



University of Essex

HR Excellence in Research Award

**University of Essex 11 Year
Summary Report**

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1. Institutional Context: Research activity and staff profile

The University of Essex is a dual-intensive institution committed to excellence in education and research, benefiting individuals and communities. It operates across three campuses (Colchester, Southend, and Loughton) and supports research through 18 departments across three faculties: Arts and Humanities, Science and Health, and Social Sciences. Research activities span foundational and applied research, knowledge exchange, impact, and business engagement, supported by over 30 research centres and four flagship institutes addressing interdisciplinary challenges (Institute for Analytics and Data Science, Institute for Social and Economic Research, Institute of Public Health and Wellbeing, Human Rights Centre). We remain connected to research across the region and internationally through key partnerships including Eastern Academic Research Consortium (EARC), Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN), and Young Universities for the Future of Europe Alliance (YUFE).

Since 2022, we have seen a growth, followed by reduction in numbers of research staff, with a similar number of research only staff employed at University of Essex in Aug 2025 compared to 2022 (305 compared to 306). There has been a slight reduction of education and research staff contracts (838 compared to 849), as well as teaching only contracts (351 compared to 374). The number of PGR students has increased in 2025 compared to 2022 (1,164 compared to 1,008) and we have 217 technical staff who receive focussed institutional support through our institutional Technician Commitment action plan.

In 2025, there is approximately 33% more FTE of research only staff employed at Essex compared to 2022 which suggests that research only staff are having longer contracts. During the same period, there has been a 9% increase in FTE for Education and Research roles with a 7% reduction in FTE for teaching only contracts.

Most research-only staff (91.7%) are early career at Grades 7–8, with 78% managed by colleagues on Education and Research contracts. Smaller proportions hold senior roles — 4.5% at Grade 9 and 3.9% at Grades 10–11 — reflecting the institution's dual focus on education and research.

The primary audience of our HREIR 2025-28 Action Plan and Concordat commitment continues to be research only staff but we have also included other research contracted staff and research enabling staff when engaging with our research community to take a holistic approach to understand our research environment and support research-only staff.

2. Governance Structures for Delivering the Researcher Development Concordat Coordination and Delivery

University Research Committee provides oversight of research strategy and governance for the University, ensuring alignment of activities with our Strategic Plan, Research Strategy and People Supporting Strategy. It is a committee of Senate and provides reports to the University Executive Team. It includes the Pro-Vice Chancellor Research, Faculty Deans Research (FDRs) and Professional Services leads. Two Directors of Research and Directors of Impact are invited to observe each Research Committee meeting. 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 University Ethics Committee advises Senate on all matters relating to Research Ethics. This Committee also has Faculty and Departmental structures that feed into it. People, Culture and Inclusion Advisory Group support the University Executive Team to develop effective people and culture strategies which includes representation from PVC Research and Executive Deans.

The institutional Researcher Development Framework (RDF) is reviewed annually with an update provided to Research Committee, USG and Senate summarising levels of engagement, progress and future intentions to support the development of researchers. Progress for our 2025-28 HREIR action plan will be monitored by Research Committee and delivery of Researcher Experience surveys and focus groups will be operationalised by a Researcher Culture Working Group, consisting of research only staff in all Faculties, a Technician representative, leadership roles within Research Enterprise Office (REO) and People and Culture.

3. Progress since the 8-year review and 2022-25 action plan

During the 2022-25 HREIR action plan reporting period, we have witnessed a reducing student and employee population, including a Voluntary Severance Scheme in 2025. This context has influenced the research environment. There have been no promotions for academic staff since 2022, locally managed research budgets have been paused for many and internally delivered leadership programmes have been paused since 2023. Central funding for external development programmes has also been paused or limited since 2024. In this context, all aspects of University activity have been reviewed, with operational leads encouraged to identify efficiencies and deliver activities differently, whilst maintaining focus towards our strategic ambition, values and commitments. This has resulted in some actions being stopped or adapted. Nevertheless, in this challenging context, there has been positive progress with our HREIR action plan commitments which are summarised below.

Environment and Culture: Progress and achievements 2022-25

- (2025) Research Experience survey conducted with research community.
- (2024) Concordat embedded in recruitment and induction information. Principles for workload allocation approved following consultation across the University at all levels; Open access compliance reached 99% in 2023-24, the research repository provided 2.9M downloads of open access research; Stress Risk Assessment training completion required by all line managers.
- (2023) Stress Management Policy updated; Tackling Misogyny policy approved and published; Report and Support service reviewed and rebranded.
- (2022-25) Progress toward LEAF accreditation and embedding climate-conscious practices in research activities.

Recognition, value and support: Progress and achievements 2022-25

- (2025) Essential Training for managers launched to ensure that all line managers are aware of the statutory obligations and professional standards in their role.
- (2024) Joint decasualisation working group and action plan implemented.
- (2023) Equality Pay Gap Working Group review and institutional action plan;
- (2022) Essential Training for all staff developed and monitored annually thereafter to ensure that employees are aware of their statutory obligations and professional standards.

Professional and Career Development: Progress and achievements 2022-25

- (2025) Implementation of a University of Essex Doctoral and Postdoctoral College.
- (2024) YUFE Research Leadership Programme, researcher support and resources curated for all researcher career stages.
- (2023) Role based support programme for Directors of Research and Impact, and PGR Directors, established and delivered annually thereafter; New Heads of Department

Induction Programme revised and implemented; New Academic Induction programme available to all researchers; annual Pathway to Permanency networking events established for all academic researchers and implemented annually thereafter.
(2022) RDF implemented in 2021-22 and reviewed annually thereafter; 10 individuals have transitioned from a teaching only to a research contract following implementation of the ASE to ASER contract guidance.

4. How an internal evaluation was undertaken: Internal Evaluation and Gap Analysis Process

The forward-looking action plan has been informed by the following data sources:

(2025) **Researcher Experience Survey** targeting all research contracted and research enabling staff, with 128 respondents (22 research only staff) and a response rate of 7% research only and 15% research contracted staff.

(2025) **Researcher Experience Survey Focus Groups** follow up to the Researcher Experience Survey findings with two groups, including 12 researchers (4 research only).

(2025) **REF People Culture and Environment Pilot** involved consultation with research roles and Directors of Research and Impact in the 4 pilot departments, as well as central leaders in research and research enabling roles.

(2024) **Institutional Employee Voice survey** (all staff) survey with a 38.6% response rate from academic staff.

(2022-25) **Annual Review of the RDF** involved structured engagement with FDRs, Directors of Research and Impact and senior professional services research enabling staff.

(2022-25) **Institutional Pulse surveys and focus groups** have also informed the following institutional consultations: Flexible Working, Working Practices, Race Equality Charter, Athena SWAN, Report and Support, Tackling Islamophobia, Financial Sustainability, Workload, Early Career Researchers, Personal Tutors, and University Leavers.

The Researcher Experience survey was mapped directly to the three core principles of the Concordat. Survey feedback provided insights at all career stages, to enable targeted and evidence-based actions to inform our HREIR action plan 2025-28. These data sources were synthesised through dedicated analytical support from the Research Enterprise Office, Planning and Data Insights Team and shared with FDRs and Professional Services Leads to identify insights and actions for implementation in the forward-looking action plan.

5. Findings and next steps

Environment and Culture

- Awareness of funding opportunities is high across researcher roles and Faculties.
- Awareness of institutional technical/admin support varies across Faculties by over 25% but is higher for research only staff compared to education and research. To address this gap, the next Action Plan will include targeted communications and faculty-specific workshops to raise awareness of support services, ensuring under-represented Faculties receive tailored guidance.
- Awareness of development and mentoring varies between Faculties with a difference of over 20%. Mentoring good practices will be shared across Faculties during Termly Directors of Research and Directors of Impact networking events and central support will be provided to support local mentoring approaches.
- Low survey response ratings for recognition of researchers for their contributions and the research environment enabling further research were received, although there were more positive responses from research only staff compared to education and research, and one Faculty, with a difference of approximately 20%. The next plan will implement recognition-

focused interventions for ASER staff, including department-level briefings and visibility campaigns highlighting research achievements.

Recognition, Value and support

- Awareness of internal schemes for recognizing researcher contributions is moderate, but external recognition opportunities and support for external collaborations was low.
- Research only staff felt that their research contributions were recognised and valued within their department or research group compared to education and research role respondents.
- The University's promotion of recognition for researchers at different career stages was nearly 20% lower for education and research role respondents compared to research only. To address this, the next plan will strengthen recognition mechanisms for education and research staff, including formal acknowledgement in internal communications and faculty-specific awards, while promoting external visibility through targeted support for collaborative and funding opportunities.
- Only 5% of respondents disagreed that they were aware of institutional open publishing mechanisms and funding sources.

Professional and Career Development

- Since 2022: engagement with the RDF has increased from 582 attendees in 2021-22 to 820 attendees in 2023-24; average attendance for centrally delivered research events has nearly doubled since before the RDF was implemented increasing from 7.7 people per learning event in 2020-21 compared to 14.9 in 2023-24;
- EARC Mentoring Scheme has had 230 UoE researchers engage with the scheme since 2021 with 94% reporting that the experience met their expectations.
- Higher proportion of research only staff use PDR as a planning tool, receive regular and constructive feedback from their research manager and are aware of mentoring schemes compared to education and research role respondents.
- Low awareness of leadership and management development programmes, training opportunities within the RDF and externally delivered development schemes.

6. HREIR forward looking action plan priorities for 2025-28

Our Research Strategy will continue to focus towards: capacity building, support for researchers, inclusivity and equity, infrastructure investment, open research and impact and sustainability. The following 8 priorities will underpin the HREIR 2025-28 Action Plan and build on the findings from the 2025 Researcher Experience Survey and Focus Groups:

1. Establish a Researcher Culture Working Group.
2. Continue to engage with researchers through Researcher Experience Surveys, Pulse Surveys and Focus Groups.
3. Targeted communications sent to researchers, managers of researchers and research leaders, led by FDRs.
4. Targeted career development support for Postdoctoral researchers, Principal Investigators, Managers of researchers, Directors of Research and Directors of Impact.
5. Review approaches and opportunities to celebrate contributions of researchers.
6. Promote external mentoring opportunities, share mentoring good practices across Faculties and provide targeted support to inform local approaches.
7. Promote opportunities to engage with external networks and development opportunities, including Eastern ARC, YUFE and YERUN.
8. Researcher Culture Annual Update report to Research Committee.