

# NFER annual statement on research integrity 2024

## Section 1: Key contact information

Question	Response
1A. Name of organisation	National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)
1B. Type of organisation:  higher education institution/industry/independent research performing organisation/other (please state)	Independent Research Organisation
1C. Date statement approved by governing body (DD/MM/YY)	30/05/25
1D. Web address of organisation's research integrity page (if applicable)	<a href="https://www.nfer.ac.uk/about-nfer/research-integrity/">https://www.nfer.ac.uk/about-nfer/research-integrity/</a>
1E. Named senior member of staff to oversee research integrity	Name: Dr Lesley Duff
	Email address: <a href="mailto:l.duff@nfer.ac.uk">l.duff@nfer.ac.uk</a>
1F. Named member of staff who will act as a first point of contact for anyone wanting more information on matters of research integrity	Name: Dr Lesley Duff
	Email address: <a href="mailto:l.duff@nfer.ac.uk">l.duff@nfer.ac.uk</a>

## Section 2: Promoting high standards of research integrity and positive research culture.

### Description of actions and activities undertaken

#### 2A. Description of current systems and culture

Please describe how the organisation maintains high standards of research integrity and promotes positive research culture. It should include information on the support provided to researchers to understand standards, values and behaviours, such as training, support and guidance for researchers at different career stages/ disciplines. You may find it helpful to consider the following broad headings:

- Policies and systems
- Communications and engagement
- Culture, development and leadership
- Monitoring and reporting

#### Policies and systems

NFER recognises the importance of undertaking its activities responsibly with the highest ethical standards. Our Code of Practice is supported by implementation guidelines for both our UK and International researchers and sets out how we must act to adhere to ethical and professional standards, in addition to safeguarding and data protection requirements.

The Director of Research (DoR) has overall responsibility for overseeing the implementation of The Concordat to Support Research Integrity and our associated Code of Practice. This includes oversight of research policies, research governance and ethics, and relevant training and development opportunities provided by NFER to its staff.

The Code of Practice operates through an internal Committee at NFER. At the initiation of any project, the project team is required to fill in a Code of Practice Checklist form which is kept with project documents, and which sets out whether the team needs to get ethical approval for its research from the Code of Practice Committee.

The Code of Practice Committee ensures that training in ethics and research integrity is available to all staff and is up to date. All staff involved in data collection, analysis, and reporting are required to undertake Research Integrity Training on an annual basis. This training provides:

- an introduction to The Concordat to Support Research Integrity and how it relates to NFER's policies and procedures;
- examples of how these policies should be applied, and how to report research misconduct;
- links to further guidance and who to contact for further support;
- an exercise to assess learning and create an audit trail of who has undertaken the research integrity training.

Currently, many of NFER's large-scale evaluations are for the Education

Endowment Foundation (EEF), which has a world-leading pre-specification and publication policy. A protocol is published, in which outcomes are pre-specified and the trial is registered on the ISRCTN database. All trials reports funded by the EEF are published. NFER researchers supported EEF's decision to publish statistical analysis plans, which are peer reviewed and published within three months of randomisation.

### **Communications and engagement**

NFER produces research and assessments. We inform funders that our research needs to be for the public benefit and that our findings need to be free from political or commercial interference. Our approach to assessment development is to ensure no harm and to provide quality assessment materials to maximise public benefit. Our charitable aim to improve education outcomes for future generations underpins this. We foster close links with policy officials, decision makers and schools in the education arena to ensure that our research has impact.

### **Culture, development and leadership**

NFER promotes a culture of creativity and intellectual curiosity. A network of professional groupings, headed up by professional leads, ensures that staff are kept up to date with new methodological developments in their specialism. There are professional groupings for: statisticians; economists; survey design specialists; trial specialists; psychometricians; qualitative researchers and assessment specialists. We take the development of staff seriously. Line managers review the development needs of staff according to the competencies needed for their role and grade, and for promotion where suitable. In addition to these formal routes of training, NFER operates a buddy system for new staff to ensure that staff have a mentor who can help them get up to speed with NFER processes.

NFER is an inclusive and open research organisation. We take our reputation seriously and staff are encouraged to seek continual improvement and to be open and honest regarding mistakes. It is a key organisational aim to ensure that those who contract with us or who read our work have the highest level of trust in our outputs.

### **Monitoring and reporting**

The Research Improvement Group leads on assuring and continually improving our research methods, conducting deep dives into our processes to ensure that they are fit for purpose. In addition to this formal group, we conduct end of project reviews and information from these reviews is used to improve our processes where needed. For large projects, we require that each has a specific project board which helps to mitigate against risks and ensure delivery to time, quality and budget.

**2B. Changes and developments during the period under review**

Please provide an update on any changes made during the period, such as new initiatives, training, developments, also ongoing changes that are still underway. Drawing on Commitment 3 of the Concordat, please note any new or revised policies, practices and procedures to support researchers; training on research ethics and research integrity; training and mentoring opportunities to support the development of researchers' skills throughout their careers.

NFER governs its research carefully. Leadership is provided by the Research Governance Board (RGB), the Code of Practice Committee, Research Improvement Group and a quality management system, which support initiatives to help us strengthen our research methods and improve our operations. In 2024, the recently formed Research Governance Board, which has now been in operation for over a year, has been firmly established, and continues to support improvements to our integrity, rigour and research quality.

This year, we have continued with our 5-year strategy (2022-2027) to transform our technology and processes, involving the implementation of new procedures and systems. These developments support researchers to carry out research activities in a robust way and facilitate research participants' engagement with our projects.

As part of our international research programme, we have formalised our approach to country engagement to ensure it is thoughtful, contextually grounded, and aligned with our organisational values. This involved developing a clear framework that considers the specific country context, including social, cultural, and historical factors; the nature and aims of the work being undertaken; the profile and positioning of the funder; and the potential impact for users of the data and insights. By doing so, we aim to build respectful and meaningful partnerships, uphold the highest standards of ethical research, and ensure our work is relevant, inclusive, and sensitive to local needs and perspectives.

In April 2024, the Code of Practice Committee co-chairs attended the University of Warwick's 'Understanding research ethics' webinar. Delivered by Dr Petra Boynton, a Social Psychologist, the webinar provided guidance on ensuring research is ethical and safe, and that those who participate are informed and protected.

In June 2024, NFER's Code of Practice Committee ran its inaugural training for early career researchers. This provided a small group of new researchers with more opportunities to learn about research ethics and to enhance their understanding of NFER's key principles and practices.

In December 2024, the Code of Practice Committee co-chairs attended the UKRI's webinar 'Research integrity and research culture in the third sector'. This webinar offered an opportunity to reflect on research ethics practices in other non-clinical, non-academic, research-intensive institutions similar to NFER and to consider the opportunities and challenges particular to these settings. Learning from all of

these webinars will be incorporated into NFER's activities moving forward.

Finally, in December 2024, annual Research Integrity Training (first rolled out in 2022) was provided for all staff involved in data collection, analysis or reporting. The requirement to attend was extended to colleagues who had not previously been included, with the aim of ensuring that all NFER staff recognise their role in upholding research ethics in our work. The training involved a presentation delivered by the co-chairs of the Code of Practice Committee, followed by a short knowledge check. The knowledge check included some ethics-related situational judgement tasks. These tasks had been newly developed by the co-chairs during the year, in consultation with Code of Practice Committee colleagues, and were designed to reflect scenarios requiring ethical judgement that may be encountered during research processes.

## **2C. Reflections on progress and plans for future developments**

This should include a reflection on the previous year's activity including a review of progress and impact of initiatives if known relating to activities referenced in the previous year's statement. Note any issues that have hindered progress, e.g. resourcing or other issues.

We are committed to further developing our approach to research integrity, ensuring it remains robust, relevant, and reflective of evolving best practice. As part of this, we are updating our ethics checklist to make it more detailed and meaningful, while retaining its clarity and ease of use for researchers. We are also beginning to explore the use of AI in our research processes, with an initial focus on using AI tools to support the analysis of secondary sources, such as policy documentation. In addition, we have agreed a schedule for reviewing and updating all of our Code of Practice documentation to ensure it is up to date and aligned with current standards. Finally, we plan to explore the principles of decolonisation and how these can be meaningfully embedded in our international research practice.

## Section 3: Addressing research misconduct.

### 3A. Statement on processes that the organisation has in place for dealing with allegations of misconduct

Please provide:

- a brief summary of relevant organisation policies/ processes (e.g. research misconduct procedure, whistle-blowing policy, bullying/harassment policy; appointment of a third party to act as confidential liaison for persons wishing to raise concerns) and brief information on the periodic review of research misconduct processes (e.g. date of last review; any major changes during the period under review; date when processes will next be reviewed).
- information on how the organisation creates and embeds a research environment in which all staff, researchers and students feel comfortable to report instances of misconduct (e.g. code of practice for research, whistle-blowing, research misconduct procedure, informal liaison process, website signposting for reporting systems, training, mentoring, reflection and evaluation of policies, practices and procedures).
- anonymised key lessons learned from any investigations into allegations of misconduct which either identified opportunities for improvements in the organisation's investigation procedure and/or related policies / processes/ culture or which showed that they were working well.

NFER has a range of policies intended to promote a positive culture for staff, and to supply guidance to staff on several issues that may pose a threat to a culture of rigour, transparency and respect. These include our Dignity at Work policy that encompasses our anti-bullying and harassment policy. In addition, our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy promotes diversity in our workforce which we believe supports research quality.

To protect researchers from undue influence we have a Conflict-of-Interest Policy, and an Anti-Bribery and Corruption Policy. We also have a Whistle Blowing policy, a Grievance Policy and a Disciplinary Policy.

In line with the Code of Practice, NFER requires all researchers to conduct themselves, at all times, in a professional and ethical manner. NFER takes any allegation of research misconduct seriously. In the first instance, anyone wishing to make an allegation of research misconduct against an employee of NFER should follow [the complaints procedure](#) on NFER's website. This holds contact details for the Complaints Officer, who will coordinate the complaints process. Should any allegations of research misconduct arise, NFER has a formal Disciplinary Policy, with associated procedures and guidance, which would be applied. NFER will maintain a register of any disciplinary actions taken regarding researchers not acting with research integrity.

### 3B. Information on investigations of research misconduct that have been undertaken

Please complete the table on the number of **formal investigations completed during the period under review** (including investigations which completed during this period but started in a previous academic year). Information from ongoing investigations should not be submitted. An organisation's procedure may include an initial, preliminary, or screening stage to determine whether a formal investigation needs to be completed. These allegations should be included in the first column but only those that proceeded past this stage, to formal investigations, should be included in the second column.

In 2024 there were no formal complaints of research misconduct.