Annual Report for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers

Universities and Research Institutes

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Statement on how the organisation creates, maintains and embeds a research culture that upholds a positive and inclusive environment for researchers at all stages of their careers *(max 500 words)*

The University of Sussex is a values-led organisation, emphasising integrity, kindness, and inclusion. This is reflected in the Sussex Research Culture Enabling Plan developed through consultation with our research community and published in 2024. It is aspirational in terms of the distinctive research culture we would like to see – collaborative and open – as well as recognising and responding to challenges identified. Key priorities include achieving parity of support for all our people in their career development to enable them to thrive, and an equal sense of belonging for everyone at Sussex, whatever their career stage and background. The four target areas are Collaboration, Open Research, Maximising Potential, and Belonging.

The plan, which provides a clear strategic focus for activities, is guided by the Research Culture Steering Group, a group of academic and professional services staff with expertise across the spectrum of Research Culture and responsibility to deliver on aspects of the agenda. Through a range of initiatives, we are actively working to enhance the research experience for all. We have delivered new mandatory training for all PhD supervisors to enhance support and mentorship, an accelerator programme to help ECRs secure their first grant (shortly to become a sustainable online training offer), and a new Women's Leadership Academy. Our first cohort completed the programme, providing training and mentoring to empower and advance the career of early-career women academics (under-represented in STEM fields), in summer 2025. We are looking to grow the programme this academic year.

Recognising that a large institution encompasses diverse research communities with unique needs, we devolved spend to our new Faculties to enable them to bring their communities together and determine the cultures they would like to build. Strategic projects that built learning about research culture needs and piloted solutions were funded e.g. implementing action learning sets for female-identifying colleagues in the Sciences; interdisciplinary workshops for colleagues focusing on University priorities (digital futures, environmental sustainability, human flourishing). These projects identified follow-up actions to drive and embed change within the Science, Engineering and Medicine Faculty and beyond. Other support for projects was responsive, with open calls distributing seed funding to support networks, workshops and events led by researchers at all career stages e.g.

a training event, led by Social Sciences, for all researchers thinking about using AI in their work.

A key role of the Research Culture Team is to share good practice we have identified so that others can learn from it. We also celebrate the achievements of colleagues through a 'Summer of Research' festival, now in its third year, celebrating research and starting collaborative conversations. We initiated Research Culture Awards in 2023, rewarding individuals and teams at all career stages (both academic and Professional Services) who exemplify practices that promote collaboration, open research, ethical conduct, equity diversity and inclusion, and strong research culture leadership. In 2025 these became part of the University Awards led by the Vice Chancellor and are now an established part of the calendar, with a new award in 2025 for Postgraduate Researcher Support.

Provide a short summary of the institution's strategic objectives and implementation plans for delivering each of the three pillars of the Concordat (environment and culture, employment, and professional development of researchers) for your key stakeholder groups together with your measures for evaluating progress and success *(max 600 words)*

The University's HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) action plan promotes consistency in the way early career researchers (ECRs) are supported and aims to embed best practice across the institution.

We identified a number of priorities for the action plan, such as establishing a clear induction framework for ECRs in each School and ensuring consistent approaches to teaching and workload allocation. These priorities were identified through direct engagement with ECRs and echoed by the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) 2023 results. CEDARS also highlighted the need for PI training and support.

In collaboration with the Research Culture Team we have identified joint priorities for 2025-26, including embedding the Women's Leadership Academy into business as usual for Faculties; launching Accelerator Programme asynchronous training on grant writing to maximise potential across the institution; and developing PI/manager training for academics.

Environment and culture

- Implementing a coherent, consistent induction spanning HR, Sussex Researcher School (SRS) and Faculties/Schools, through an audit of current

provision/practice, revision of materials, and creation of templates and best practice framework.
- Clarifying the ECR committee structure and ensuring ECR representation is diverse across disciplines by strengthening Terms of Reference and role description, involving School leadership in recruitment, and recognising Reps' contribution in promotions criteria.
- Establishing a Community of Practice for staff who support ECRs to share effective models and improve collaboration.
- Increasing engagement with the ECR Symposium and other research culture-driven activities through co-creation with researchers, strategic approach to Summer of Research events, and improved communications.

Employment

- Ensuring policies are inclusive, incorporate ECRs, and are applied consistently across Faculties/Schools, including equitable teaching practices and workload allocation (taking into account School-specific needs).
- Recognising importance of informal supervision and other ECR activities, reflecting in promotions criteria, and targeting promotions workshops at ECRs to improve rate of applications.
- Reducing the promotion applications gender gap through a Women's Leadership Academy, empowering women to forge a research career that works for them.

Professional Development

- Providing PI training across the institution.
- Reviewing the ECR training offer across Organisational Development (OD), SRS and Faculties/Schools to improve engagement and evaluation, and align with the Researcher Development Framework.
- Improving engagement with Annual Development Review (ADR) appraisals through targeted communications and training, embedding CPD and career development for ECRs across Faculties/Schools, and exploring a minimum frequency for ECR one-to-ones.

Evaluation

Activities are assessed through qualitative and quantitative evaluation, including feedback forms, training engagement data, webpage hit rates, and demographic promotions data.

CEDARS and the Staff Survey are key tools for assessing changes in researcher and manager attitudes/experiences, comparing to previous surveys and, for CEDARS, benchmarking against the sector.

Many HREiR measures involve implementation of positive interventions or improved engagement with ECR matters e.g. delivering one OD wellbeing workshop per term at minimum; policy on teaching hours adopted by all Schools.

Following HREiR assessment, more diverse measures of success were added:

- Changes to feedback questionnaires, asking about impact pegged to intended outcomes.
- Follow-up questionnaires after six months for key interventions, to collect outcomes data and measure longer-term changes in behaviour/skills/confidence.
- Data on applications for, and success of, grade 7-8 promotions by gender, to assess interventions on research gender gap.
- Pre- and post-activity surveys to assess effectiveness of PI/manager training in raising confidence, knowledge and awareness.
- Exploring Report and Support Tool data to assess prevalence of bullying, discrimination etc. and whether interventions lead to reduction over time.
- Exploring HR data sources to measure key training outcomes e.g. increased engagement with ADRs, reduction in Report and Support complaints.
- Considering focus groups where there is value in collaborating with a target audience or gaining rich feedback.

Summary of actions taken, and evaluation of progress made, in the current reporting period to implement your plan to support the three pillars in respect of each of your key stakeholder groups [Institution; Academic Managers of Researchers (Deans, Heads of Schools/Departments/PIs); Researchers]

Environment and Culture *(max 600 words)*	Institution
	To implement a more coherent and consistent induction process for ECRs at Sussex, SRS developed a checklist for ECR onboarding in consultation with relevant staff across the institution, to be fully rolled out by the end of 2025. In regard to mandatory training on LearnUpon, Sussex's online training platform, focus remains on Faculty/School responsibility for monitoring compliance. These conversations are ongoing in light of changes to staffing

across the University following the Voluntary Leavers Scheme, and Faculty restructuring.

HR now tracks ECR and PI engagement with Organisational Development training regularly, enabling year on year assessment. While direct comparisons are difficult, as training modules have changed, there has been a positive increase in engagement by both cohorts between 2023 and 2024: 229 ECRs and PI engaged with OD training, up from 174. Once available, data from the 2025 calendar year will enable comparisons between HREIR submissions (the previous, and the current), providing a foundation for future iterations.

Researchers, managers of researchers and ECR Sub-Committee members were consulted during development of the Sussex 2035 institutional strategy, launching September 2025.

Academic Managers of Researchers

As phase one of developing PI/manager training, the Researcher Development team and Organisational Development conducted a survey of PI training needs to assess levels of knowledge, areas of interest, and appetite for learning. In response to results, and as a first step to improving support for PIs, existing training, resources and policies pertaining to ECRs will be collated on the SRS website. Additional training will be considered once post-Leavers Scheme workloads are established in both teams.

Researchers

The Director for ECRs continues to work with the Research Culture Steering Group on a workload allocation model for research staff; this will be a priority for HREiR work this coming year.

Organisational Development (OD) have made improvements to MentorNet, the staff mentoring scheme, to ensure that it is tailored to the needs of researchers as well as non-

	academic staff. An ECR speed mentoring session launching the revisions was held during the Summer of Research. Increased consideration of ECRs in the planning of the 2025 <u>Summer of Research</u> meant researcher needs as an audience were taken into account. This, coupled with better scheduling and a clear communications plan between the Research Culture and SRS teams, led to improved engagement and feedback, and greater visibility of ECR successes.
Employment *(max 600 words)*	**Institution** Promotions criteria were redrafted in the previous reporting period to reflect diverse ECR-specific contributions and recognise the personal circumstances of carers and part-time workers. Academic promotions were paused in spring 2025; improvements to criteria will be carried forward when promotions are reinstated. One of the Women's Leadership Academy workshops addressed promotions, and was co-delivered by OD, HR and academics; this model will be used for a workshop for all ECRs when promotions are reinstated. Responses to the revised Staff Survey, conducted in October 2024, have been collected and are being analysed against previously collected data. Initial results show an improvement in ECR experiences overall. SRS soft-launched the ECR induction checklist following its approval by the ECR Sub-Committee in Spring 2025. While initial take-up has varied across the University, Schools ta have begun utilising this checklist have fed back positively. In advance of full rollout in Autumn 2025, the checklist has been added to SRS's PI support webpage, to promote greater engagement. **Academic Managers of Researchers** Revision of academic promotions criteria is ongoing despite the Spring 2025 promotions round being paused due to the University's financial situation and the impact of the Leavers

	Scheme. Changes are expected to be introduced when promotions are reinstated.
	Researchers
	Mandatory training on research integrity was introduced in November 2024, for all researchers at the University. Available through LearnUpon, it promotes good conduct and will ensure all researchers and managers of researchers familiarise themselves and operate in accordance with relevant codes of practice.
	To address a gender gap in applications for promotion among ECRs, a <u>Women's Leadership Academy</u> was piloted in Spring 2025, to empower female and minority gender researchers to take charge of their career development and carve a path in academia that suits their needs. The programme was co-created by Researcher Development, OD and academic colleagues, with support from an external careers coach.
	An initial cohort of 18 women took part, drawn from sciences and social sciences. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive; all 11 respondents to the post-Academy survey said they felt ready to go for promotion – the key metric – and would recommend the programme to others.
Professional development *(max 600 words)*	**Institution**
	In May 2025 the Research Culture and Education Awards were integrated into the new, overarching <u>Sussex Awards</u>, recognising achievements by academics, Professional Services staff and students across the University. Specific ECR awards were included, greatly raising the visibility of their contributions to the institution. The Women's Leadership Academy was also shortlisted for an award.
	SRS's annual training audit was improved to ensure all ECR training at the School/Faculty level - formal and informal - was captured, including those conducted regularly and on an as-needed basis.

Work to review and improve SRS's ECR Development Series workshops was delayed due to the impact of the Leavers Scheme on workloads.

Academic Managers of Researchers

The annual Achievement and Development Review process was reviewed and revised in the previous reporting period to empower managers to conduct more meaningful career-focused conversations.

CEDARS 2025 showed that the percentage of researchers who feel they receive clear, constructive and timely performance feedback has risen considerably since 2023, to 67% from 52%. The survey also showed improvements in the percentage of managers who felt confident providing feedback and managing appraisals effectively; 98% agreed, compared to 95% who felt confident providing effective feedback and 83% who felt confident managing appraisal processes in 2023.

As mentioned above, dedicated PI training will be developed in the coming months, based on specific needs of researchers at Sussex.

Researchers

The Fellowship and First Grant Accelerator Programme shifted to an asynchronous training model to ensure sustainability and reach a wider audience. A consultant was employed to convert taught materials to online modules delivered via Canvas, working with Research Development and Initiatives to produce Sussex-specific guidance and harness internal expertise. The modules will be launched during the 2025-26 academic year, complemented by taught workshops on peer review and interview techniques.

Sussex again co-organised an October cross-institutional speed mentoring event with colleagues from other universities in the south-east, giving ECRs the opportunity for

	short, focused career conversations with more senior academics across the sector.

Comment on any lessons learned from the activities undertaken over this period and any modifications you propose to make to your action plan and measures of success as a result. *(max 500 words)*

Timelines and actions set out in the previous period were impacted by the Voluntary Leavers Scheme at Sussex, necessitated by financial uncertainty across the sector. Both the workload associated with administering the scheme and the resulting reduction in staffing have affected outcomes, though excellent progress has been made in key areas, particularly the Women's Leadership Academy.

The success of that programme demonstrates that taking a clear, evidence-based approach with buy-in from all stakeholders does work: outlining gaps in provision, gauging researcher need, and building in assessment mechanisms to track success. This model will be applied to other projects, including PI/manager training.

The Women's Leadership Academy pilot also showed that truly collaborative projects – bringing together academics with colleagues from HR, the Sussex Researcher School, and ECRs themselves – make the biggest impact and can bring about real change across the institution. Steps will be taken to identify additional areas of the action plan that match the strategic priorities of other areas of the University, and that could benefit from a collaborative approach between Professional Services and academic staff.

More realistic timeframes for completion of actions are needed, as Professional Services teams across the institution are adapting to working with fewer staff. Going into the final year of the action plan, some projects will be deprioritised to ensure that the most pressing obligations, aligning with strategic goals, can be met.

Difficulties remain in engaging School academic leadership with their HREiR responsibilities consistently. The shift to Faculties, with new admin structures and leadership roles, has made this more challenging; but it also offers an opportunity to re-establish lines of reporting and ensure HREiR obligations are regularly monitored and acted upon at the local level.

It will take time to embed these practices into the new structure, and to build connections with those in new ECR-focused roles. The list of those responsible for

actions will be reviewed, and revised to match current roles, and the Director for ECRs will connect with Faculty ECR leads once they are in post.

The Sussex 2035 strategy is due for publication in September 2025. Note that strategic priorities may shift once that is available for review.

Outline your key objectives in delivering your plan in the coming reporting period *(max 500 words)*

The University has been through a challenging period, and over 350 staff from all departments left through the Voluntary Leavers Scheme in summer 2025, including Researcher Development administrators who supported ECR work.

In light of this, the Director for ECRs and Researcher Development Manager reviewed planned projects and timelines in the HREiR action plan, and the following priorities have been identified.

For 2025-26, the University's Concordat priorities are:

- To establish a framework of training for PIs/managers of researchers:

PI/manager training remains a key aspect of the HREiR plan. HR and Researcher Development will collate existing taught and online resources into one hub and identify gaps where additional training is needed, building on the training needs survey conducted in Spring 2025 and taking into account staff reductions in both teams. There may also be opportunities to contribute to development of academic management training across the wider institution.

- To improve Faculty engagement with ECR activities across all disciplines:

The Director for ECRs will focus on building links with Faculties now the restructure is complete, developing positive relationships with academics in the new ECR lead roles at Faculty and School level, and working together to identify Faculty-relevant priorities for the HREiR 2026-29 action plan as we develop it. This may include revising membership of the ECR Sub-Committee to ensure the appropriate decision-makers are involved.

- To establish a guidance for workload allocation model for ECRs, including 10 days' CPD:

At present each School has its own model, and these do not apply to staff on research contracts. Working with research culture colleagues, the ECR sub-

committee will aim for consistency in the way ECRs are recognised and rewarded for roles they undertake in addition to their research - informal supervision, officer roles, Reps etc.; for 10 days' CPD to be an agreed standard across Schools; and for guidelines to set minimum standards for teaching work.

- To revise and update the SRS ECR webpages:

Following redesign of the SRS website in 2024-25, the ECR pages will be reviewed to ensure they meet the needs of current ECRs; are accurate; signpost rather than duplicate HR information; and can be easily maintained taking into account Researcher Development workload.

Monitoring and evaluation of HREiR interventions will continue, with future activities shaped by both feedback from stakeholders (ECRs, PIs, School research leadership and administration) and the Sussex 2035 institutional strategy.
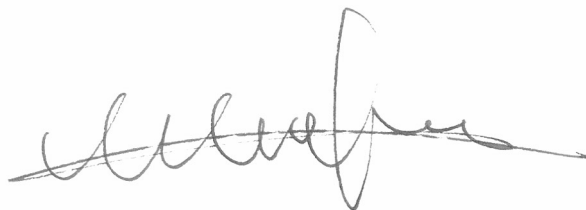

Please provide a brief statement describing your institution's approval process of this report prior to sign off by the governing body *(max 200 words)*

This report has been drafted by the Researcher Development Manager and Assistant Programme Manager in SRS with input from the Director for ECRs, who chairs the ECR Sub-Committee and leads the University's work on the Concordat. ECRs were consulted through the ECR Reps Group that feeds into the Sub-Committee.

The report has been discussed and approved by members of the Sub-Committee – including ECR Leads or equivalent from each academic School, and representatives of HR and SRS – before going to the University Research and Innovation Committee (URIC), chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research and Innovation, for discussion. URIC includes Heads of School and relevant Heads of Professional Services. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor signed off the report as a member of the University's Executive Group.

The University of Sussex introduced a system of regular HREiR monitoring and reporting in Spring 2024. An HREiR progress report is submitted to the ECR Sub-Committee each meeting (termly), and this Concordat report serves as an annual report for the ECR Reps Group, ECR Sub-Committee and URIC each autumn.

Signature on behalf of governing body: Prof. Maria Fasli

Contact for queries: Katy Stoddard, Researcher Development Manager

This annual report will be analysed by the secretariat for the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, to identify good practices, themes for development and information to improve national research culture policy and practice.

If you have any questions, or suggestions on how the reporting process could be improved, please contact the secretariat via the email address listed on the RDC website: www.researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk.