

Sussex Researcher School

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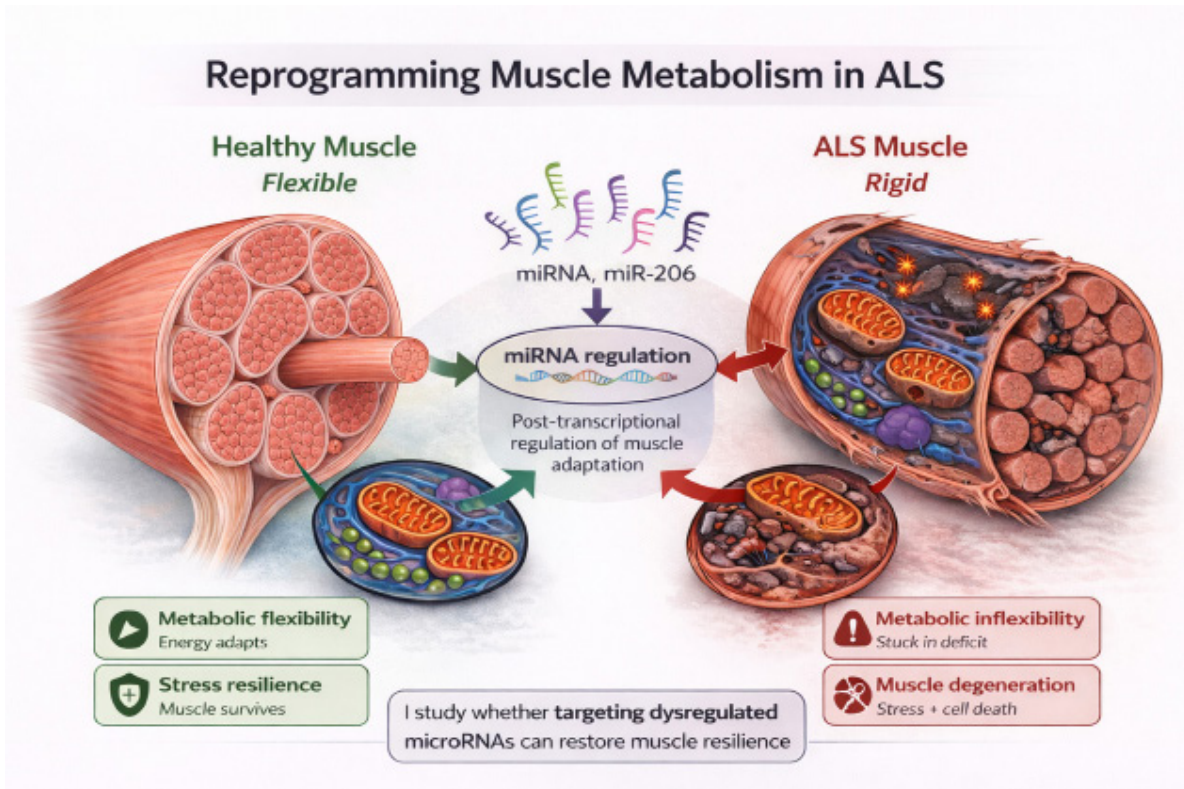
# **Emerging Researcher Image Competition 2026**

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## **People's Choice Award**

# Sussex Researcher School Emerging Researcher Image Competition

## Reprogramming Muscle Metabolism in Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis



### Zaid Muhammad Life Sciences

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) is best known as a disease of nerve cells, but muscle may also play an early and active role. In healthy muscle, cells can flexibly adjust how they produce and use energy, allowing them to adapt to stress and maintain function. In ALS, this flexibility appears to be lost, leaving muscle cells “metabolically rigid” and more vulnerable to damage and death.

My research focuses on small regulatory molecules called microRNAs, which influence how muscle cells control energy use. Early findings suggest that altering miR-206 levels changes how muscle responds to stress—either increasing vulnerability or improving resilience. This image illustrates how disrupted microRNA regulation may drive metabolic inflexibility in ALS muscle, and how restoring this balance could help protect muscle and open new avenues for early therapeutic intervention.

*AI has been used in the creation of this image.*

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Introducing Community Wealth Building to undergraduate students  
at University College London



## **Dr Max Lacey-Barnacle** University of Sussex Business School

For the past five years, I have been researching how to integrate ‘Community Wealth Building’ into energy transitions to renewable energy systems. The core aim of my research is to explore ways in which we can ‘anchor’ the economic benefits of the energy transition in local communities and economies, ensuring those benefits are rooted in place through public and community ownership, whilst opening new pathways for what is possible as we decarbonise our society.

This is becoming increasingly important as net zero is now a politically divisive topic.

In late 2025, I had the immense privilege of being invited to deliver a guest lecture to undergraduate students at University College London. It was a cold winter morning, and I was worried no one would show up! Fortunately, I had an amazing, attentive and engaged group of many students who energised and inspired me. I hope I reciprocated that energy!

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Day in the Life of an ASM Neighborhood



**Aysha Valery**

**Institute of Development Studies**

My research explores artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) livelihoods in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This photograph was taken just outside an ASM site, and it depicts just how dependent the local economy is on ASM. You can see trucks carrying minerals away from the site. You see people transporting people and goods to the site. You see street vendors trying to attract any of the 20,000+ ASM miners that work at this site.

*AI has been used to remove debris from this photo.*

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Race against time



**Emily Snowden**  
BSMS

Fishermen in Sierra Leone work together to haul in their nets as a powerful storm approaches.

Extreme weather events cause destruction and threaten lives. Across sub-Saharan Africa, these events are becoming both more frequent and more intense. Extreme weather causes significant damage and destruction with an estimated financial burden on the healthcare system of billions of pounds.

One of the most critical systems to protect is community healthcare. My research forms part of a broader project to co-design and co-evaluate interventions aimed at strengthening healthcare resilience to extreme weather events in Southern Africa.

Determining which interventions are both effective and cost-efficient is no simple task. Some solutions may be relatively easy to implement but financially prohibitive, while others may be accessible yet culturally unacceptable within certain communities. Therefore the focus of my research is the evaluation of the interventions with involvement of local stakeholders.

Like fishermen racing to secure their livelihoods before a storm hits, this research brings together stakeholders to evaluate and prioritise interventions to secure healthcare resilience in the face of extreme weather.

# Sussex Researcher School Emerging Researcher Image Competition

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Border Textures: Scales of Migration



**Barbara Oettinger**  
Media, Arts and Humanities

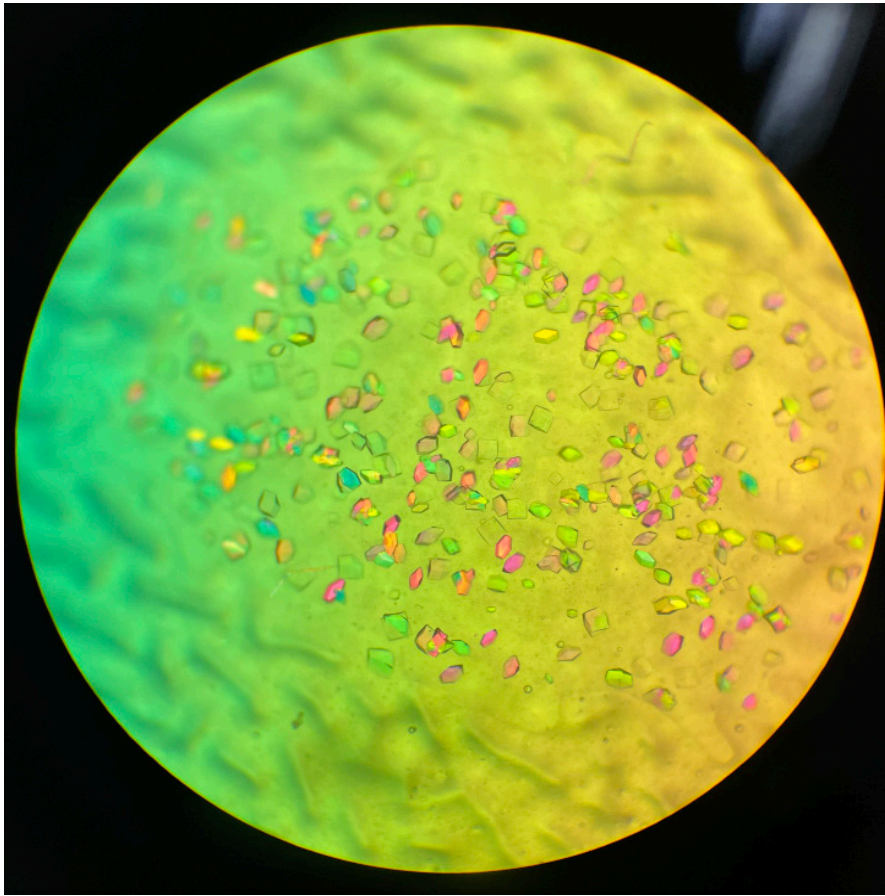
This diptych contrasts two perspectives of border vegetation: a macro view (left) of algae, its violet and acid-yellow folds abstracted into a vascular, almost bodily form, and a standard shot (right) of plants growing along a physical border. The juxtaposition mirrors the layered scales of my research, from the intimate, material traces of migrant journeys (symbolised by the algae's fragile textures) to the broader, often invisible systems (like the plants) that define and police borders. Both images reflect the fluidity and precarity of migration, where natural and human forces intersect, and where sensory, postcolonial, and cinematic lenses reveal the complex dynamics of movement and control.

# Sussex Researcher School

## Emerging Researcher Image Competition

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Crystallizing Life: Order Emerging from Soft Matter



**Yizhen Yan**

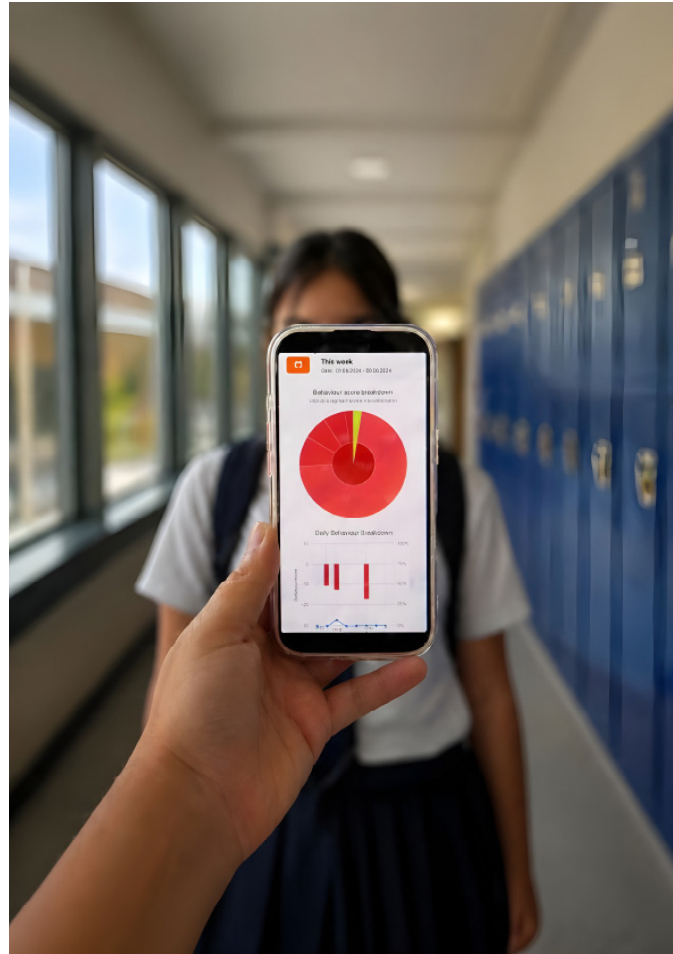
**Engineering and Informatics**

This image captures the formation of protein crystals on a biocompatible hydrogel surface, where soft materials guide molecular order. The vibrant, jewel-like structures arise from controlled nucleation and finely tuned supersaturation, transforming invisible biomolecules into visible, highly ordered crystals. More than a visual curiosity, protein crystals are essential for revealing molecular structure and understanding biological function. By enabling high-throughput crystallization and promoting uniform crystal growth, this hydrogel-based platform supports structural determination. It also provides insights critical for the development and large-scale manufacturing of protein therapeutics such as monoclonal antibodies, enzymes, and hormones. At the intersection of materials science and biopharmaceutical engineering, this work highlights how delicate control over the crystallization environment can translate into meaningful advances in medicine - where understanding structure ultimately shape's function and improves human health.

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Behind Every Behaviour Point is a Whole Child



**Natalia James**

Law, Politics and Sociology

In secondary schools across the UK, pupils' behaviour is scored and tracked in real time using digital platforms like Class Charts. Each incident—a late arrival, missing equipment, a loss of focus, calling out—is logged as a data point and shared with staff and parents, before the child has even arrived home. This image shows what that data looks like: a behaviour score breakdown, for some students dominated by red negative points. Behind the screen stands the child the data claims to describe.

My research explores how these platforms shape the school experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families. Behind every behaviour point is a whole child. This image asks whether the data can ever really reveal them to you, or whether the points obscure what's really happening behind them.

*AI has been used in the creation of this image.*

# Sussex Researcher School Emerging Researcher Image Competition

Same Country, Two Realities



**Charity Anietie-Akanam**  
University of Sussex Business School

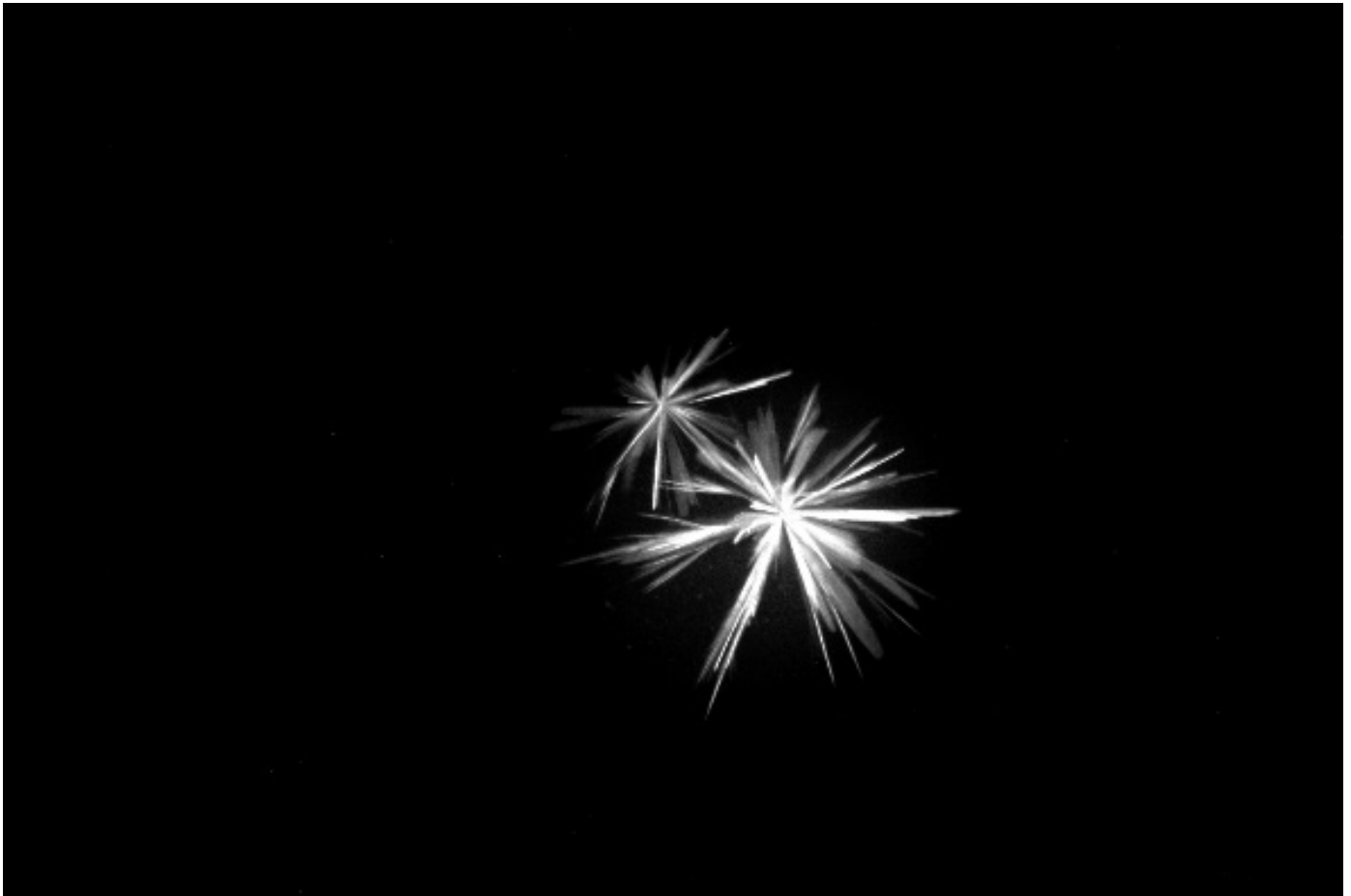
This image shows how the same country can be viewed in two very different ways at the same time. On one side, there is growth, innovation, and opportunity. On the other, there are concerns about risk, instability, and trust. My research explores how nation branders in emerging markets work within this tension. Through in-depth interviews with policymakers and communication professionals in Nigeria, I examine how they respond to negative stereotypes and persistent global perceptions. The challenge is not simply improving a country's image but managing how that image is judged by external audiences. This matters because decisions about investment, partnerships, and engagement are shaped not only by what a country promises, but by whether those promises are believed. The image reflects a central finding of my research: nation branding is not just about projection, but about managing trust when change takes time.

*AI has been used in the creation of this image.*

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Futile Fireworks



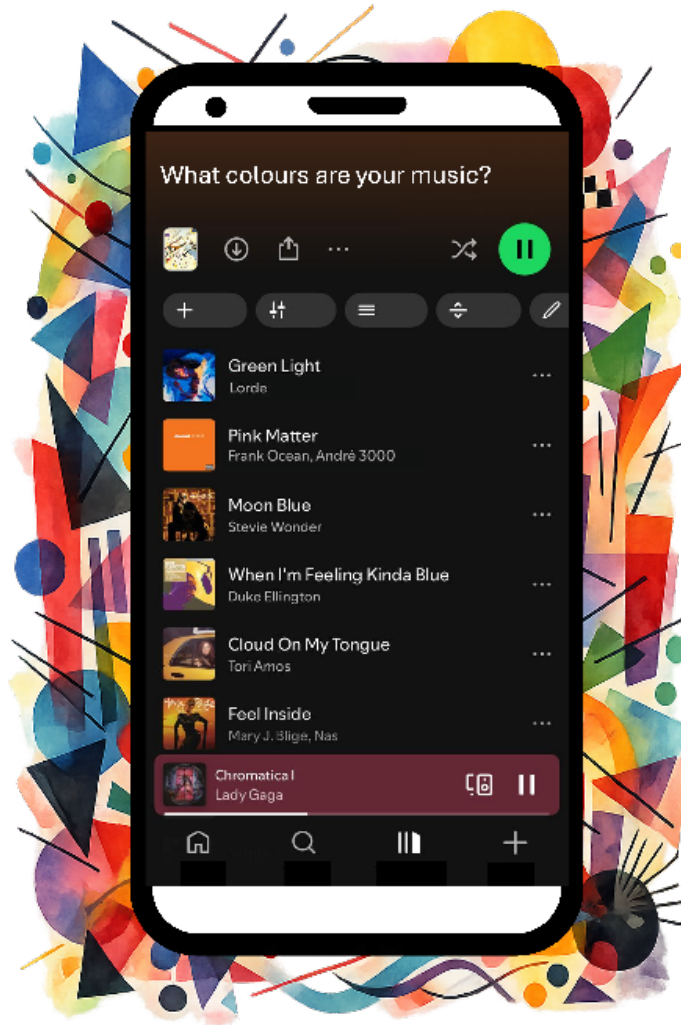
## **Sarah Connery** Life Sciences

At the Sussex Drug Discovery Centre, we focus on early-stage drug discovery. Protein X-ray crystallography is a powerful technique used in drug discovery because it enables us to “see” proteins at atomic level, the molecules that make up all life. A protein’s 3D structure determines its function, and proteins play important roles in health and disease. When we develop new drug molecules, we use protein X-ray crystallography to find out how drug molecules interact with our protein of interest. This image shows an attempt to grow crystals of a protein involved in brain cancer development, bound to an early-stage drug molecule. Proteins fluoresce in UV light and, therefore, shine on this UV image. The protein crystals grow from a nucleation point outward, giving the impression of beautiful fireworks. Unfortunately, these crystals were not usable due to their thin shape – teaching us that beauty is not necessarily an indicator of quality.

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What colours are your music?



**Carli Fine**

**Psychology**

My research is about developing brain-based biomarkers for a neurological condition called synaesthesia, in which individuals experience crossed sensory experiences. An example of synaesthesia is that some people experience colourful shapes in their mind's eye or projected into the environment in response to sounds, such as listening to music. This image was created by editing a screenshot of a real Spotify playlist of songs by artists with synaesthesia who have indicated that their unique experience shapes their music process. The border is reminiscent of art by the painter Wassily Kandinsky, who also had synaesthesia. In my research, I work on computational models from brain scans of individuals with this condition. The inclusion of the title in the image prompts the viewer to look inward and reflect on their own conscious experience, considering the relations between artist and listener, art and viewer.

*AI has been used in the creation of this image.*

# Sussex Researcher School Emerging Researcher Image Competition

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## Trouble Maker



**Jules Gillard**  
Psychology

When a child repeatedly disrupts a classroom, talks back, or refuses to work, the explanations adults reach for often sound like this: "rude, naughty, lazy, disruptive". These labels feel like descriptions, but they function as verdicts, shaping how teachers respond, how peers relate and crucially, how children come to see themselves. My doctoral research asks what happens when we move from "correction to connection". Drawing on attribution theory and the psychology of belonging, I am developing and testing an empathy-based intervention for UK primary schools that helps staff in schools reframe the behaviour they find most challenging, not as a character flaw to punish, but as a signal worth understanding. My hypothesis is that behaviour is communication. The post it notes in this image will peel off. The impact of relationships at school last a lifetime.

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Its OK Miss I have my knitting!



**Catherine Cundy**  
Media, Arts and Humanities

While working in a local secondary school, I observed a Year 9 pupil knitting in an academic lesson. It transpired that she had completed all the assigned work and had not been provided with differentiated tasks. This led me to consider how, as a music teacher, I ensure that my most able young musicians are provided with challenge and what constitutes effective provision. To uncover the current teaching and learning strategies in English secondary schools, I am undertaking research at the junior departments of music colleges, giving our most able young musicians a voice by sharing their experiences of teaching and learning within their typical school day. This will enable me to understand what they expect and require from their school experience. The research should benefit a wide range of teachers, increasing the effectiveness of their professional practice and the systems we use to support children's learning.

*Artist Johanna Amos created this work under my guidance in response to my research.*

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Invisible in Plain Sight



## **Seyi Ugochukwu** Law, Politics and Sociology

Each silhouette in this textile artwork originated from a photograph of a real migrant participant before being transformed into a fabric cut-out and stitched into a larger collective tapestry. Created through a Brighton-based migrant support project, the piece reflects both individuality and shared experience. The stitched silhouettes preserve traces of personal identity while obscuring recognisable features, echoing the tension between presence and invisibility experienced by many undocumented migrants.

The image reflects the paradox explored in my research on undocumented migrants' access to legal aid in the UK. Undocumented migrants are often deeply embedded within communities while remaining structurally invisible within legal and political systems. Through a postcolonial perspective, my research examines how immigration structures continue to shape visibility, recognition, and access to justice.

*Photograph by the researcher. Textile artwork created collaboratively with migrant participants and community artist (Gil Doron).*

# Sussex Researcher School Emerging Researcher Image Competition

Don't move! You're getting on my vagus nerve



## Elisabeth Koch Psychology

My image illustrates misokinesia ('hatred of movements'), a condition characterized by intense negative emotional responses to the sight of others' repetitive movements. Whether it's seeing someone chewing or typing, these movements can trigger intense anger, anxiety and disgust. In my image, triggers are placed in the visual periphery, where recent studies suggest they are most distressing.

At the Kapoerio lab, we are investigating vagus nerve stimulation (VNS) as a potential treatment. My image depicts a device delivering electrical pulses to the left ear to stimulate the vagus nerve. As VNS has shown promise in enhancing emotion regulation and treating conditions associated with visual sensitivity, we are investigating its potential to mitigate the emotional and visual distress of misokinesia. With around one in three people affected, most of us have likely triggered someone's misokinesia without even realizing it. VNS might help to find calm in a world that never stops moving.

*Stock photos have been used in the creation of this image.*

# Sussex Researcher School

## Emerging Researcher Image Competition

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Is Colombia's ship of state stranded without fossil fuels?



**Guy Edwards**  
Global Studies

A stranded boat emblazoned with the Colombian flag lays on the bed of the Peñol reservoir in Colombia. In 2024, reservoir water levels fall due to droughts exacerbated by El Niño.

With hydroelectric plants normally generating around 70% of electricity, this drought precipitated an energy crisis with water rationing and thermoelectric plants having to ramp up their output to avoid power cuts. The boat symbolises the fragility of the Colombian economy, which could end up stranded unless it adapts to climate impacts, builds renewable energy projects and shifts away from oil and coal exports. My project explores the Petro administration's Just Energy Transition agenda and the conflict between a government seeking to decarbonize and fossil fuel elites fighting to keep Colombia moored to an extractive economy. With the boat's cockpit hidden from view, the question remains who is shaping Colombia's energy transition: Is it the Petro government or these elites?

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## Framed Masculinity



**Gaorui Zhang**

**Media, Arts and Humanities**

A participant stands within a simple metal frame, dressed in a navy blazer, white trousers, and a light-coloured hat. The image presents the suit as both formal and playful. While the outfit suggests elegance, aspiration, and self-fashioning, the bowed posture introduces a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. As a photograph I made with my participant, the image reflects my PhD research on how post-90s urban Chinese men use suits to construct, negotiate, and question masculine identity. Rather than seeing the suit simply as business wear, the project examines it as a visual and embodied object through which masculinity can be performed, rehearsed, and reimagined. Through collaborative photography and visual ethnography, my research explores how clothing, pose, and setting allow participants to express personal desire, social expectation, and queer forms of self-representation.

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Islamic Divorce in Kano, Nigeria



**Adriana Lynn Myland**  
Global Studies

A Hausa-Fulani woman prepares waina, a fermented rice cake for her family that is a popular food across northern Nigeria. Many families in the city of Kano struggle with the rising price of food items except some staple such as waina are more affordable. Divorcees are often severely impacted due to the neglect of their former husbands to provide financial support required by Islamic law. Many dissolved marriages are settled within the family as opposed to Sharia courts that creates a lack of clarity on equity and equality in family arrangements. Most significantly, children's wellbeing is impacted due to child custody disputes and lack of financial support leaving women in distress and trying to survive. Legal practitioners in both Sharia and Common law courts, judges and divorcees, claim men lack basic Islamic knowledge on their rights and responsibilities that contributes to the changing state of marriages in Kano.

# Sussex Researcher School

## Emerging Researcher Image Competition

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Beyond Borders: What enables access, participation and success for refugees in higher education?



**Marcela Gola-Boutros**  
Education and Social Work

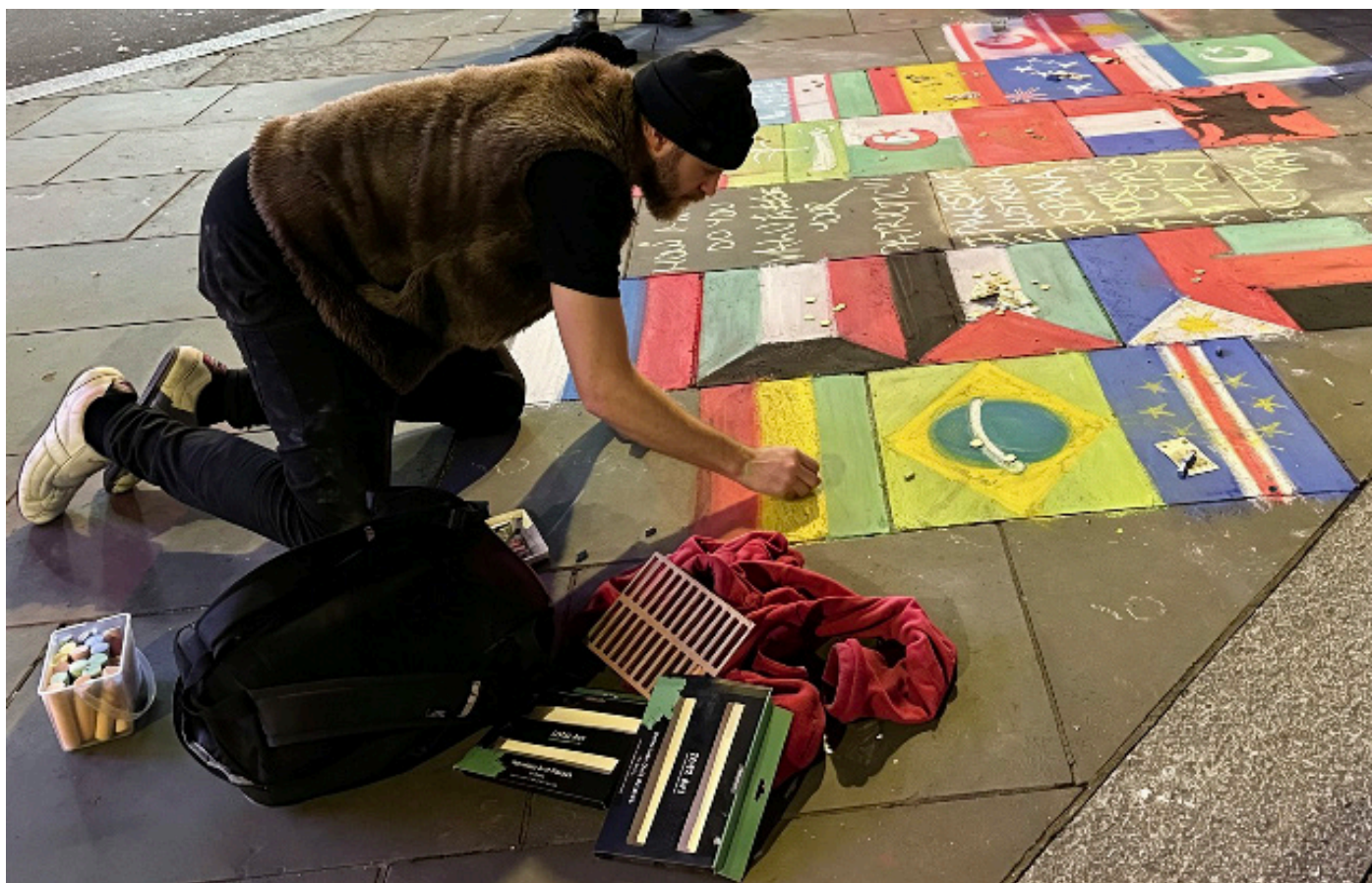
This photo was taken at the border between Brazil and Venezuela. The added sketch figures bring invisible stories into view, representing the educational hopes of people crossing borders in search of safety and opportunity. My doctoral research explores the experiences of refugee students in Brazilian universities, examining factors that enable access and successful completion of their studies. Although Brazil is recognised for its progressive refugee protection framework, pathways into and through higher education remain uneven. The image reflects a journey shared by many refugees: arriving in a new country with uncertainty, but also a strong desire to learn and make a positive impact. The graduation imagery echoes this achievement. Many of my research participants have since graduated and contribute to their communities. If we are to build more inclusive and sustainable futures, we must understand the conditions that make education possible for all, including those forced to move across borders.

*AI has been used in the creation of this image.*

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## Flags That Touch



**Mengwei Wang**  
Global Studies

This image captures a street artist creating a chalk mural of flags from across the world, paired with the question “How do you value your patriotic identity?”. It is a powerful visual commentary on multiculturalism in the UK, reflecting my research interest in how diverse communities navigate belonging in a plural society. The mural mirrors the core inquiry of my research theme: how do different cultures coexist, negotiate, and integrate in a society shaped by migration and global ties? The artist’s question “How do you value your patriotic identity?” echoes the quiet, unspoken tensions of integration: how do we honour our cultural roots while building a shared home with others? The mural’s overlapping symbols speaks to the reality of multicultural Britain, where identities are not siloed, but constantly in conversation with one another.

*AI has been used to hide the identity of the artist in this image.*

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Voice in the Mist



**Yeoki Zhou**

**Media, Arts and Humanities**

Borders are rarely walls. More often, they are moments of blur.

My research explores how Chinese opera sounds carry cultural identity across borders, how its traditions travel, transform, and find new life when fused with AI and immersive performance via VR/XR environment. When something moves through transformation, how much of the original remains?

This golden, mist-filled Brighton shore captures that question visually. The pier stands half-dissolved in haze, neither fully present nor absent; the tiny figures below navigate a threshold between land and sea. The mist doesn't erase the structures, it repaints them in unfamiliar colours.

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Lignin based anticorrosion coating of carbon steel



## Akinsanmi Fowowe Engineering and Informatics

This image illustrates how lignin (the second most abundant terrestrial biopolymer after cellulose, a natural polymer found in plants and often treated as pulp and paper industrial waste) can be transformed into a sustainable protective coating for carbon steel used in community infrastructure. The rusted steel beam transitions into a protected, green-coated surface, symbolising the coating's ability to resist corrosion caused by water, oxygen, and salts. The community centre in the background represents real-world applications where longer-lasting steel structures can improve safety, reduce maintenance costs, and support sustainable construction.

My postgraduate research at the University of Sussex focuses on developing lignin-based multifunctional anticorrosion coatings that not only protect carbon steel but also reduce reliance on petroleum-derived materials. The work combines green chemistry, materials engineering, and sustainability to create environmentally friendly solutions for durable infrastructure.

*AI has been used in the creation of this image.*

# Sussex Researcher School

## Emerging Researcher Image Competition

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The fallacy of responsibility



Well, at least we knew it was coming.

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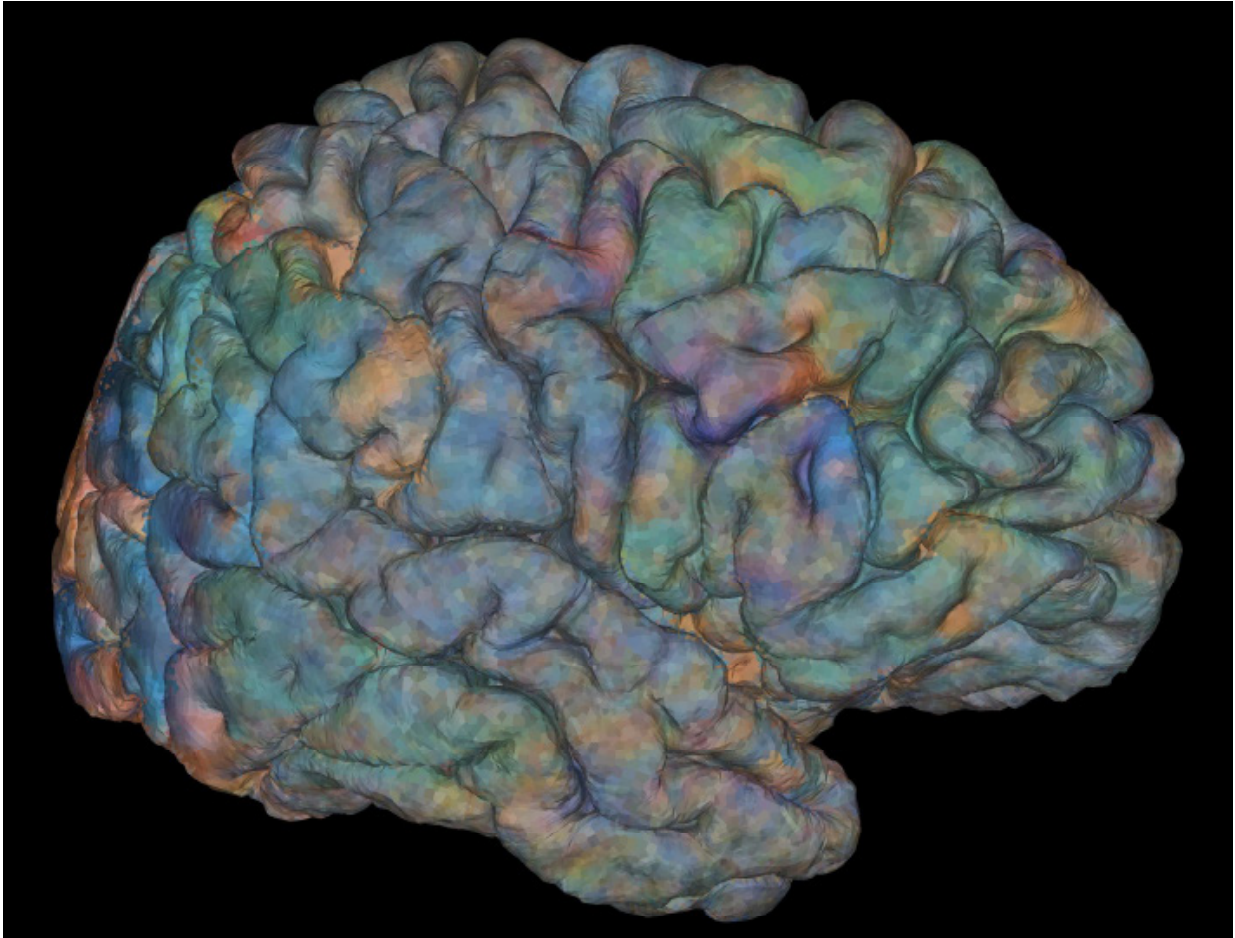
**Devin O'Donnell**  
University of Sussex Business School

Does climate policy do what it says on the tin? The short answer: no. The long answer: it depends what you think the goal of climate policy should be. We look at how climate policy protects people. Through an analysis of municipal climate action plans, our sample of global cities had a high understanding of climate risks to residents. They often included elements of health and equity in their vision statements and pillars. Yet very few had comprehensive actions to address identified health risks. The findings, illustrated by the cartoon, punctuates a common contradiction in climate policy: we know climate change will have severe consequences on people and yet action doesn't match. This issue lies less in knowledge and awareness and instead in policy priorities, governance, and political will. My PhD builds on this first paper to understand what is necessary to prioritise and implement people-centred climate policy.

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Mapping the Visual World



**Ian Pennock**  
Psychology

We created a new method called 'voxel-preferred images' (VPIs) to analyse brain scans when participants view normal images. The method colours in the brain regions based on what they respond to and therefore we can segment the brain into distinct regions.

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## Urban Solstice



### **Silvia Sergi** Global Studies

This image shows a Winter Solstice celebration in the Andes, on June 21, marking the moment when the baby Tata Inti (the newborn Sun) rises. It captures the exact moment the first rays of the sun reach people's hands, raised to welcome them and the new agricultural and life cycle, accompanied by a "mesa" (a traditional deity's libation ritual), in which a llama is sacrificed as an offering of gratitude.

La Paz's population is distinguished by a large indigenous component, historically resistant to colonial oppression, which, in recent decades, fought for and obtained recognition of its rights and culture within the state. Consequently, the city presents a unique fusion of epistemic and ontological traits, blending indigenous cosmology with the modern-global one. Here, the entire city participates in an ancestral ritual that continues to thrive amid urban life, where, shaped by diverse anthropologies, different ways of experiencing the world coexist.

# Sussex Researcher School Emerging Researcher Image Competition

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Redefining Power and Purpose



**Hadil Mohammad S.Alsaieri**  
University of Sussex Business School

This image captures a Saudi woman entrepreneur balancing business-building with motherhood: a visual reflection of my doctoral research on women's entrepreneurship and psychological empowerment in Saudi Arabia. My research explores how entrepreneurship is not only a route to income but also a source of confidence, dignity, and purpose. At the same time, it reveals the emotional labour of care, the pressure of multiple roles, and the ongoing negotiation of social expectations. The image conveys not only resilience but also the question at the heart of my research: how do women transform motherhood, responsibility, and social expectations into sources of agency and quiet social change in today's Saudi Arabia?

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## Emerging Researcher Image Competition

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“This is my first time trying this!”: Co-Producing Visual Knowledge through Participatory Methods



### Hestin Klaas

#### Institute of Development Studies

The quote reflects a participant’s reaction during a participatory video workshop at Sentani Lake, Indonesia. This image shows the lake and a small lakeside village, captured from above using a drone as part of my doctoral research on adaptive social protection and digital technologies in fragile contexts. I work across communities in Papua, Timor, West Kalimantan, Indonesia, and Jakarta.

In this workshop, villagers were introduced to drone technology for the first time and learned to operate it themselves. The image reflects not only the landscape but also co-production, where research becomes a shared practice rather than an extractive one. Participants described their excitement at engaging directly with the equipment, which helped build confidence and new ways of seeing their environment. My research also explores how video as a method can support communities in telling their own stories and shaping representations of their lived realities.

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## Sonic solidarities



### **Ghulam Shair** Global Studies

Sonic Solidarities captures a collaborative performance at Soul City Arts, Sparkbrook, Birmingham, organised as part of a Palestine solidarity gathering. Combining spoken word and live bansuri (bamboo flute), the performance explored sound as a space of mourning, ethical listening, and collective reflection. Rooted in South Asian raag-based traditions while responding to contemporary political realities, the performance reflected on music's capacity to carry grief, memory, and solidarity across borders. The event formed part of an ongoing practice-based and ethnographic exploration of sound, affect, and antiracist cultural production within Birmingham's super-diverse community arts landscape.

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Don't just dream of innovation, innovate your dream!



## Charlie Westpfel Engineering and Informatics

Tucked away in the organised chaos of our lab sits the blowdown test rig, a stainless-steel jungle of valves, gauges, and high-pressure lines that form the beating heart of our mission to push sustainable clean-energy technologies forward. What looks like an intimidating maze of pipes is actually a precision-built platform for testing next-generation components under extreme, real-world conditions. By releasing controlled bursts of high-pressure gas, we can probe how new materials, sensors, and flow-control strategies behave when the stakes are high and the margins are thin. It's gritty, hands-on engineering: tightening fittings, chasing leaks, and praying the pressure holds while the data streams in. But this is where real innovation happens, not in daydreams or glossy diagrams, but in the clang of tools, the hum of instrumentation, and the quiet thrill of watching an idea survive its first true test.