, broader northern alliances) to develop synergistic goals and joint activities.

- Engaging with communities and the public to seek their collaboration with our work.

- Communicating with R&D funders to understand their priorities, raise our profile and to seek to influence future funding initiatives, including in the promotion of interdisciplinarity in research calls.

- Building relationships with government departments and agencies to raise our profile and influence policy.

- Participating in national and international organisations, including UN and EU programmes, to raise our profile and provide thought leadership on a global scale.

Research Institutes, Centres, Groups, Networks

Research collaborations take many forms from informal activity and networking through to more formally constituted organisational units such as research networks, research groups, research centres and research institutes.

Each Faculty has developed Faculty specific guidance, frameworks and definitions for different forms of research collaborations at the level of networks, groups and centres (see Appendix A). Research institutes exist at a cross University level with a Faculty host and are established, governed and reviewed via UMRI Board.

Purpose and Characteristics

The common purpose of research collaborations is to contribute to a vibrant research environment and culture. Many collaborations overlap, for example, research groups may sit within centres and across departments and divisions within one School.

Research groups and networks add value to the research activities of colleagues and the intellectual life of a School more broadly. The primary objectives of Research Groups are to:

- Strengthen and promote a research culture;
- Organise regular workshops and research seminars;
- Engage with leading external academics within their field;
- Provide peer support, including reviewing and mentoring on research;

- Support and embed early career researchers (ECRs) and postgraduate research students (PGRs) into an active research community;
- Encourage the development of individual and collective research funding initiatives.

Research centres are more formal organisational units often emerging from a network or a group. Centres add value to the research activities of colleagues and the intellectual life of a Faculty more broadly. They will enhance the quality and impact of the research it supports by serving most, if not all, of the following purposes:

- To be a vehicle for communicating, promoting and branding research and knowledge exchange to staff and to the outside world.
- To facilitate implementation of particular areas of Faculty research strategy.
- To provide a structure to secure external funding in a specific area of research.
- To facilitate cross-discipline, cross-School and/or cross-Faculty work on a shared challenge or problem.
- To bring together, and make visible, a critical mass of cognate researchers.
- To provide a supportive environment for research staff and PGRs; and their recruitment and retention in a competitive market
- Have a shared research agenda promoted via the organisation of workshops, seminars and via engagement with leading external academics within their field.
- Have and/or encourage securing external funding to support activities.

Research centres are expected to:

- Have a coherent research agenda which transcends a particular research project.
- Have a clear and well-designed strategy in place for supporting excellence in the quality of research outputs – including mentoring and peer review of draft outputs and funding applications.
- Have a clear and well-designed strategy for promoting their research profile, engaging in knowledge exchange and achieving impact.
- Generate a regular stream of research funding, at a level appropriate for the field of enquiry.
- Have a coherent and realistic plan to securing external funding and recognition.
- Engage and support the career development of PGRs and early career researchers as well as more established members.

Research institutes exist at a University level and are governed by the UMRI Board. Research institutes typically:

- Encompass a larger body of activity and funding than a research centre.
- Have a strong interdisciplinary dimension.
- Link to the University's strategic objectives.
- Have achieved or aspired to achieve world leading status in interdisciplinary research.
- Have and/or intend to secure external funding.

It is recognised that there are no defined criteria in terms of size and composition for a research institute. Institutes can be:

- A range of different shapes and sizes.
- Either emerging or fully developed.

Irrespective of shape, size and stage of development, institutes need to be able to adapt to the changing environment including adapting to opportunities arising from changes in staff, funding streams and other resources.

Establishment, Governance and Review

Each Faculty and School has its own guidance and frameworks for the establishment, governance and review of research groups and centres (see Appendix A).

In the case of establishing a research institute, applications must first be made via a lead School to the Faculty and be developed and discussed within the Faculty through working closely with the Faculty Vice Dean for Research and Innovation. Those that are endorsed and approved by their Faculty can then be considered for approval by the UMRI Board.

Institutes are reviewed on an annual basis by the UMRI Board following a cycle of light touch annual reports and regular (typically every three years) in depth full reviews. Reviews are co-ordinated by the Faculty Vice Dean for Research and Innovation and review panels include cross Faculty membership. The Faculty review is reported through to the UMRI Board.

Summary and Recommendations

Research platforms support a strategically important field of interdisciplinary research and enhance opportunities for diverse forms of research, funding and impact through a combination of internally and externally facing activity.

Research collaborations take many forms and research networks, groups and centres are managed and governed at a School and Faculty level. Research institutes exist at a University wide level, link to the University's strategic objectives, have a strong interdisciplinary dimension and are governed by the UMRI Board.

Members of Research Strategy Group are asked to note and confirm:

1. The role and expectations of research platforms.

2. The distinction between research groups, centres and institutes.

3. The current governance arrangements.

4. The continuation of this approach to the UMRI Board, confirming definitions and expectations of each research unit.

Appendix A: Faculty Policies and Process relating to Research Structures: Centres, Networks, Groups and Institutes

- [Guidance for Designing Operating Models for Externally Funded Research Centres](#)
- [Faculty of Humanities Policy on the Governance of Research Institutes, Centres, Groups and Networks](#) (noted revised and updated in June 2023)
- Faculty of Science and Engineering (available from Faculty RBE)