



School of Media, Arts, and Humanities



**Research Strategy
March 2024**

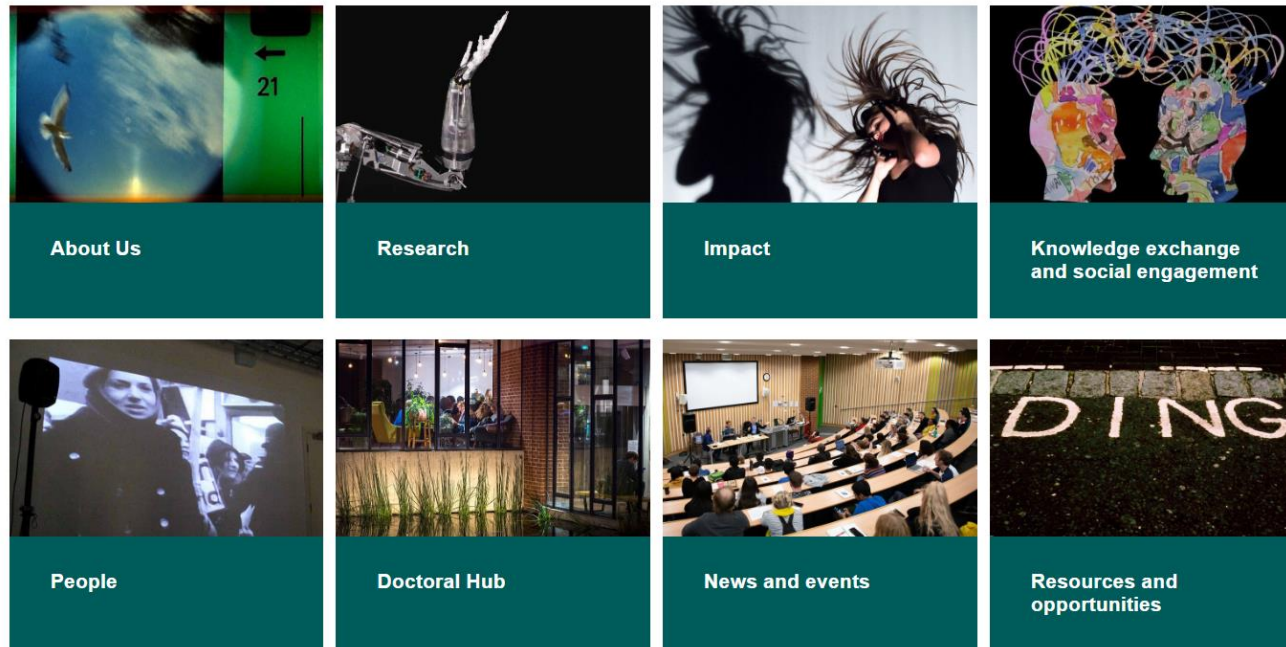
Overview

Established in 2020, the Sussex School of Media, Arts, and Humanities (MAH) comprises a substantial and wide-ranging community of researchers engaging in innovative and often experimental disciplinary and transdisciplinary work across eleven Departments. Since the inauguration of the School we have sought to build a distinctive, rich, collaborative research environment whilst extending the reach and significance of our research through active engagement with local, national, and international partners.

The MAH Research Institute



Research activity within MAH is hosted by our [Media, Arts, and Humanities Research Institute](#). The Institute was created to advocate for the value of the Arts and Humanities across a range of different contexts, within Sussex as well as on the international stage. It embodies an aspiration for Sussex to host a recognised centre for advanced study that showcases our research and celebrates the Arts and Humanities whilst making a clear case for their value and impact in society. Our work informs a range of sectors including healthcare and wellbeing, community and placemaking, industry and the economy, social justice and the environment.



The Institute is the home of our Sussex Centre for Excellence – the [Sussex Digital Humanities Lab](#) (also prominently supported by EngInf, as well as ESW, LPS, and the Library) – which maintains strong links with its sister Centre of Excellence, [Sussex AI](#). Alongside the SDHL, the MAH Institute supports a series of dynamic, interdisciplinary [Research Centres](#), whose progress is reviewed annually, such as:

- Centre for Intellectual History and Social and Political Thought
- Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research
- Centre for Modernist Studies
- Centre for Sexual Dissidence
- Centre for World Environmental History
- Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies

- Sussex Weidenfeld Institute for Jewish Studies

These Centres are supplemented by a number of smaller, less formal research groupings. In addition, MAH has notable transdisciplinary research strengths in environmental sustainability (and is a pillar School of the [SSRP](#)), activist histories, the study of life stages/ageing, oracy, memory and the Holocaust, regional identities, experimental music – the latter led by our internationally renowned lab, [EMute](#) – and linguistic analysis, as exemplified in the ROLLS (Research on Language and Linguistics) group and the [Concept Analytics Lab](#) which is housed in the School. All of these areas have seen notable external funding successes in recent years.

Based in dedicated spaces within the Silverstone Building, the Institute provides an environment in which our research can flourish: our researchers benefit from support by the Research Portfolio team who help broker external partnerships, support impact enhancement and bid development, organise faculty training, and curate events throughout the year. In addition, our faculty are annually invited to either propose or engage with a democratically-selected Institute research theme (the inaugural theme in 2023/24 was '[Beginnings](#)') which encourages interdisciplinary thinking, conversations, and events.

Our Researcher Profile and Capabilities

In terms of scale, MAH's faculty comprises c.130FTE on Research & Education contracts, and c.75FTE on Education & Scholarship contracts, with a substantial community of c.230 PGRs who are increasingly integrated into the School's research culture. Research-contracted faculty meet annually with a one of four MAH Research Leads to discuss their Personal Research Plans (PRPs), are supported by a dedicated Research Professional Services team, and are divided between the School's eleven Departments, as shown in fig. 1 below. A strong performance across the School in REF2021 generated a 22% increase in QR funding (to £3.13m p/a) for the current cycle, notably with a top ten result for Art History. The REF submission process necessitates the restructuring of the School's research-contracted faculty into a different configuration, with six UoAs submitted in REF2021 and potentially seven to REF2029 (with a possible UoA26 still to be finalised ahead of REF2029). See fig. 2, below, for further detail.

Fig. 1 MAH Composition by Department/FTE

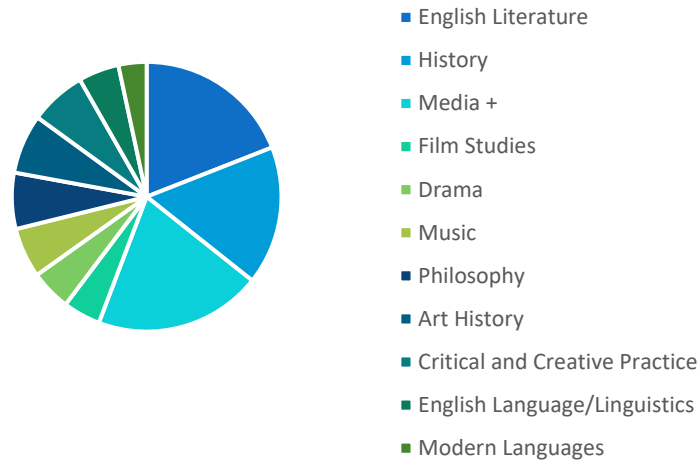
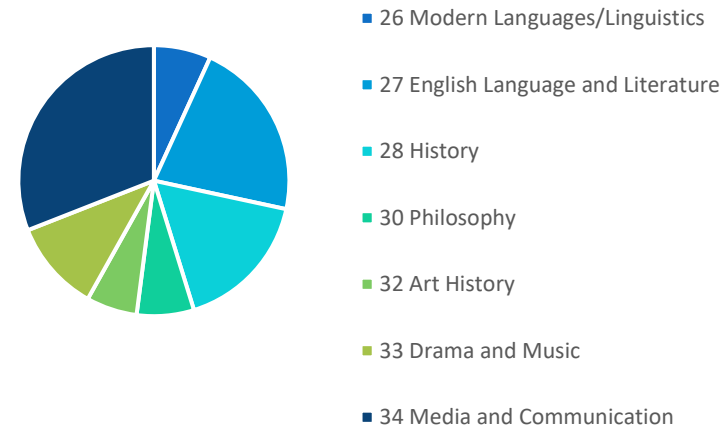
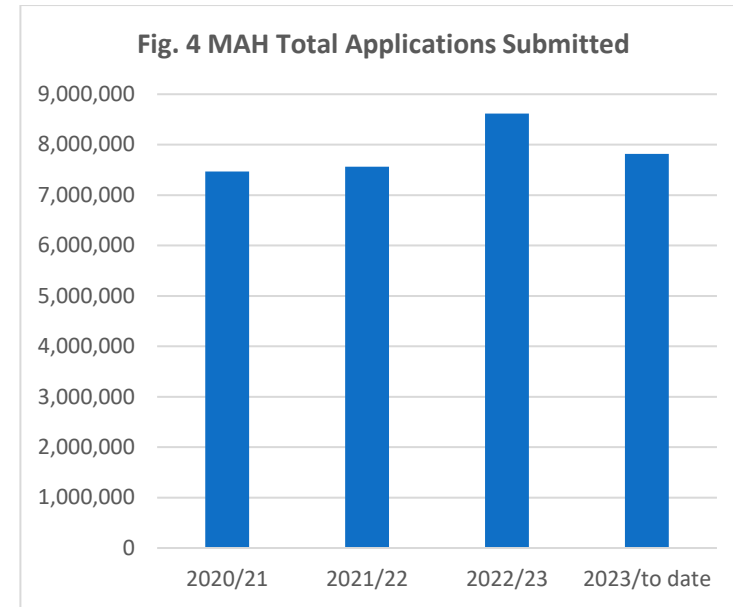
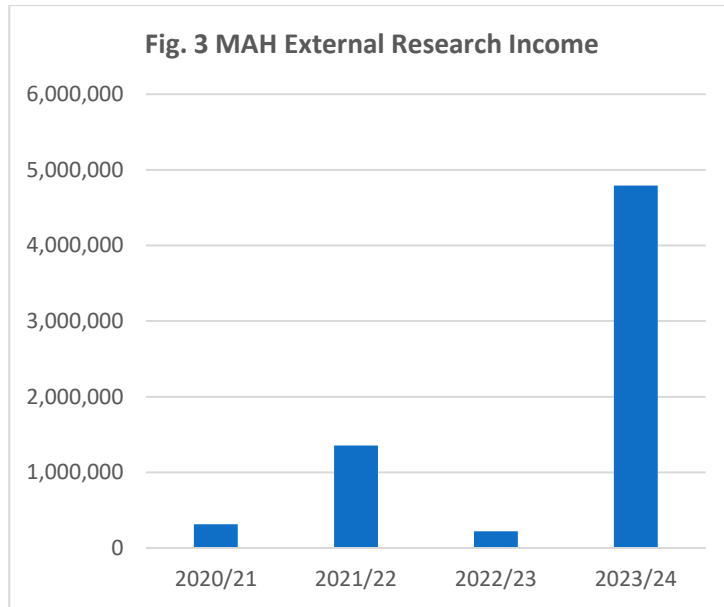


Fig. 2 MAH Potential REF UoAs by FTE



A Focus on Raising the Quality, Volume, and Success of our External Funding Applications

Increasing research income generation across MAH is a priority for the Research Portfolio team. Led by our Director of Research (External Funding) we have developed and are implementing an external funding strategy with the aim of increasing the quality and number of substantial applications, broadening the pool of funders where possible, and working in a focused way with our primary research council, the AHRC, to build external grant income. We are also seeking to better use our internal research funds to target seed projects that have the potential for expansion and the generation of external funding. This includes new emphases in faculty PRP meetings and individually-tailored support, new training opportunities (for example on integrating impact into bids), the expansion of our internal Peer Review College, and specific funding workshops for each of our Research Centres, all to ensure we can recognise potential from within our faculty and be responsive to new calls/pre-calls and funders’ priorities. Early indications are that we have already increased the number of applications, particularly to the more substantial funding schemes, and this should enable us to establish a sense of momentum and confidence to begin to

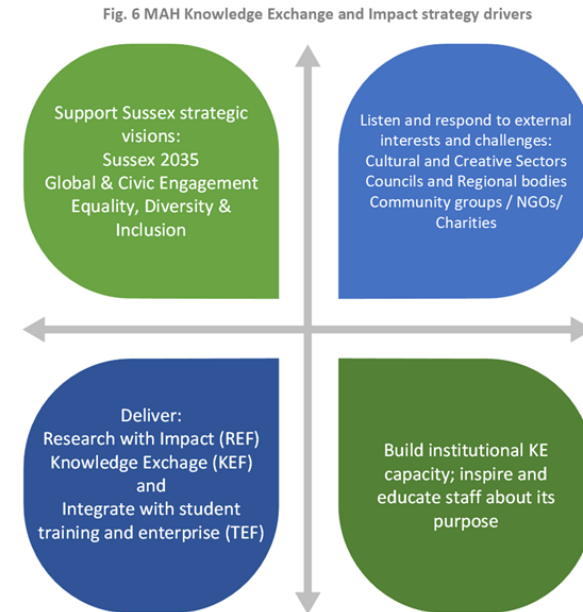
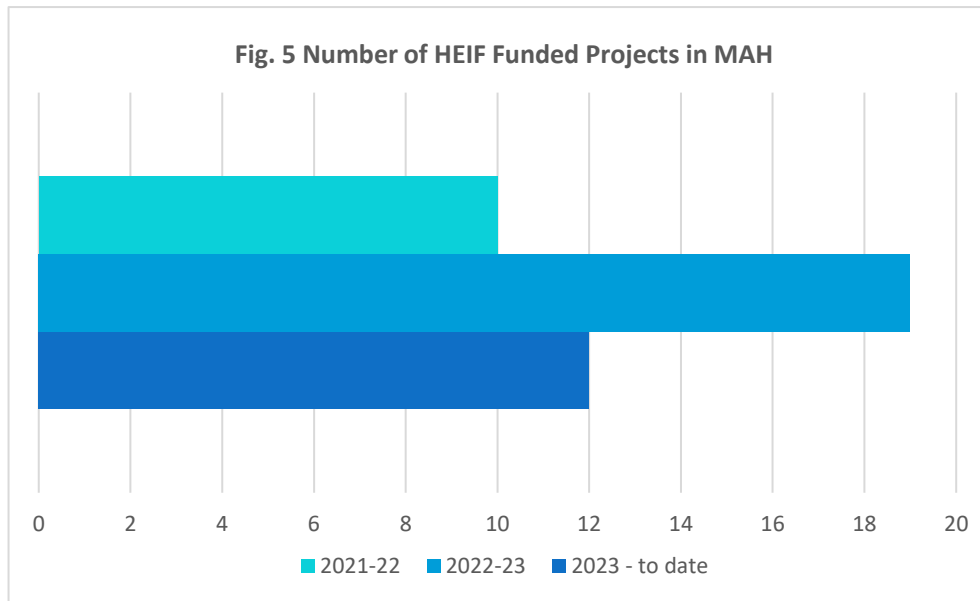


even out the peaks and troughs of recent years (a consequence of a reliance on a narrow group of funding schemes, one-off large grant successes, and a relatively small pool of researchers applying for funding).

Recently we have seen an encouraging increase in the number of successful first-time applicants, which further broadens our capacity to apply to different funders' calls. Our external funding income since the creation of MAH in 2020 is detailed in fig. 3, and the total amount of applications made in the same period – increasing year on year to the present day – are shown in fig. 4.

A Commitment to and Investment in Knowledge Exchange and Impact

Recalibrating a traditional approach to Arts and Humanities research that assumes the primacy of individual interests to one which responds to real world challenges and external needs is also high on our agenda. Led by the Director of Research (Knowledge Exchange and Impact) we are embedding a new strategic plan across our research portfolio, with the aim of collaborating and exchanging knowledge with a wide range of



governmental departments, organisations, businesses and individuals. We focus on impactful research supporting inclusive, sustainable heritage, cultural and creative enterprise, community place-making and growth through Arts and Culture (for more detail on specific elements of this work, see Engagement below). This closely aligns with the emerging [Sussex 2035](#) strategy, in particular on Global and Civic Engagement, and the University’s KEI strategy and KEF submission.

This work is increasing researcher engagement with central HEIF capture and return, in addition to our school-specific HEIF allocation (see fig. 5), and is enabling us to integrate and root KEI work across the three pillars of REF, KEF and TEF, in addition to the new University drivers and external perspectives (see fig. 6). We are accordingly developing a set of excellent impact case studies for the School’s REF2029 submission, through bespoke support and detailed tracking, and are scaling up and clustering selected research projects with KEI potential, orienting them to partner interests using the AHRC IAA (£600k over four years). Simultaneously we are sculpting our public and community engagement to respond to KEF frameworks, including through NCACE-informed use of participatory methods and co-created projects.

A Research Vision For MAH – CIRCE

A bold research vision reflects the scale and potential of MAH but also necessarily responds to the challenging circumstances faced by the Arts and Humanities in Higher Education contexts and in the wider economic climate, particularly in relation to funding cuts across the Arts and Cultural Sector, which are felt acutely at local government level. Our vision is nonetheless appropriate and ambitious, and is designed to offer a wrap-around, career-long support structure for our researchers, a roadmap for expanding our influence and external funding income, and a set of proposals that will encourage innovation and collaboration. Cutting across all these areas is an ongoing commitment to place EDI considerations at the heart of MAH's structures; to increase our external grant income; to fulfil our goals for REF2029; and to connect with wider University teams to enable delivery. Named after Circe, the Greek goddess famed for her powers of transformation, our Research Vision focuses on:

- **Collaboration.** Drawing on Sussex's long commitment to transdisciplinary exchange and experiment, we seek to create a rich, collaborative environment in which researchers can actively engage with the challenges of our time, bringing together environmental, technological, and philosophical spheres through a focus on the human.
- **Innovation.** We will enable research that pushes the boundaries of our disciplines and connects to similar work underway across Sussex.
- **Reputation.** We want to ensure the MAH Research Institute becomes recognised as a leading centre for advanced studies in Media, Arts, and Humanities research, and engages with equivalent institutes at national and international level.
- **Celebration.** We intend to rigorously promote our research successes within the School, across the University, and to external audiences.
- **Engagement.** We will build and deepen our relationships with external partners to ensure our presence in the local arts/cultural ecosystem, one of the most vibrant and important in the UK.

We aim to realise this vision in the following ways (five per theme):

- **Collaboration.** A focus on collaboration will allow us to further enrich our research culture – through events, activity and support to researchers at all career stages, from PGR to senior faculty. The restructured MAH Research Portfolio Team has worked intensively with faculty to create a unified structure to strengthen an effective research culture for the School as a whole – with obvious benefits for REF2029 – putting systems and teams in place to enable the expansion of support for all aspects of research. PS and academic staff are closely integrated within the Team and link regularly with colleagues across the institution to achieve this objective.
 - We will develop ways of working across the Research and Doctoral Studies portfolios to enable further PGR integration in our wider research activities, building on the recent creation of a PGR role to help coordinate the new annual theme (joining established PGR roles including PGR Events Officer and CHASE EDI Officer). These roles offer professional development for our PGRs as well as an essential connection to the PGR perspective.
 - We will remodel the MAH Research Committee to take on a greater strategic role in this area, including full oversight of the MAH Research Institute as its steering group. Additionally, we will revisit the criteria for the Institute annual theme bidding process to emphasise the need for collaborative bids.
 - We will set up spaces in which faculty from different disciplines across the School can discuss research and potential collaboration. This will focus on rejuvenating the existing ‘Research Conversations’ strand of events (set up in 2021) to use the format to bring together faculty involved in emerging areas as well as those from across the University and beyond; one new development for 23/24 incorporates regional partners. We intend to identify those transdisciplinary strands that worked well in previous conversations – for example Activism/Activist Histories – and explore their potential for further development.
 - We will establish closer ties with the Sussex Library Special Collections and The Keep to enable faculty to advance research projects based on their archival holdings and to develop further teaching links, for example in Activism and Activist Histories (building on already established connections with the Mass Observation archive).
 - We want to help build an institutional framework for more cross-School, clustered research projects and the means through which new, cross-disciplinary research collaborations can be brokered.

- **Innovation.** Already a key element of MAH's research culture, innovation is central to the curiosity-led research that comprises the majority of the School's outputs. Fostering such innovation is in part about making time for faculty to write (an impediment often noted in PRP meetings). In response we have brought forward an annual strand focused on writing and writing support throughout the academic year (including writing retreats and peer review opportunities). We have also – for the first time – provided dedicated internal funding to support innovative faculty projects in creative practice (our Creative Practice Project Awards).
 - Innovation is a necessary element of any successful external funding bid. MAH recognises the need for support and time to develop larger, multi-collaborator, multi-institutional funding bids and will offer more dedicated resources to enable this, including the provision of more Visiting Fellow positions in the Institute for potential collaboration with leading thinkers. We will also reserve an element of our two-day summer writing retreat specifically to bring together faculty working on funding bids.
 - Working with partner institutions within the Southeast AHRC IAA cluster (Brighton, Kent, Reading, Southampton, UCA) and in the Eastern ARC consortium (Essex, Kent, UEA) we will seek to lead on Arts and Humanities initiatives (for example in their research focus areas: Coast/Food/Heritage/Sanctuary), aiming to bring together faculty within as well as across disciplines to generate new, creative responses through themed symposia and workshops. This might also include the creation of a Visiting Research Fellowship scheme with Eastern ARC partners to facilitate innovation, collaboration, and mobility for Arts and Humanities researchers, whilst simultaneously engaging with their AHRC Doctoral Focal Awards scheme.
 - We will seek to drive innovation by extending and deepening our work with creative practitioners, archives, and heritage organisations in the region (for instance in the Towner Gallery's Black Robin Farm initiative), demonstrating how MAH research can address and respond to 'real world' challenges and problems.
 - We intend to use identified areas of research strength in MAH and current Research Centres to more effectively integrate finalist UG and PG teaching into our research culture, which will involve closely liaising with the School's Education Portfolio and necessitate greater flexibility and innovation in curricular and pedagogical terms.
 - We will further innovate in the ways we use our web presence and research events to bring faculty together and conduct research in the public sphere; whilst deepening and extending our commitment to Open Research in the Humanities and the exploration of what opportunities that offers in practice.

- **Reputation.** One of the challenges of being a relatively new School containing a new Research Institute is how, once the latter is established and running, to build a regional, national, and international reputation. We begin with Sussex's celebrated interdisciplinary legacy and a reputation for strengths in specific research areas from the pre-MAH tri-school System, but now need to find and foreground our own distinctiveness. A key element underpinning this ambition is to be seen as an exemplar for good practice and the embedding of EDI concerns in all aspects of our research culture. This involves foregrounding EDI initiatives, including work with institutional projects (for example Black@Sussex; Black Cultural Archives); ensuring the continuing success and connectedness of relevant research centres (for example the Centre for Sexual Dissidence); and the promotion of our established partnership schemes (particularly our close relationship with the Stuart Hall Foundation and our Stuart Hall Fellowship).
 - We want to establish close connections with other Arts and Humanities Research Centres/Institutes internationally around specific areas of research excellence. A first step should be becoming a member of the international [Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes](#) and the UK-wide [Consortium of Institutes of Advanced Studies](#). Rejuvenating our relationship with UCSC (Santa Cruz) is another useful starting point – perhaps on the basis of a shared annual research theme between the MAH Research Institute and the UCSC Institute for the Humanities, for instance – which could enable collaborative online research events and potential faculty exchanges. Other similar potential collaborators are LAHRI (University of Leeds); the Humanities Institute at Trinity, Dublin; CRASSH at Cambridge; and TORCH at Oxford.
 - Our external [Impact Advisory Group](#) (set up in 2023) consists of members working in relevant sectors (including practitioners, publishers, journalists, broadcasters and filmmakers, alongside representatives from libraries/archives, museums, galleries, and festivals) who have close links with the School and the University. We will endeavour to work with this valued group to reflect on our own impact and engagement work and to continually look to move that work beyond the bounds of the Institution.
 - We will continue to expand and deepen our relationship with the Brighton Festival, which in 2024 will host six events proposed by MAH as part of our [Festival of Ideas](#). Sussex is now a Festival partner, hosts an annual festival masterclass with the Festival organisers, and is collaborating with them on our new BA in Cultural Industries. Similarly, we will look to develop our relationship with the Towner Gallery, Eastbourne, with which Sussex partnered on a series of [Turner@Towner](#) events and which will host an

exhibition curated by MAH faculty member Hope Wolf in 2025 (coinciding with our hosting of the prestigious International Virginia Woolf Society (IVWS) conference).

- We will ensure that MAH is represented on, and engaging with, external bodies. This includes local committees such as the Culture Alliance, SECEN, SELEP, and the Brighton Chamber of Commerce, as well as national subject-specific representation such as the Royal Historical Society, the British Academy, the Institute for Historical Research, funding bodies such as the AHRC, the Leverhulme Trust, the Wellcome Trust, and national heritage institutions with which we have close connections such as the British Museum, the British Library, and the V & A.
 - Key to the continuing enhancement of our reputation in the sector will be our ability to build on a strong set of results from across the School's 6 UoAs in REF2021 and improve our performance in all areas for REF2029. We have a detailed MAH REF strategy in place and have been able to draw on Sussex's AHRC IAA award to continue to support Arts and Humanities-related impact work across the Institution.
- **Celebration.** The majority of the research undertaken in MAH remains led by individual researchers and focused on the production of substantial monograph-style or major creative practice outputs. This can be isolating and in the past we have lacked a forum in which we can bring faculty, Professional Services colleagues, and PGRs together to celebrate our successes. The MAH Research Institute offers a physical and virtual space in which that celebration can be encouraged and supported.
 - We will continue to develop the visibility, legibility, and identity of the MAH Research Institute within the School, to ensure that all faculty feel meaningfully connected through it. This will build on ongoing communication of our research activity and successes both internally and externally, via research newsletters, social media, the Institute website and throughout the Silverstone building.
 - In the wake of a series of significant research funding successes (including an award of c.£2.2m for Viki Walden on Holocaust memorialisation and funding from the German government) we are working with the Sussex Weidenfeld Centre to move towards University Centre of Excellence status in (or after) 2028, which would be a fitting celebration of the importance of this research area for the School and the institution as a whole.

- More specialised training will be made available for MAH faculty on external engagement and how to gain public traction for their research.
 - We will use the annual MAH Research Away Day to explicitly celebrate our successes over the previous year, and these successes will be prominently celebrated throughout the year with a dedicated section in our monthly MAH research newsletter.
 - MAH's expanding and increasingly important [Festival of Ideas](#) slots at the Brighton Festival offer an ideal medium through which we can publicise and celebrate our research in one of the biggest arts festivals in the UK.
- **Engagement.** Overlapping with many of the preceding themes is one that is becoming increasingly important for MAH: engagement. As the holders of the only current IAA at Sussex – the AHRC IAA, which runs to March 31, 2026 – we are in a privileged position to seed fund and stimulate connections between researchers and external partners working within the AHRC remit. Co-ordinated from MAH, our specialist impact support has enabled academics from across the University to fund activity that aims for change-making outcomes and contribute to REF 2029. We are currently expanding our capacity and literacy for Enterprise and Knowledge Exchange activity, especially at a local and regional level, through focused work by our Research Portfolio Team, including a range of tailored impact and KE training funded by the AHRC IAA. We want to deepen our collaboration and the exchange of knowledge with government, organisations, businesses and individuals, regionally, nationally and internationally. We will do this to develop impactful research that supports inclusive, sustainable heritage, cultural and creative enterprise, community place-making and growth through arts and culture. In this work we want to build on the University's stated desire to be a University *of* as well as *in* Sussex.

Our vision in this area is to lead as the University that champions challenging, creative and innovative external engagement which contributes to bringing about a sustainable, socially just world. For us, this means positioning the School as a strong platform for Media, Arts and Humanities in the region and as a hub and anchor institution for arts, heritage, culture and creative industries actors and sectors. We are committed to developing new knowledge that challenges conventions and offers inspiring and creative ways to address global, national and local issues. Our approach is for new knowledge to be co-created for mutual value with our partners, to underpin

our people's innovative and enterprising approaches and methodologies, to inform students to become 'citizens of the world', and to inspire citizens to be active agents and leaders in their own communities.

- We will align School participation in sometimes disparate groupings and bodies across Brighton and the South-East into a single, coherent MAH regional plan for the Arts and Humanities/Creative Industries, building on strategic planning and consultation undertaken in 2022.
- We will build on and extend our current Impact/KE database, developed from our initial mapping exercise in 2021, to focus MAH resources on specific projects in order to accelerate their development.
- We will formalise long-term partnerships with key local and regional organisations through collaborative agreements, public events programmes, our Impact Advisory Board, and an emphasis on stronger communications and governance.
- We will look to increasingly embed external partner expertise in teaching – e.g. Brighton and Hove Pavilion and Museums Trust in Liberal Arts delivery, Glyndebourne in music delivery, alongside placements for UG and PGR students in Drama, Creative and Culture Industries, and Media Production.
- We will seek to undertake research in partnership with the sector (e.g. Music and sound technological futures and economies; Innovative and decolonial heritage work; regional cultural development; arts, social prescribing and wellbeing; arts advocacy; environmental humanities).
- We will enable better understanding of economic value and commercially-involved research through closer work with the Business Partnerships Team, Sussex Innovation, the Business School, and by joining external committees, including Council Creative Industry Steering Groups.
- We will enhance capacity in participatory methods training for public and community engagement for all MAH faculty.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New scale of the School – greater critical mass – opportunity for new researcher connections and larger Research PS and Research Portfolio team to work together • Established research support infrastructure with introduction of Research Leads to create tentacular reach to every academic to ensure they can be directed to appropriate support • Well-integrated Research Portfolio team across academics and PS colleagues • Excellent REF results, world leading research, and largely receptive faculty • AHRC IAA • Eastern ARC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited capacity of Research PS team – growth dependent on securing increased external research funding • IT and comms challenges • Historically behind key competitors in terms of external funding income
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential to build reputation through membership of Advanced Study Consortia • Major funders seeking to work most closely with HEIs • Clustering with partner HEIs through groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ AHRC IAA ▪ Eastern ARC • Linking with new Global and Civic Engagement PVC to support delivery of targets around arts and culture, including via the Culture Alliance group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imminent budgetary pressures on our internal funding as well as our ability to offer research leave • National sense of crisis for University Arts and Humanities departments • Poor UG recruitment to core subjects – impact on morale and focus on teaching away from research