University of Sussex Business School

Research Strategy

Better Research for a Better World

US | **BUSINESS SCHOOL**

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Background

The University of Sussex Business School, while only recently rebranded as such, has thrived as a cohesive, multi-departmental unit for 10 years and enjoys, in Economics and SPRU, an intellectual footprint that goes back at least five decades. The School is home to approx. 200 academics plus 150 doctoral students in five departments (Accounting & Finance, Economics, Management, SPRU, and Strategy & Marketing). Some departments already have distinct identities and established strengths whereas new departments have just come into existence and still need to develop their own identities. Overall, the Business School has an excellent research reputation established by a unique group of creative and diverse scholars and enhanced by a dedicated Professional Services team.

Our vision continues to be of a close-knit yet outward-looking scholarly community that collaborates across disciplines to shape global issues in business, management and wider society, creating a positive impact on academia, policy, practice and people.

The Research Strategy is based on an internal SWOT analysis (see Appendix A) and several school workshops with feedback loops (see Appendix B).

RESEARCH VISION, UNDERSTANDING & OBJECTIVES

The School is committed to the University's vision to understand and help address the grand issues of our time, by challenging conventional thinking and discourse, being creative and open in our approach and innovative in our methods in order to produce world-class research with impact. To achieve this, the School fosters research excellence combined with the highest standards of academic rigour and applied problem-solving, bringing together the best and brightest scholars from across the globe to attain the necessary critical mass of knowledge, skills and talent.

Our aim is to create an institution where curious scholars can pursue fundamental and emergent – as well as applied – high-impact research that cultivates unique solutions to real-world problems for economic, environmental and societal benefit (research with impact) – in short, creating a better world. This ambition continues a long-standing cultural tradition of the University: that of encouraging "disruption by design", fostering a pioneering spirit that invites us to embrace experimentation in our methods, calculated risk-taking in our approaches, courage in our choices and convictions, and critical scepticism in our acceptance of received tropes, established boundaries and conventional ways of thinking.

Our research is distinct in 3 key respects: **1)** it is highly attuned to the modern world, addressing grand challenges in an applied and often practical manner; **2)** our approach to research is characterised by challenging conventional thinking and disrupting established norms, but also by the ways in which we work in partnership with and proactively engage others; and **3)** our research both evolves organically, bottom-up, and enjoys the high-level strategic support and oversight required to develop its full, world-leading potential.

We firmly believe that the strongest research develops from the ground up, driven by the passions and intellectual interests of academics working in self-organising groups unencumbered by centrally imposed research priorities or a top-down agenda (decentralised growth), but that this research needs to be carefully nurtured and strategically supported if it is to achieve maximum impact and global visibility. To this end, we foster excellence in all our research areas while strategically supporting those established school-level themes and high-performing research groups that have already achieved international prominence or clearly have the potential to do so.

Our research objectives are:

a. To pursue rigorous, internationally-leading research, clearly emphasising quality over quantity and, where possible, with interdisciplinary focus
b. To create research with impact for academy, policy, practice and people, addressing the grand issues of our time
c. To attract external funding at exceptional levels
d. To create a research environment that allows individuals and groups to excel in their research activities, whether in applied, mainstream topics or theoretical, highly specialised areas

These Research Objectives are linked to the following KPIs

	Description	Comments
A1	80% of all Business School outputs are assessed as being at least 3* by the REF panel; in addition, we aim at a Top 25 REF positioning for UoA 17 (Business and Management Studies) and Top 15 positioning for UoA 16 (Economics and Econometrics)	Rolling forecasts, final assessment in 2021
A2	55% of publications internationally co-authored by 2021	Rolling 5-year average
B1	80% of impact cases are judged at least 3* by the REF panel. Top 25 REF positioning for UoA 17 (Business and Management Studies) and Top 15 positioning for UoA 16 (Economics and Econometrics)	Rolling forecasts, final assessment in 2021
B2	Enable at least 5 globally-visible, well-funded and sustainable University-recognised research centres by 2021	Annual data
B3	Increase field-weighted citation impact above 2.2 by 2021	Annual data
C	At least maintain but ideally improve our research income ranking as measured by CABS (current ranking = 3rd) and meet university targets (2% annual growth rate: £000s 2018/19: 4,351, 2019/20: 4,438, 2020/21: 4,527)	Period data
D1	Continuous improvement of research culture as voiced by staff members	Annual survey
D2	Flourishing cohort of doctoral students measured by number of graduated students, completion rates and placements after graduation	Annual data

Strategic Plan

Key to achieving our research targets is the creation of an open, supportive and diverse research culture that fosters excellence and facilitates impact in every part of the Business School, combined with the opportunity to reach out and cross-fertilize research in a way that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries.

We focus on a multi-level strategy that enables us to signal clearly our core research strengths – which inform and enhance our taught offering and enable us to attract and retain high-calibre international scholars. Our research environment will cover all major aspects of research management, from postgraduate research (PGR) support and REF preparation, research communications and events, to external engagement, knowledge exchange and impact with businesses, policymakers and myriad other stakeholders and research users. This enhanced operational capability – in conjunction with our evolving research culture – facilitates ground-breaking and timely research, enabling emergent research to accelerate and empowering researchers to pursue their intellectual interests independently, in a stimulating and collaborative environment.

Our research stands at the intersection of many of society's most urgent and intractable problems – problems which necessitate multi- and inter-disciplinary solutions. Our collective expertise means we are uniquely positioned to leverage talent and funding in pursuit of these solutions.

The Strategic plan is built upon the following 7 pillars.

1. **Establish a highly attractive research environment.** Most of the following points feed into this dimension, but it must be clear that the environment and culture are key for our plans.

2. **Recruit and retain the best researchers at all career stages.** This includes establishing a recruitment process aiming at research excellence; ongoing support and mentoring of all existing staff; a predictable and transparent promotion process; defining clear career pathways for researchers at all levels.

TASKS:

- Implement **recruitment processes** that allow the selection of high-calibre researchers who either are or have the potential to become **international leaders** in their research area and who demonstrate a clear fit with vision of the School and the strategic aims of the relevant departments/groups. Teaching needs and research opportunities should be balanced in the recruitment process by integrating Directors of Research (or their representatives) into the hiring process

- Renew our strong commitment to **fair and equal career opportunities for all** in hiring and promotion practices, supporting all researchers in achieving their full potential

- **Stimulate researchers** by providing opportunities to join new research teams, and **engage in networking** and intellectual exchange (research days, themed meetings, hackathons, 'speed dating' events), with opportunities for interdisciplinary and agenda-setting research in the Business School and across the University

- Provide **clear and reliable development pathways** for all career levels in line with promotion committee expectations, and ensure PRPs align with these pathways

- Allow **adequate time for researchers** to concentrate on research work (e.g. by allocating teaching in one term wherever possible and demanded) as well as advocate for the provision of **high quality resources** (including technology and office space as well as Professional Services support)

- **Ringfence 40% of research workload capacity** for research activities and monitor compliance based on academic time surveys

- Provide the opportunity for **study leave / sabbaticals for research work** after three years of satisfactory performance

- **Facilitate targeted opportunities for collaboration** within critical mass-sized research groups and support all researchers in engaging with collaborators and internal and external stakeholders

- Introduce an **onboarding programme - especially for junior academics -** designed to help jump-start their research careers, providing an introduction to key research issues and firmly grounding them in the research culture of the School. This also entails the development of a specific ECR training programme, complementing existing university offerings.

3. **Strengthen and support our research activities.** This includes providing exceptional service from research management staff, creating research incentives as well as cultivating a supportive and collaborative environment.

TASKS:

- Provide guidance, training, mentoring and support as required to equip all researchers with the skills needed to undertake high-level research as well as to apply for research funds that enable the institution to grow (e.g. writing workshops for papers and research proposals; dedicated mentoring)

- Provision of dedicated Professional Services support for managing REF processes, doctoral programmes, conference organisation, policy engagement, communications and impact work, bid development, etc.

- Appoint Research Mobilisers to drive research themes, combining existing research strengths and creating opportunities for collaboration across the School, the University and beyond. Adopting and adapting the current SPRU model, Research Mobilisers will have access to dedicated resources, and will seek to create new cross-departmental research groups with soft boundaries as well as interdisciplinary groups

- Provide the means and opportunity to create new research centres (that might cross disciplinary boundaries) and support those centres to grow and flourish

- Provide the professional support and internal structures required to help realise the University's goal of '[putting] collaboration at the heart of everything we do' (Sussex 2025); building opportunities and incentives for collaboration and engagement into the design of our policies and practices

- Ensure that appropriate and effective incentives are available to researchers who are particularly successful in attracting research income and producing world-leading research outcomes

- Provide more generous conference attendance funding and administrative support than most competitors

- Attract leading journals to make the School their editorial home by offering workload allowances and/or financial support

- Encourage international research activity by inviting leading scholars for centrally-financed visiting scholarships, actively developing nascent partnerships and managing and maintaining existing ones

- Ringfence workload and funding for impact case work for REF

- Host major national and international conferences by providing financial and human resources (e.g. the appointment of a dedicated Research Engagement & Events Officer)

- Reduce clashes between teaching and research activities (e.g. smarter timetabling and leaner processes)

- Continue an active research seminar series with regular participation and attendance by faculty at all levels

- Formalise cross-campus links with key synergy schools (e.g. Engineering and Informatics, Global Studies, LPS) and IDS to foster interdisciplinarity

- Enhance workload planning to ensure staffing needs are met over the medium-long term; e.g. continual liaison between departments and RDOs to ensure current Research Assistants/Fellows and Professional Services posts are written into research grants

- Regular review of timings of fixed-term research posts and early consultation with post-holders and PIs to enable seamless redeployment where appropriate, ensuring continuity of employment, training and development for staff and retention of knowledge, skills, contacts/networks and expertise.

4. Grow our external research funding.

TASKS:

- Provide enhanced dedicated Professional Services support for managing research bids both pre- and post-award

- Continue to aggressively support major research bids, through match funding, strategically prioritising research which aligns with key synergy areas and areas of significant strength

- Engage proactively with major funders of research, e.g. UK Research Councils

- Enable teaching buy out for externally funded projects (in accordance with existing School policy)

- Create a timely, rigorous and consistent internal peer review process to enhance competitive funding proposals and improve success rates

- Diversify our external research funding by creating and appropriately supporting opportunities for working on corporate sponsored projects, consultancy engagements, and other non-standard forms of research or knowledge exchange activity

- Use cross-departmental synergies for funding applications to diversify research income streams and foster interdisciplinarity, exemplifying the University's ambition to 'reclaim our reputation as the university of choice for those committed to interdisciplinary research and engagement' (Sussex 2025)

- Position ourselves to capitalise on key strategic funding opportunities. Ensure our subject mobilisation groups are apprised of key opportunities with support from the Research Development Office (e.g. under the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund and Global Challenges Research Fund), are well informed, well resourced, and poised to react in good time.

- Ensure networks are actively developed and maintained, and are appropriately utilised in marshalling collaborators to pursue key funding opportunities.

5. Ensure transparent and reliable processes for the allocation of research resources following high standards of integrity.

TASKS:

- Establish transparent processes for the allocation of resources (match funding, impact funding, seed funding) as well as ensuring fair and open access to research leadership positions

- Regularly review processes and policies to ensure full compliance with equality, diversity and inclusion principles.

6. Communicate, promote and celebrate research internally and externally.

TASKS:

- Support impact generation and external engagement and communicate successes through web, media, social media and bespoke publications

- Develop a stronger web presence for research, focused around core themes while also linking with the research profiles of Departments and Centres, to ensure academic colleagues, potential collaborators, new potential staff, students, funders and policy makers are fully aware of the School's strengths and expertise

- Create research communication training programmes to enable researchers to promote their personal research more effectively and engage widely, both internally and externally

- Identify central research themes for the school and provide extra resources for their communication & promotion strategies

- Cultivate a strong, coherent research identity by actively promoting key synergy areas and high-performing research groups, consistently championing areas of core research strength

- Organise an annual research day to celebrate the research successes of our School and share research interests and best practice

- Work to instil a culture that recognises and rewards research success by communicating accomplishments widely and awarding prizes

- Provide regular and timely communication about research topics (e.g. via the Research Roundup and Research in Focus initiatives) as well as producing an annual research report showcasing success across the School

- Create an easy-to-use school research log that provides researchers with a quick overview of current and planned research projects to identify and connect colleagues with similar interests.

7. Create a flourishing doctoral student cohort and dynamic PhD programme.

TASKS:

- Provide a comprehensive and attractive doctoral training programme that produces excellent research scholars in the spirit of the School's research programmes and engenders the skills and experience required for today's hyper-competitive graduate market

- Grow the doctoral student cohort by identifying innovative ways of funding studentships

- Integrate doctoral students from the start into research groups and wider research community, allowing them a crucial role in contributing to the research culture of the School

- Attract increasing numbers of high-quality applications to the doctoral programme by ensuring the programme's competitiveness against rival offerings.

Next Steps

- Now follows a period of prioritisation and implementation of the measures set out in this Strategy. The School DRKE and Research Manager will liaise with department DRKEs and the Research Development Officers to determine priorities, establish appropriate timelines and assign tasks across the team. A list of key priorities and an implementation/action plan will follow the publication of the Strategy, once budgets for the coming financial year have been confirmed.

- Research Management Team objectives and workload for the coming year will be finalised, informed largely by the Strategy. The Team will work closely with the Research Development Officers to develop/amend relevant underlying policies and internal processes to support the implementation of the Strategy.

- Departments, Research Centres and Research Groups are encouraged to develop/update their own research strategies in light of the above. Support is available from the DRKE and Research Manager as well as the wider Research Management Team.

Appendix A: SWOT analysis

Context

These are times of unprecedented change in the external research funding landscape:

- UKRI active from 1 Apr 2018, along with OfS and Res England
- Brexit: implications for research talent and access to EU capital & research funds
- Radical sector changes under consideration by Government
- Large-scale national funding initiatives: Industrial Strategy, GCRF, Rutherford Fund, etc.
- National sectoral disquiet around pensions, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, HE culture & practices

Coupled with substantial internal changes:

- Recent change of university leadership
- Increased budgetary pressures imposed by Centre
- Development & subsequent implementation of Sussex 2025
- Institutional refocusing on teaching & learning, and away from research & KE
- Potentially radical reshaping of central Research & Enterprise division: review undertaken, restructure currently underway