

# HR Excellence in Research Award

## University of Sussex Summary Report, January 2024

### 1. Institutional Context

The University of Sussex (UoS) is a globally renowned research-intensive university, known for its innovative research and a progressive, critical approach. Its international, multi-disciplinary outlook brings about powerful impacts in business, government, third sector, health and culture. [REF2021 results](#) reflect this, with 89% of research activity categorised 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent', and 93% of research impact 'outstanding' or 'very considerable'. UoS ranked 27<sup>th</sup> in the UK for Research Power and Market Share, 32<sup>nd</sup> for Research Impact and 30<sup>th</sup> of multi-disciplinary institutions overall<sup>1</sup>.

UoS holds an [Athena Swan institutional Bronze award](#), [Gold for Brighton & Sussex Medical School](#), and Bronze/Silver for all STEMM Schools and several Arts & Humanities departments. It also holds a [Bronze Race Equality Charter Award](#). It is a signatory to the Concordats on Research Integrity, Knowledge Exchange, Openness on Animal Research and Open Research Data, the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Race Equality Charter, a Disability Confident Level 2 Employer and a Stonewall Diversity Champion.

In 2022/23 UoS employed 3,491 staff (2,693 full-time equivalent). Research-only staff number 365 (Nov 2023), of whom 320 are early career researchers (ECRs; grades 6-8). ECRs are the core audience for Sussex's HREiR activities, broadly encompassing research assistants, postdoctoral researchers and research fellows; some specific activities also include postgraduate researchers (PGRs), managers of researchers, and research and teaching staff.

The Research Staff Office (RSO) – part of the Sussex Researcher School (SRS) within Research and Enterprise Services (RES) – oversees Concordat obligations via the Researcher Development Concordat Steering Group (RDCSG), provides training and development support, and builds community. It is led by the Director of Research Staff Development (DRSD) and Researcher Development Manager, who represent ECR interests on groups including the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RaKE), Athena Swan, Knowledge Mobilisation Group, Research Culture Steering Group and Open Research Working Group.

Since the previous HREiR review UoS has undergone significant changes, including a new Vice Chancellor (VC) and a restructure. RSO has rejoined the Doctoral School, which moved from Student Experience back into the RES division. A new Head of Doctoral School has co-created an ambitious Enabling Plan, informed by a UKCGE review and supported by the Dean, to enhance how the institution governs and supports emerging researchers (PGRs and ECRs).

This includes:

- a rebrand from Doctoral School to Sussex Researcher School (SRS), reflecting the full range of researchers the department serves;
- a shift in terminology from 'research staff' to ECR and a clearer institutional definition to promote engagement and more effective data collection;
- a repositioning of SRS as the central unit with responsibility for emerging researchers, signalling that Sussex prioritises them alongside other researchers.

In August RSO merged with the PGR-focused team to create a single unit under the Researcher Development Manager, working across both PGR and ECR development, including oversight of

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<sup>1</sup> Time Higher Education analysis of REF2021, [sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/58013](https://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/58013) [accessed 24/01/24].

HREiR.<sup>2</sup> This allows for a more strategic focus and holistic approach to researcher development.

The SRS restructure resulted in temporary resourcing gaps while new posts were advertised and workloads reconfigured. Other key departments have also undergone restructuring and subsequent recruitment, including HR and Organisational Development (OD). This impacted the ability to track and evaluate HREiR success measures and to deliver on actions that were set out in 2021. Nevertheless, Sussex has made progress on key interventions.

While these changes have affected progress in the short term, we are confident they will ultimately strengthen UoS and accelerate developments, and the focus now is on prioritising the Concordat. Both the PVC for Research (PVCR) and VC have been involved in the resubmission, considerably raising the visibility of ECRs and demonstrating a commitment from UoS to value and invest in them. Building on the groundwork laid in the previous period, tracking and reporting of HREiR commitments will be embedded into the annual cycles of business across committees and departments, with ultimate accountability to the University Executive Team (UET).

## **2. Internal Evaluation**

The priorities and interventions identified in the 2023-26 Action Plan are the result of discussions and consultation with researchers, University leadership and the staff who support research across UoS, and align closely with current institutional strategy. An initial gap analysis reviewed ongoing RDCSG-led projects and identified items from the Backward Action Plan to carry forward or develop, with consideration of support and services as they now stand.

This information, coupled with the current action tracker from RDCSG, was combined into an outline of forward actions and a list of projects to carry forward, and presented to key stakeholders in Schools and Professional Services via committees (RDCSG, Research Culture Steering Group, RaKE and UET; the Athena Swan institutional plan was also reviewed for cross-cutting action points). Close consultations were held with the Assistant Directors of HR and OD, RES Director and Head of SRS, who provided key strategy points at department, division and institution level. Final approval was secured from all those with responsibilities, including the Director of HR.

From the earliest stages, ECRs were consulted through the Research Staff Reps Group, which includes 17 representatives from all disciplinary areas. The Group held discussions during the gap analysis, canvassed opinions among ECRs in their Schools, and reviewed and commented on the Forward Action Plan as it was drafted. Responses from CEDARS were also scrutinised to ensure that the Plan aligns with the needs of current researchers.<sup>3</sup>

## **3. Governance Structure**

SRS is managed by two committees: the PGR Board and RDCSG. RDCSG covers ECR activities and is chaired by the DRSD, reporting to RaKE and then to Senate. Senate is responsible for academic standards and the direction and regulation of academic matters. All governance, monitoring and evaluation of HREiR and the Concordat is overseen by the PVCR (RaKE chair) and VC (Senate chair), demonstrating a commitment to HREiR principles and obligations.

RDCSG follows the guidance of the General Counsel, Governance and Compliance division,

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<sup>2</sup> 'RSO' terminology will be phased out as part of the wider SRS rebrand during 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Conducted in Spring 2023. Survey population: 370 research-only staff and 374 PIs/managers.

which supports functions across the institution. Its focus is developing policies, practices and initiatives in line with the agreed HREiR Action Plan and the Sussex 2025 Strategic Framework.<sup>4</sup> Members meet termly and oversee Action Plan tracking, projects and data collection to support HREiR commitments. In January 2022 RDCSG changed from a working group to a steering group, raising visibility of ECR needs at committee level.<sup>5</sup> Membership was updated to bring together senior staff who are able to enact change and champion ECRs across UoS, including the Deputy PVCr, RES Director, Assistant Director of HR, and representatives from Professional Services and School leadership supporting ECRs. Two ECR Reps, the preceding and forward Chair of the Reps Group, attend each meeting.

The Reps Group sits below RDCSG, giving researchers an opportunity to get involved in policy development and decision-making, and a platform to voice their concerns in a fair, transparent and safe space. It consists of ECRs from each of the 10 academic Schools, with a minimum target of two per School plus additional Reps from Life Sciences, who have a larger ECR population. It is supported by SRS and chaired by Reps on a rolling basis, giving members the chance to gain chairing experience and attend RDCSG. The group discusses HREiR Action Plan progress and School updates, and escalates issues to RDCSG for discussion. Since 2022 Reps have met six times a year, adding three interim meetings to improve the flow of information back down from RaKE / RDCSG to Reps and on to ECRs.

Work is underway to review the Reps Group, updating the Terms of Reference and creating a new role description, and moving responsibility for recruiting Reps to DRaKEs/ECR Leads. The aim is for greater engagement across Schools, truly diverse researcher input, and proper recognition for the role. A wider review of RaKE sub-committees may result in more formal framing of this group. There are also plans to clarify the standing of RDCSG (provisional name ECR Board) to make clear its status and confirm that ECR support is central to SRS business.

#### 4. Past Progress and Achievements

Noting the above comments on progress, some key aspects of the 2021-23 Action Plan have been achieved and there has been considerable progress in many areas:

- **Governance:** Changes to RDCSG – a result of the stakeholder analysis priority in the previous summary report – have led to better awareness of the Concordat, enabled greater advocacy for ECRs, and prioritised ECR interests across Schools and Professional Services. Ongoing work to formalise recruitment to and recognition of the Reps Group is already seeing results, with greater engagement and input across disciplines.
- **Induction:** A new HR Welcome Pack for all staff has improved onboarding and enhanced information-sharing on both the Concordat and tools for mental health support, an area of focus in the last plan. A revision of RSO induction is being piloted, complementing the Welcome Pack and combining targeted information and interactive sessions on career development, community, support and expectations.
- **Concordat awareness:** Integration of the Concordat into the University's fabric is underway. A [Research with Impact webinar on the Concordat](#), led by the PVCr and DRSD in March 2022, brought together speakers from UUK, UKRI, UKRSA and academics from Oxford and Surrey, to raise awareness and demonstrate the importance of ECR development.
- **Appraisals:** A comprehensive revision of HR's appraisals process, now termed

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<sup>4</sup> Consultation on a new institutional strategy – which will run to 2035 – is currently underway.

<sup>5</sup> This was a commitment in the 2021-23 Action Plan.

Achievement and Development Review (ADR), includes well-defined objectives and timelines for research opportunities, references the Researcher Development Framework (RDF), and aligns with Concordat 10-day professional development guidelines.

- **Bullying and harassment:** The new [Report and Support Tool](#) provides researchers and managers with a safe and anonymous route for addressing issues.
- **Mental health and wellbeing:** A comprehensive approach to mental health and wellbeing is being pursued for staff across Sussex, and staff mental health support has been integrated into RSO communications. This was a 2021-23 priority.
- **Building community:** The ECR Symposium grew from the Research and Impact Day detailed in the previous report, and in 2023 included Centres of Excellence keynotes, a diverse careers roundtable, a research image competition and a Dragons' Den contest. The Dragons' Den in particular was valued by researchers as an opportunity to gain experience in writing pitches, communicating research and bidding for small grants, and building a strong network of peer support and encouragement. Other initiatives include monthly coffee mornings and writing retreats.
- **Research culture:** The Seed Fund empowers ECRs to enhance their immediate research environment and to develop initiatives to improve research culture across UoS.
- **Policy and practice:** RDCSG/RSO are leading a review of School-level inductions, and reviews of ECR teaching and informal supervision in Schools (instigated by Reps).

## 5. Strategic Objectives and Implementation Plan

### 5.1 Aligning HREiR and Institutional Strategy

The [Sussex 2025 strategic framework](#) emphasises disruptive creativity and innovation, and identifies five core values: kindness, integrity, inclusion, collaboration, and courage. Consultation has begun on a new strategy for 2035, which should be in place by Autumn 2024.<sup>6</sup>

The Research with Impact pillar of Sussex 2025 addresses UoS's urgent priorities for research in the post-Covid environment, and identifies ECRs as a career stage needing distinct support, setting out a clear manifesto for "support mechanisms to help our researchers to develop throughout their whole career." The revised strategy highlights interdisciplinarity, impact and integrity as key to fostering a vibrant, exciting culture of research excellence, and prioritises the need to "develop the skills and competencies of researchers to maximise the influence and impact of their work." This highlights the importance the institution places on ECRs, viewing them as key stakeholders who should be supported, recognised, and celebrated.<sup>7</sup>

Our 2023-26 HREiR Action Plan aligns with these goals, identifying key actions that will:

- offer opportunities for researchers to share their work and connect across disciplines;
- strengthen ties between Professional Services divisions and with Schools, to create a coherent training offer and support for ECRs across the institution;
- foster a positive research culture through improvements to employment conditions, recognition of ECR activities, and opportunities for career development;
- improve support for PIs/managers of researchers through training;
- create a Community of Practice for staff who support ECRs, to encourage collaboration and model a consistent approach;
- celebrate ECR successes and showcase to the wider University, through RSO and Research Culture Steering Group activities.

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<sup>6</sup> At this stage, core themes in Sussex 2035 strategy are Research and Enterprise, Global and Civic Engagement, and Education and Student Life.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the UoS research strategy see [sussex.ac.uk/research/about/strategy](https://sussex.ac.uk/research/about/strategy) [Accessed 16/01/24]

Our approach also aligns with the guiding principles of the RES divisional strategy and the [SRS Enabling Plan](#), with priorities including mentoring, interdisciplinarity, a review of training and induction, equitable policies and practice that are applied consistently, and a communications strategy to support the development of a vibrant and connected community and raise the profile of emerging researchers. Additionally, UoS is [moving to a Faculty structure](#), and introduced Senior Research Managers (SRMs) to oversee work in distinct disciplinary clusters. These SRMs are already embedded in the work of the Concordat, including an active seat on RDCSG.

## **5.2 High-Level Actions and Success Measures**

While significant strides have been made in some areas, the primary focus has been on laying the groundwork for 2023-26, which will promote consistency and aim to embed best practice across the institution. Many of these actions arise from the work of the RDCSG and Reps Group.

These priorities were identified in discussion with ECRs, who specifically highlighted the need for a clear and consistent induction framework in Schools, and for a consistent approach to ECR teaching and workload allocation. These were echoed by CEDARS 2023, where the proportion of researchers who found UoS inductions useful was 21% below the sector average. CEDARS also highlighted the need for additional PI training and support.

### **Environment and Culture**

- Implementing a coherent, consistent induction process spanning HR, RSO, and Schools, through an audit of Schools, a revision of materials, and creation of templates and a best practice framework.
- Clarifying the ECR committee structure in line with institutional practice, and ensuring ECR representation is comprehensive and diverse across disciplines by strengthening the Terms of Reference and role description, involving DRaKEs in recruitment, and recognising the contribution in promotions criteria.
- Establishing a Community of Practice for staff who support ECRs in Schools to share effective models, and improve collaboration and support across Schools/Faculties.
- Increasing engagement with the ECR Symposium and other research culture-driven activities through co-creation with researchers, a more strategic approach to Sussex-wide Summer of Research events, and improved communications, ensuring the University considers ECRs as key stakeholders.

### **Employment**

- Ensuring the institution's policies are inclusive, incorporate ECRs, and are applied consistently across Schools, including equitable and consistent teaching practices and workload allocation (while taking into account School-specific needs).
- Recognising the importance of informal supervision and other ECR activities, reflecting these in the new promotions criteria, and targeting promotions workshops at ECRs to improve the rate of applications and reduce the gender gap.

### **Career and Professional Development**

- Providing PI training across the institution, and reviewing the ECR training offer across OD, SRS and PS teams to improve engagement, evaluation and align with the RDF.
- Improving engagement with the ADR process through targeted communications and training, embedding CPD and career development for ECRs across Schools, and exploring setting a minimum expectation of regular 1:1s.

The meticulous capture and evaluation of all relevant data, with timely and appropriate responses across stakeholders, and accountability to the highest level of University management, are also core to the next three-year plan.