



# **Specification for the Services of External Research Advisors**

**Updated October 2023**

# 1. BACKGROUND

## 1.1 Background

The University of Sussex wishes to understand and enhance the quality of its research and impact portfolio, and its research environment, on an on-going basis. Research assessment processes have, in recent history, been largely focussed on the externally-imposed processes of national research assessment (the Research Excellence Framework or REF). Alongside preparing for such exercises, the University wishes to ensure that regular review of research strategy and profiles, and processes of internal research assessment, are undertaken on a systematic and continual basis, and in a way aligned with the full range of its strategic priorities for research. In support of this effort, the University is seeking, through its academic Schools, to engage a number of External Research Advisors (ERAs).

## 1.2 Objectives

The ERAs will contribute to the University's understanding of its research quality profile and potential through their advisory contributions to review of a unit's overall research strategy and plans, profile, and context relative to comparator units; and through their assessment of individual outputs and of the unit's contribution to knowledge and understanding, its impact case studies and engagement activities, and the data and narratives related to the unit's people, culture and environment. The ERA's assessments and advice will complement and help to calibrate the regular internal review of unit research strategies, plans and profiles, and internal assessment of research quality.

## 1.3 Appropriateness of the individual to act as an ERA

The ERA will normally be a senior academic employed at another institution, although engagement of a research user (or impact beneficiary) as an ERA may also be appropriate (in addition to, rather than instead of, academic ERAs).

Heads of School (HoS) and School Directors of Research and Knowledge Exchange (DRKEs), and Unit of Assessment (UoA) Leads or their appropriate nominees, are responsible for the identification, selection and engagement of ERAs. They should have due regard to the following requirements in identifying and selecting ERAs, and the selection process should be documented and made transparent to the unit as a whole, for example by the sharing of key information about it within regular all-department updates. ERAs who are considering providing their services to Sussex are also asked to raise any area where they do not meet the requirements with the HoS, DRKE, UoA Lead, or their nominee.

- Academic ERAs must have both a strong individual research profile within their discipline **and** some experience relating to the assessment of research.
- The individual must be capable of making a fair assessment of research, to the best of their ability, where it falls outside their immediate expertise or where it takes a position, or reaches conclusions, that may contradict the positions held by the ERA.
- The individual will normally not have any significant existing relationship with the University of Sussex (unless as a previously-engaged ERA).

- Individuals who may be particularly suitable to target for engagement as an ERA include former REF panel members, members of funder review panels, and expert advisors to policymakers. International (i.e. based outside the UK) ERAs may be used, but must have a reasonable understanding of the UK system for research and its assessment, and work and payment arrangements must meet any legal, HR or visa-related requirements.
- The ERA must understand the level of commitment expected and be willing and able to deliver in a thorough and timely fashion.
- Schools should seek to give due regard to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in selecting ERAs, and should for example avoid, as far as possible, having all ERAs of the same gender. The RIQI Team will undertake regular monitoring of the overall gender balance amongst ERAs across the University, and UoA Leads may be asked to explain their compliance with these requirements as part of internal review exercises.

## **2. SCOPE**

### **2.1 Role of the ERA**

The External Research Advisor (ERA) is an expert external advisor on the research profile of a given area of the University of Sussex.

The principal role of the ERA will normally be to advise on the overall research strategy, plans and profile of a given area of the University, and/or the research output profile of that unit and/or on the research impact profile of the unit and/or on the research environment and culture of the unit .

The ERA's activities will normally also include: detailed, in-depth assessment of published or draft material, for triangulation and calibration with internal assessments; and/or review of relevant data .

The ERA's assessment of the material may be spread over time, as agreed between the ERA and the HoS, DRKE, and or UoA Lead, rather than necessarily taking place in one go. For example, for the assessment of outputs, batches may be sent periodically on a scale and schedule agreed, with a view to building up the School's/unit's understanding of the profile of its output quality gradually throughout a REF cycle.

The ERA will be asked to provide regular (at least annual) written feedback to the relevant HoS, DRKE, UoA Lead, or their nominee, which may be shared with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) and any member of the University's REF Steering Group and/or Research Quality, Information and Impact Team, and may be quoted in reports from the REF Steering Group to the University Executive Team..

Further information on the role of the ERA is given under 'Deliverables', below.

### **2.2 Structure for the use of ERAs**

At least two ERAs will normally cover each major research area within a School. (A 'major research area' normally corresponds to a Unit of Assessment (UoA) in REF2021 and REF2028, and/or to a department or equivalent unit (depending on the organisational structure of the School)). This aims to ensure adequate triangulation of advice and feedback. The exact number and structure of the ERAs will be subject to the decision of the HoS, who should prioritise ensuring that such triangulation is in place. The structure for the use of ERAs may be revised, if necessary, as matters evolve or when the UoA structure for the next REF and the University's likely selection of UoAs in which to make a submission develop.

It may also be appropriate, at the discretion of the HoS, to engage one or more ERAs to advise at the School (rather than UoA) level, particularly where the delineation of departments or subject groups is less significant or subject to greater flexibility. Although the ERA may be engaged to advise on a Department, group, or cluster etc., overall responsibility for the selection and continuing engagement of an ERA (or the termination of the engagement) remains at the School level with the relevant HoS.

Schools are responsible for the payment of External Research Advisors, and fund these payments from their own budgets. The standard payment is an honorarium of £1,000 per annum, provided the work as specified here is completed. Schools can increase this payment at their discretion . A clear written agreement on payment must be included as part of the correspondence where the individual agrees to act as an ERA.

### **3. DELIVERABLES**

#### **3.1 Key Deliverables**

The External Research Advisor (ERA) will periodically undertake an advisory review of the strategy, plans, profile, outputs, impact or environment in a given area of the University of Sussex's research activity, as agreed between an HoS or her or his nominee and the individual engaged to act as an ERA.

The review will, to the best of the individual's ability, be thorough, detailed, robust, and undertaken with integrity.

The review will lead to production of, or contribution to, one or more written reports, to be provided to the HoS and DRKE and/or their nominee, who may share it with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) and members of the University's REF Steering Group and/or Research Quality, Information and Impact Team. The ERA's report may also be quoted in written or verbal reports from the REF Steering Group to the University Executive Team.

The report may be either from the ERA individually or be made up of contributions from multiple ERAs.

#### **3.2 Standards**

The ERA will assess the quality of each item for assessment in accordance with the normal standard(s) and understandings of research quality within the applicable discipline(s), and by applying her or his personal expertise and professional judgement in a fair and rigorous way.

It is not expected that the ERA will have specialist expertise in the particular field of every output assessed. The ERA should use professional judgement to the best of their ability, and if appropriate may raise cases where an output's field lies particularly far outside their expertise with the HoS or DRKE.

The ERA will make a fair assessment of all items allocated for review, including where an output or other item advances a conclusion, or takes a position, that the ERA does not support.

All assessment used for REF purposes must be undertaken in line with the University's current or most recent REF Code of Practice.

The ERA should act in line with the Seven Principles of Public Life (also known as the Nolan Principles).

#### 4. RESTRICTIONS AND LIMITATIONS ON THE WORK OF THE ERA

Should an output, case study or other item for review relate to an individual, organisation or topic in respect of which the ERA has a conflict of interest, the ERA should exclude the relevant item from assessment and notify the relevant HoS or DRKE, UoA Lead, or their nominee.

Any information not otherwise in the public domain and shared with the ERA in the context of undertaking this role must be treated as confidential and not shared with others.

The ERA's own report, assessments and comments etc., should be submitted to the HoS and DRKE, UoA Lead, and/or their nominee. The ERA should **not** share these items with others prior to this, nor at all without agreement from the HoS or DRKE or UoA Lead. The ERA's report, assessments and comments etc, or any insights gained into the University of Sussex, must **not** be shared with any other organisation or individual for the purpose of seeking competitive advantage nor for any other purpose.

ERAs must **not** advise or comment on the performance of individuals or on other internal matters relating to individuals. ERA's assessments will not in and of themselves inform internal performance management or other HR processes relating to individuals. Confidential or sensitive information relating to individuals will not be shared with ERAs.

ERAs should have due regard to equality, diversity and inclusion when undertaking their assessments, and within the constraints of the information available must actively seek to avoid potential bias against individuals or groups, including unconscious bias.

Should evidence of bias against individuals or groups by the ERA emerge, the engagement of the ERA should be discontinued and feedback or advice already given may be disregarded.

ERAs' work in this role must be compliant with the provisions of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, to which the University of Sussex is a signatory.

## 5. EXAMPLES OF ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN THE ERA AND THE SCHOOL

The following examples are provided as indicative of types of engagement activity in which the ERA might be involved *beyond* the review of outputs, impact and environment material and provision of written reports as described above. Whether, and which of, these activities are actually undertaken will be dependent on agreement between the Head of School, DRKE and UoA Lead (or nominee), and the ERA, and not all of them will necessarily be appropriate in even circumstance. They are considered, however, to broadly represent good practice.

Any reimbursement for these activities will be subject to prior arrangement between the HoS, DRKE, UoA Lead or their nominee and the ERA, and will normally be incorporated (except for payment of any agreed travel, accommodation or similar expenses) into the overall honorarium paid to the ERA.

- Participating in, and/or presenting at, a meeting or workshop with the School or part of the School (e.g. to explore the current research profile, the unit's plans for development, or current trends within the relevant discipline(s));
- Participating in, and/or presenting at, a Research Awayday or similar event arranged by the School or part of the School;
- Participating in drafting sessions or workshops where narrative material for a future REF submission is being prepared.