

HR Excellence in Research Award

University of Essex 8-year Review Report

1. Institutional Context

“Our vision of Essex researchers is one of activists, advocates, change-makers, innovators, reformers and disruptive thinkers. Curiosity, tenacity, social action and impatience for change define our ‘Essex Spirit’. Our diverse community and international profile create an outward looking research culture underpinned by our values of inclusion and responsibility, academic freedom, respect, trust and evidence-based rigour.” (University of Essex [Research Strategy](#) 2019 -2025).

The University of Essex is part of an elite group of dual intensive universities, committed above all to two main things: excellence in teaching and excellence in research. Having developed an international reputation for research we are a member of Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN) and Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) alliance. Our diverse community and international profile create an outward looking research culture underpinned by our values of inclusion and responsibility, academic freedom, respect, trust, and evidence-based rigour.

Our focus on inclusion is recognised by our range of institutional awards and commitments. We hold an institutional [Athena Swan](#) bronze award,¹⁴ departmental awards, and are seeking to extend this as outlined in our new HREiR action plan. We have University of Sanctuary Status, the MoD Silver Armed Forces Covenant, we are a ‘Two Ticks Employer’, have signed the Mindful Employer Charter for employers who are positive about mental health, and have made a commitment in our new action plan to submit an institutional application for the Race Equality Charter. We have a strong practice and on-going commitment to promoting and supporting inclusion and equality within our researcher community, and we are leading a pioneering new project [‘Transitions and Transformations: Black Researcher’s Journey’](#) aimed at developing a sustainable model of support for Black researchers, which should have sector-wide benefits.

Essex is a powerhouse for social sciences and is in the top 10 in the UK for economics and econometrics, modern languages and linguistics, politics and international studies, and sociology. We’re also in the top 20 for art history, law and philosophy (Grade Point Average, Research Excellence Framework 2021). [The Research Excellence Framework 2021 \(REF 2021\)](#) is the national assessment of research quality and impact at UK universities.

Our performance in specific areas of assessment shows Essex’s strengths as a centre of research excellence. Essex is ranked 1st for research impact in modern languages and linguistics, 1st for research environment in sociology and 2nd for research output in politics and international studies. 83% of our research output is world-leading or internationally excellent and three subjects were in the top 10 in the UK for research output. 100% of our research impact is world-leading or internationally excellent for 10 subjects, and four subjects were in the top 10 for research impact. 100% of our research environment is world-leading or internationally excellent in seven subjects.

Structure and Governance

The University employs 2,853 staff, the equivalent to 2,496 full time employees. This included 1,019 academic staff in a teaching or teaching and research role (equivalent to 947 FTE) and in July 2022, the research-only staff population totalled 160 (109 FTE). These figures exclude graduate teaching staff and fixed-term teachers or on-demand. While many of the actions outlined in our new plan will have a beneficial impact on a wider audience, it is the last group of research-only staff that has been considered the key target audience for our action plan.

From a governance perspective, Research Committee provides oversight of research strategy and governance for the University. It is a committee of Senate and provides reports to the University's senior management team (University Steering Group). It includes the Pro-Vice Chancellor Research, Faculty Deans Research, Director of Research and Enterprise, Director of Organisational Development and researchers from all faculties. Each faculty has its own Faculty Research Committee and departments have their own structures, with each having a nominated Director of Research and Director of Impact. The Ethics Committee, advises Senate on all matters relating to Research Ethics. The Director of Organisation Development sits on the Research Committee, acting as a bridge between the researcher community and the People and Culture function, and People Supporting Strategy. The Research Committee will be responsible for monitoring progress against the new HREiR plan.

2. Engagement with researcher community

The University has actively engaged the researcher community with many of the initiatives that are at the core of the new action plan, and this engagement also occurs within the research community itself, through initiatives as part of their 'enhancing research culture'. We have also shared the new HREiR action plan with a sample of early career researchers to gain their feedback and to enable them to help shape the direction and specific actions outlined.

Some examples of proactive engagement with our researcher community during the run up to the eight-year review and in shaping the new plan have included:

- Researcher Development Framework, with consultation and development at all career stages, including through the Task and Finish Group.
- Consultation on the [Research Action Plan](#).
- Consultation on the planning for Pathway to Permanency networking events.
- Survey and focus groups in relation to changes to our approach to induction/onboarding.
- Consultations relating to equality, diversity and inclusion policy and initiatives, financial sustainability, and working practices during the pandemic, including a 'research-led' interactive event relating to hybrid-working.
- Engagement surveys e.g. workload, permanency and promotion.
- People Landscape meetings with managers of researchers to understand workforce patterns, plans and development needs.
- Engagement on the supporting action plans in relation to areas for – open access research, research centres, citations, research visibility.
- Senior staff events with a focus on aspects of research (e.g. senior staff conference).

3. Progress and review of 2020-22 Action Plan (6-year review)

The report on our progress against the 6-year action plan below, needs to be considered in the context of the extreme pressures and changes to working practices because of the pandemic, which necessitated a re-focus of activities and priorities, not least of all due to the enormous task of moving all teaching and support functions online. During this same period, we also had a change in Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research, and in the People and Culture staff who were leading on HREiR.

3,4.3 – Introduce new support and resources for researchers of all levels to engage with the impact agenda: this is where we have probably made our biggest achievement, with the development and launch of our [Researcher Development Framework](#), which provides a comprehensive programme covering the major stages of research design, production, funding, management, knowledge exchange and impact. This was developed following a comprehensive and expansive consultation with researchers at all stages. We also created the [peer mentoring database](#) to support greater collaboration and networking, and provided a range of ‘Space to Grow’ events, to help move ideas and innovation out of the laboratories and into the marketplace. The [Impact Toolkit](#) (an online resource) was launched in July 2021, alongside an annual [Impact Academy Programme](#) that provides opportunities for researchers to attend impact related events throughout the academic year.

3,4.3/3,4.7/3,4.8 – Develop and implement a Research Leadership Framework and Programme specifically supporting colleagues who are (or who will be in the future) responsible for leading large research projects. This will include leadership of global research projects and partnerships with industry: Our [Future Leaders and Strategic Leaders](#) programmes have research elements, led by our Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research, and we have been working on a bespoke programme with AdvanceHE for implementation next academic year, which will be complemented by our new Research Leadership Programme, which has been developed in collaboration with PVC-Research, Faculty Deans Research, and the Research and Enterprise Office.

3,4.5 – Introduce online networking events for new [Pathway to Permanency](#) academics. Form a network of new Essex academics across departments: faculty-based networking events have been delivered in both the Autumn and Spring terms for the last two years, and will continue. Face-to-face events for new Pathway to Permanency academics will commence in 2022-23.

3,4.5 – Targeted coaching support for Academic Advisers to help them develop the skills needed for development conversations with their Pathway to Permanency Academics: all Academic Advisers have been offered coaching support, including group coaching. Our P2P Moodle resource is being developed to provide clear expectations and support for colleagues engaged with the P2P process, including coaching support through the University’s [Coaching for Success](#) service.

3,4.5 – Roll out Electronic Document Management for permanency and promotion processes: all permanency applications are now using the Electronic Document Management system, with a plan in place for promotion applications to be moved to the new system as part of the new HREiR action plan.

3,4.6 – Expand ‘Newcomers Programme’ to offer year-round sessions in addition to annual research week, blending face-to-face and online delivery to improve accessibility: the [Newcomers Programme](#) has become an established part of our annual offer for early career researchers, and covers many aspects of research practice. This is complemented by a range of engaging Moodle resources.

6.3 – Continuous and long-term engagement with Athena SWAN charter - we have 20 departments and 18 of those are eligible to apply. Of those, 16 applied, with 14 receiving an award (3 of which are silver). We are working proactively with the remaining departments to submit in 2023, and are exploring with AdvanceHE whether previously ineligible departments may now be included under the transformed charter

Other planned actions that were impacted by the pandemic, have been picked up in the new Action Plan, with work either underway already, or scoped to take place in the new review period.

4. HREiR Action Plan for 2022-25

As well as outlining the positive initiatives and resources available to our researcher community currently, the new plan sets out a range of 38 actions focused on creating a research environment and culture in which research staff and those that manage them are supported, developed, and recognised. These actions sit alongside the University Strategy, Research Strategy, People Supporting Strategy and Research Action Plan and include:

- Providing greater visibility of the Concordat and our HREiR Action Plan as part of the recruitment, onboarding, induction, and promotion/permanency processes for researcher staff.
- New model of academic induction for research staff, with more opportunities to introduce colleagues to our strategic ambitions and priorities, connect with each other and understand the key roles that will support their transition.
- Investigating new engagement initiatives with researcher staff, including participation in CEDARS, bespoke surveys on key touch points in the researcher career journey, and focus groups to increase engagement with programmes and policies – such as the new induction programme, and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion policies, such as Neuro-inclusion and Tackling Misogyny.
- Participation of researcher staff in our joint Workload Working Group and themed focus groups to identify opportunities to have a positive impact on workload for the researcher community.
- Initiatives to further support wellbeing and mental health, including a new Stress Policy and supporting resources for managers of researchers, and revision and re-launch of our 'Report and Support' programme.
- Development of a new 'How We Manage at Essex' programme which will strengthen management capability within the researcher community, and provide additional development in core areas on inclusion, leadership, well-being, and career development. We will also develop a Research Leadership Programme.
- Further actions to support our diversity and inclusion work, including a joint working group to look at pay gaps in relation to gender, ethnicity and disability (and intersectional identities), an application for the Race Equality Charter, increasing the number of Athena Swan awards, and further training in areas such as automatic bias, and privilege and microaggressions.
- Re-launch of the Professors' Network to support networking, collaboration and the development of a community that are strong role models and mentors.

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