

School of Education and Social Work

Strategic Plan 2019-2025

Overview

This strategic plan is in response to the “A Better University for a Better World” Strategic Framework that was launched by the University in 2018. The plan for the School of Education and Social Work (ESW) focuses on strategic aims and objectives for ESW that will help realise the strategic vision for the University.

The University framework is built upon four key pillars: Learn to Transform; Research with Impact; Engage for Change; and Build on Strengths. In the strategic plan for ESW we speak primarily to three of the four (Learn to Transform, Research with Impact, Build on Strengths). In ESW we consider engagement as a cross-cutting theme that flows across education and research. In this strategy, we specifically highlight the contributions ESW will make to equality, diversity and inclusion within and beyond the University.

The plan for ESW will be supported by annual operational plans and projects that will assist in delivery of our aims and objectives. We see this strategic plan as a road map, but it is very much a living document that will be shaped and changed as our environment flexes and shifts. Being nimble and reflexive has been a great strength of ESW under the previous strategic plan (2014-2018) and our ability to respond quickly and appropriately to both internal and external forces will remain an important part of our approach. It is particularly important that we are responsive to student and staff agendas and we recognise that these may develop at speed and we should respond accordingly. However, we are committed to putting in place clear medium and long term plans in order to secure the future of our fields and disciplines within the University and the sector.

Vision

Moving forward, our teaching, research and engagement will focus on social justice and social action. We will continue to strive for a better and more just world for all people. This will be achieved through meaningful, rigorous, and ethically sound research that has a positive impact on communities and individuals both locally and globally. Our students will be engaged citizens who will be prepared for an ever changing and challenging world. They will see only possibilities and work towards meaningful solutions for all, but with a particular focus on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in our society.

Aim

ESW’s over-arching strategic aim is to foster a thriving and sustainable environment that contributes at the highest level to the disciplines of education and social work. ESW has a commitment to supporting and improving social justice at the global, international and national levels through our research, teaching and professional activities. Under this new strategic plan, we are renewing and increasing our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

We will continue to build upon the strong reputation of our constituent Departments to identify and pursue new opportunities for within-discipline, inter-disciplinary, and pan disciplinary collaboration. We recognise that connections with other disciplines - such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, law and health/medicine - are fundamental for our success in current and future research and political and policy environments. Developing stream of interdisciplinary activity unites the work of colleagues with common interests including the study of childhood and youth, adult well-being, pedagogy and inter-professional policy and practice.

Values

We acknowledge and embrace the University values of Kindness, Integrity, Inclusion, Collaboration and Courage. In ESW, we are also committed to embodying Community and Social Justice.

Learning to Transform

“Making students partners in the big decisions that shape our University’s future”

Enhanced Curriculum and Pedagogy

We will offer a distinctive, inter-disciplinary, and dynamic curriculum that is deeply embedded in principles of social justice. We will prepare and qualify students for diverse professions in education, social work, social care and wellbeing while nurturing their moral compass and sense of purpose and encouraging courageous and meaningful action to address the key social issues of our time. We will actively encourage our students to engage with the Sussex Award and continue to provide ways within the school of acknowledging and accrediting participation in and contribution to civic wellbeing.

Our curriculum will be led by pedagogy and process as well as content. In designing our curriculum, we will adhere to core principles of design ensuring that the curriculum is relevant, appropriate, challenging and coherent for our students. We will maintain the Sussex tradition of inter-disciplinarity both within ESW and through electives modules, pathways, and continuing professional development courses. We will offer a range of courses paced to suit students’ needs: from short and fast track to ‘long learning’ and extended programmes. These initiatives will include the development of online distance learning (ODL) modules and courses local, regional and global partners.

Our pedagogical approach will provide safe and respectful spaces that encourage students to challenge ‘grand narratives’ and develop critical responses and alternatives including inter-sectional perspectives. We will work to ensure that our courses offer students a curriculum that represents diverse cultural heritages and knowledge, and engagement with non-mainstream epistemologies and methodologies, in which students can recognise positive representations of groups to which they belong. New generations of trained practitioners will be equipped and motivated to challenge inequalities and discrimination in their professional roles. Where applicable, we will ensure our curriculum is professionally compliant and maintain excellent working relationships with our professional accrediting bodies. In areas where placements are not required as part of the course of study, we will ensure that students have the opportunity to have professional experience away from campus through internships, placements or through volunteering.

A large part of our curriculum is characterised by interfacing theory and professional practice, work-based research, and strong partnerships between the University and the wider local, regional, and global community. We will continue to grow and strengthen a strong network of partnerships in order to enhance our curriculum and prepare our students for their lives beyond Sussex. We will continue to promote a practitioner research ethos, community partnership links and offer opportunities for study and professional development to partners and the public within the community. Specifically in the area of social work, we will continue to engage and collaborate with service users to develop long-term understanding and respect for others and eschewing a deficit model of society.

Our students will develop into research practitioners by actively harnessing their curiosity through both collaborative and independent enquiry and research. We will ensure that all student research and enquiry is ethically sound. All our courses will foster research-informed practice and practice-informed research and involve students with elements of knowledge creation through enquiry. We will continue to consider all students to be integral members of the research community and look to enhance the coherence between research centres and related courses. We will organise events to specifically showcase and celebrate ongoing student research and its impacts on our communities of partnerships.

Digital Technology

Digital technology will be used in the School to enhance student learning in both physical and virtual spaces. We are committed to harnessing the potentials of technologies to enhance the classroom experience but we are mindful of using digital technology in inclusive ways that always takes into account the range of student and staff confidence, experience, and needs. We will provide opportunities for staff to train, develop, and then share digital good practice and continue to use digital communication and tracking systems to sustain support for students on professional practice placements.

We will continue to provide leadership in higher education pedagogic development through innovation and enrichment for colleagues across the University and beyond. We are committed to not only helping our University colleagues gain external recognition through the Higher Education Academy Fellowship programme, but we will increase the percentage of staff in our own school that are Senior and Principal Fellows and the number of research students who are Associate Fellows. For the latter, this also means providing opportunities for our research students to contribute to teaching and learning.

Enhanced Student Voice and Support

Relationships are at the heart of teaching and learning and they flourish when staff and students work closely together and when students work closely with each other. A student centred approach for us means developing and maintaining strong and mutually respectful relationships.

Giving rise to student voice and ensuring this happens in a meaningful and authentic way lies at the heart of our Learn to Transform strategy. Students will be perceived as partners in the co-construction of knowledge and learning. One way this will be achieved is by providing opportunities for student participation in course review, planning and innovation, and by expecting students to develop their identity as active participants in the production of knowledge rather than as passive consumers. We will encourage students to use their voice and be active participants in shaping their professions, their professional bodies and representative organisations. We will also encourage students to recognise their position as a member of a series of nested communities, from the local to global; at every level they have both responsibility and agency.

Academic advising is at the core of supporting our students. In order to enhance our offering we will operate a flexible approach to staff workload and academic advising to allow for differing levels of student support and to embrace our diversity of learners on their journeys through higher education and beyond. We will continue to support our students beyond their academic lives by forging strong links with the new Student Centre and ensuring ongoing professional development for all staff to enable effective student support across all domains including, but not limited to, mental health. We will develop stronger partnerships and communication with the Student Union and all student services and provide clear highly visible mapping so students know what support provisions are available. A key aim for us is to develop mentoring and buddy systems along with the Student Union to offer peer support, opportunities to develop mentoring, and coaching skills for students.

We will nurture a culture of inclusivity and kindness within the school where students feel a sense of belonging. We will develop physical spaces to make them more student-centred and work alongside students to organise academic and social activities to enhance their engagement with the school and foster their sense of wellbeing.

RESEARCH WITH IMPACT

“By challenging conventional thinking and discourse, we will understand and help solve the grand issues of our time”

Building on Strengths

We are recognised – locally, nationally and internationally – as a leading and outward-facing centre of research excellence. Our diverse research shares a common value of social justice and commitment to inclusion and equity, social and civic participation, and improving lives. These values underpin the Research with Impact strategy through, (1) creating an environment where diverse researchers are supported to thrive, at all stages in their research careers – from undergraduate to emerita (2) providing a critical and ethical perspective on knowledge production – engaging those who have a stake in our work, respecting and attending to marginalised and minority perspectives, disrupting normative assumptions and power relations (3) breaking boundaries between different kinds of research, innovating in theory and method, and (4) re-imagining social justice for contemporary times of rapid change in technology, inequality and precarity, and across local, national and global contexts.

Across contexts, we will ensure that our research continues to be valued as a key resource for positive and critical change in practice and policy, as well as making significant and wide-reaching contributions to the sustainability and vitality of our disciplines and fields.

Working in partnership

Whether supporting local practice, responding to professional or community concerns, or shifting critical debates in national, regional and global policy, our research aims to make a positive difference to diverse lives and challenges. Our strategy builds on an exceptional record of accomplishment of collaborative engagement with practice and policy research users. Collaborative co-production underpins the societal relevance of our research; we listen and learn from those who have a stake in our work. We will build on these strengths with a strategic emphasis on active dialogue, building long-lasting connections with diverse communities and extending intra- and inter- university research networks and partnerships beyond the academy in order to (1) exchange knowledge, identify problems and co-produce research led solutions (2) provide a space to think; that helps our partners to engage with research, build capacity and share expertise and (3) make porous boundaries between research and practice, disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions and enabling the sharing of insights and experience, through innovations such as secondments and embedded researchers.

Re-imagining social justice

Building on our strengths in grant capture from varied funders, the breadth of our research inquiry enables us re-imagining social justice as an interface between theory, policy and practice. Our pioneering research is critically reflexive and publicly engaged giving rise to fresh epistemologies and methodologies. Our work is disruptive by design and pro-actively attentive to questions of diversity, equity and equality. Going forward as a recognised centre of excellence in research and teaching, we will maintain this innovative and inclusive approach, including a commitment to enabling all researchers to be confident, creative, and competent in their research, teaching, knowledge exchange, and impact. We will also build a collective research identity that accommodates researcher autonomy and respects diversity, but which transcends disciplinary and methodological boundaries through a common concern with the most pressing social challenges and injustices of our time, and the inequalities that shape diverse and disadvantaged lives in UK and global societies.

Our commitment to social justice informs our research environment, which enables all staff to flourish in their research and scholarship, reaching the highest standards of excellence. We believe that a vibrant research culture is built on shared values including commitment to inclusion and equity, sensitivity to inequity and diversity, social and civic participation, and improving life chances across the life-course. We also provide a robust and nurturing research community, with internationally recognised research centres delivering strong externally facing identities and a 'research culture without borders' within ESW and the University.

Centre of Excellence

The research centres provide the key mechanism through which we develop and implement our research agenda, through links, networks and knowledge hubs with local, national and international research partners and stakeholders and synergies between research, scholarship and teaching. We will extend existing relationships with practitioners and local government in education, social work and allied professions, including further development of collaborative and practitioner-inquiry research between the university, partner agencies/schools and user groups involving co-production. These networks will enrich and inform our commitment to social justice, generate research impact promoting research-mindedness in policy and practice. Our research centres will also continue to promote cross-university partnerships to develop interdisciplinary bidding platforms, enabling new possibilities for grant capture and improving research capacity, quality and innovation to ensure our ongoing success in a changing funding landscape. Our research centres will continue to provide a crucial architecture for research support, creating a challenging, contemporary and inspiring research environment and culture. . ESW and its research centres are inherently interdisciplinary, linking education and social work with cognate disciplines and professional fields, while research centres with cross-University membership enhance our inter-school links, and the variety of disciplines with which our researchers engage.

Our research will continue to combine conceptual and theoretical sophistication with methodological and epistemological innovation and rigour. Across research centres and areas of specialist expertise, our research portfolio will continue to be diverse, including both blue skies, formative research, commissioned studies and

programme evaluations that are responsive to emergent policy and practice agendas. These strands of work will inform and enrich each other, enabling the independence and rigour necessary to challenge conventional wisdom and reconfigure understanding of complex societal issues, whether locally, across the UK or internationally.

Our commitment to methodological innovation, to post- and trans-disciplinary collaboration, and to the development and execution of high-risk/high-gain research involves critical engagement with complex and often politicised research agendas. In turn, this engagement will form part of a school culture that builds our scholars' confidence, courage, and capacity to disrupt dominant paradigms and discourses – in research, teaching and engagement beyond the academy.

Supporting our People

To ensure an equitable environment in which research careers can thrive, we will build on existing structures for support and mentoring to enable researchers at all career stages to fulfil their potential. This entails support for planning and implementing excellent research from inception of ideas, to project management and the delivery of outputs, and impact. Building on strong foundations of value-based mentoring, we will develop supportive and inclusive systems designed to engender a sense of enjoyment in research, a space to think creatively and disruptively about disciplines, epistemologies and methodologies, and to celebrate individual and collective research achievements.

We will continue to build and review systems and support mechanisms, ensuring they are robust, address research development and research planning needs and encompassing individual research plans. This includes transparent approaches to appraisals, study leave, training of researchers and professional staff, quality assurance of bids and outputs, and careful workload management. As well as support for faculty, our focus on building the next generation of research leaders encompasses attention to postgraduate research provision, enhancing existing work on supervision frameworks and progress review, training and support for doctoral supervisors and students, and building further equitable opportunities for postgraduate research students to engage in funded research and teaching. We will also prioritise the development of expert professional staff (in relation to research support, communication and impact) in order to enable researchers to work to their strengths, and to access and engage key publics.

Finally, recognising that an increasingly competitive research environment will affect our aspirations for research with impact, we will work to strengthen a research culture where priorities for bidding and writing are guided by quality, enabling staff to understand and engage with external expectations for research assessment without sacrificing commitments to critical engagement and social justice. For grant capture, this includes further developing existing systems for pre-submission, including; internal peer review of proposals and tailoring support to researchers' needs (career stage and experience) to the scale and scope of bids and funders. For research outputs, this involves enhanced quality and capacity building that balances the requirements of quality assurance systems (such as REF, KEF and external peer review) with supportive yet robust scrutiny from peers aimed at promoting excellence in line with our shared values.

Building on Strengths through Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

“A people powered transformation for a kinder university”

Our staff and students are our greatest asset. ESW is a community of academics, professional services staff, students, external partners, and alumni. We flourish as individuals but also as a collective. Equality, diversity, inclusion and accessibility lie at the heart of our strategic plan to build upon our strengths. We aspire to be a more equal, diverse, accessible and flexible school.

We are committed to being institutional leaders in presenting a critical, challenging and disruptive response to unequal policies and practices whether within ESW, the University or external community. As part of this leadership aspiration, we will challenge ourselves as individuals and collectively to continue to develop and evaluate our awareness, practices, achievements, and priorities around building an inclusive and equal working

environment. This will be achieved in part through engagement with appropriate internal and external training and external charter mark processes. Realising the potential of our diverse students and colleagues to work together to address inequalities in student attainment and staff progression around protected characteristics and their intersections will be a major focus. We will reinvigorate our efforts and our commitment to working to achieve greater diversity within our staff and student bodies, progression and leadership structures.

We will create opportunities to welcome our students from diverse backgrounds into our academic School community, to foster a culture of value, inclusiveness and belonging. We remain committed to building on our current achievements in diversity of student profile, including through our existing efforts to recruit and retain students with non-traditional academic backgrounds such as Access, BTec, and professional experience routes. Part of this is committing to Widening Participation (WP) and aligning our work with that of the University's WP team, including recognising that accessibility and inclusion continues beyond admission, and extends to degree experience, attainment and career outcomes.

Developing positive and respectful relationships are integral to every aspect of our work as staff and students in ESW. As such, we will continue to work actively to foster a positive culture of kindness, dignity and respect in relationships between staff and students, and that is intolerant of bullying and harassment; including through development of resources, clarity of processes, and appropriate support structures. We will approach research relationships with all partners and participants in sensitive ways that recognise power dynamics and seek to maximise democracy of process and benefits.

Building on our strengths is about providing the right support so all our staff and students can flourish. We recognise that the uniqueness in backgrounds, skills and needs of diverse students and staff will necessitate different levels and kinds of support to facilitate success, including development of appropriate technologies and training. We will develop training, mentoring and professional development opportunities to support the progression and well-being of staff in diverse roles including professional services, research staff and teaching only staff as well as continuing to embed engagement and evidence around equality and diversity in progression and reward processes including appointments, promotions and discretionary pay awards.

We will acknowledge and act upon awareness of the barriers faced by many individuals including those with seen and unseen disabilities. It is important that we develop and publicise clear channels for staff and students who have experienced equality issues to take these forward to the appropriate person and develop positive opportunities to celebrate our diversity including through bringing together academic and professional service staff in diverse roles. A specific focus will be to develop an inclusive environment that is conducive to the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students, including addressing ongoing stigma surrounding disclosure.

We are committed to being an institutional leader in supporting work-life balance and creating a more flexible workplace for staff including professional service colleagues, and recognising the benefits of the productivity and wellbeing of all.