

## **Developing Excellent Researchers: Six-year self-assessment report HR Excellence in Research Award**

### **An overview of the University of Suffolk**

The [University of Suffolk](#) successfully gained the HR Excellence in Research Award in June 2017, retaining the award at the two- and four-year reviews in 2019 and 2021 respectively. The accompanying Looking Back Action Plan (2021-2023) and the Looking Forward Action Plan (2023-2026) provide detail on the university's specific achievements and actions. There have been significant changes, some of them as a direct result of the university's ongoing work to implement the Concordat for the Career Development of Researchers' principles. By receiving the HR Excellence in Research Award and implementing the action plans, the university demonstrates its commitment to providing a conducive and supportive environment for researchers. These initiatives contribute to the overall growth and success of the university's research community.

As proud holders of the HR Excellence in Research Award, we have adopted one of its key principles that excellent research requires a supportive and inclusive research culture to underpin our [2023-2030 Research Excellence Strategy](#). This recognizes that to create and develop positive environments and cultures in which all researchers can flourish and achieve their full potential, a proactive and collaborative approach is required between all stakeholders. Comprehensive support for the development of researchers is a key aspect of the research environment at the university.

We have undertaken our first submission to Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2021, and we are now preparing our application for RDAPs in 2025. Introducing an all-staff survey in 2022 gave us robust evidence with which to further evaluate our strengths and identify areas for improvement. Subsequently, we successfully delivered a university wide action plan (2022-2023) in response to the survey outcomes. To support equality, diversity, and inclusion on all levels with an improved focus on intersectionality, our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion committee monitors our policies, procedures and strengthened infrastructure. By signing the Declaration on Responsible Assessment (DORA) in 2020 we are demonstrating a commitment to improving the evaluation of scientific research and moving away from journal-based metrics as the sole or primary criteria for funding, appointment, and promotion decisions.

The introduction of the Suffolk Academic Model in 2022, increased the number of academic staff with significant responsibility for research (SRR) to 37%. Increasing the number of SRRs has brought expanded research outputs, increased collaboration across all our schools and research institutes, enhanced our research culture, and it has started attracting talented researchers and PGR students interested in pursuing research-oriented careers. By aligning HR Excellence initiatives with the Athena SWAN Bronze Award, the UK Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and the University EDI Strategy showcases a holistic approach to promoting gender equality, diversity, inclusion, well-being, and career development opportunities for University of Suffolk researchers. This integration of efforts can lead to a more comprehensive and impactful approach to supporting the career development and success of our researchers. The University's comprehensive approach to the self-assessment and implementation of the HR Excellence in Research Award demonstrates a commitment to transparency, collaboration, and ongoing enhancement of the research environment. By involving various stakeholders, disseminating information and monitoring progress, we create a culture of continuous improvement and ensures that the initiatives aligned with the award are effectively implemented and supported.

### **The target beneficiaries for the HR Excellence award**

In line with our Strategy and Vision 2020-2030, the university's future ambition is to provide an excellent educational experience for our students as well as develop our research and knowledge activities significantly. Three distinct career pathways were implemented in this academic year:

- Research and Knowledge Exchange Pathway; these are a small group of colleagues (32) who have research only contracts. It is expected that as the university grows its research portfolio of funded projects, we will also be growing this category of our staff.
  - Professors: 6
  - Associate Professors: 5
  - Senior Research Fellows: 4
  - Research Fellows: 11
  - Research Associates: 5
  - Research Assistants: 1
  
- **Learning, Teaching, and Research Pathway:** staff following this pathway will develop a major research profile which would mean they should be eligible for our REF 2027/28 submission, having significant responsibility for research. A higher percentage of staff in SSH (School of Social Sciences & Humanities) (47%) and the School of EAST (Engineering, Arts, Science and Technology) (31%) have significant responsibility for research compared to HSS (School of Health and Sports Sciences) (14%). This data could help inform strategic decisions, resource allocation, and the development of research development initiatives aimed at supporting research activities and fostering a research culture within each respective School.
  
- Learning, Teaching, and Knowledge Exchange Pathway; excellence in Learning, Teaching, Knowledge Exchange, as well as Business and Community Engagement.

Clear and well-defined criteria enable our researchers to plan and work towards their career goals effectively. Together, this supports their career progression and professional development, fostering a culture of excellence and providing incentives for continued contributions to research and scholarship.

Our eight pan-university dedicated research institutes and centres are: [Institute for Health and Wellbeing](#); [Suffolk Sustainability Institute](#); [Digital Futures Institute](#); [Institute of Social Justice and Crime](#); [Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching](#), [Centre for History and Heritage](#), [Integrated Care Academy](#) and [Leadership and Management Academy](#).

### **The governance structures and the internal evaluation**

The strategic lead responsible for the HR Excellence in Research Award is the Pro-Vice Chancellor Research. The operational lead is the Head of Research Development. “Implementing and monitoring the award” Action Plan has been monitored through the HR Excellence in Research Working Group, Research Management Group and the Research and Enterprise Committee. The Research Management Group, the Research and Enterprise Committee and the University of Suffolk Senate are responsible for the Governance Arrangements Approval of the Self -Assessment Submission. The HR Excellence in Research Award as being a standing item on the above Committees ensures that the action plans remain on track and receive appropriate attention and support from key decision- making bodies within the university. The HR Excellence in Research Working Group membership has led the internal evaluation. The group membership consists of two Early Career Researchers (Research Fellows on Research Contract), Head of Suffolk Doctoral College (Deputy chair, Associate Professor on Research Contract), Head of Research Development (Chair), Senior Business Partner (Talent and Organizational Development) and Suffolk Doctoral College PGR Academic (Secretary). Engaging various groups and University Research wide committees, as well as utilizing less formal discussion forums (ECR Network), provided opportunities for open dialogue and input from a diverse range of voices. The dissemination of activities and initiatives from the Looking Back and Looking Forward Plans to all staff in their respective schools and research directorates ensured that the entire research community is aware of the action plans and can actively contribute to their implementation.

The availability of the Concordat resources on the intranet pages, communication through research newsletters, 1-2-1 research induction sessions, 1-2-1 meetings with staff with Significant Responsibility for Research (SRR), the Researcher Development programme, the Research Mentoring Programme together ensure that staff have access to the necessary information and support related to the HR Excellence in Research Award. This approach facilitates transparency, knowledge sharing and engagement, with the initiatives aimed at enhancing the research environment.

### **Key achievements (2021-2023)**

- Research Excellence Framework: we achieved excellent results in our first submission to REF – nearly 70% of our research outputs were classed as world- leading (4\*) or internationally excellent (3\*).
- Professorial Appointments on research contracts only: we significantly strengthened our research governance and scholarly culture with seven new professorial appointments, leading research institutes and centres as well as new research partnerships.
- Staff with Significant Responsibility for Research: With the introduction of the Suffolk Academic Model in 2022, we increased the number of academic staff with significant responsibility for research to 37% and intend to lift that to 60% of our academic workforce by 2030.
- Research Integrity: 83% of our staff with significant responsibility for research have successfully completed the research integrity training.
- Research Leadership: 43 staff on research contracts and academic staff on learning, teaching, and research contracts completed the Advance HE Research Leadership training; 4 staff on research contracts only completed the Advance HE Executive Leadership Development programme.
- Research mentoring programme for all staff with significant responsibility for research was introduced in 2022. It has to date matched 100 % of mentees with mentors (across the institution)

- **Early Career Network:** we launched the Early Career Research Network in October 2022 and run monthly Early Career Researcher Lunch Talk events with invited speakers. The ECR Network provides a valuable platform for networking, collaboration, and professional development among those beginning their research careers. By creating a community specifically tailored for ECRs, the university fosters an environment where researchers can connect, share experiences, and support each other's growth.
- **Researcher Development training programme:** we ran 42 research workshops between October 2022 and June 2023.
- **Recruitment and selection:** a key part of our policy development and evaluation is the use of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs). We now have 20 'enhanced' trained assessors who can support others to undertake EIAs.
- **Recognition and value:** Principal Investigator (PI) training is included in the Researcher Development programme. It recognizes that effective leadership and project management skills are essential for successful research outcomes and contributes to building a strong research culture within the institution.
- **Performance and Development Reviews (PDRs)** are conducted with all research staff. By engaging in regular performance discussions, the university is looking to maximize the potential of its research staff, nurture talent, and drive research excellence and innovation.
- **Career development:** all research staff have a 1-2-1 research induction with the Head of Research Development. By offering a 1-2-1 research induction approach, we ensure that all new research staff receive consistent and relevant information to kick-start their research journey. There has been increased communication of the concordat and its principles to research staff as part of the research induction and the researcher development programme.
- **Research Resources Hub:** A comprehensive research resources hub for research staff was launched in the summer of 2022. The research hub pages are updated weekly, and they are accessed by all research staff.
- **Responsible researchers:** The Head of Research Development with the support of the relevant Associate Dean for Research and Knowledge Exchange and Research Institute Directors organized 1-2-1 meetings with staff responsible for research across all Schools and Research Institutes. These meetings were held between February 2023 and June 2023, with a focus on various aspects of research activity at the University of Suffolk. The discussions were well received by the staff, indicating their enthusiasm and interest in contributing to the University of Suffolk's research goals and supporting their own professional development. The data collected from these meetings has shaped our HR Excellence submission. Additionally, the insights gained from these meetings contributed to staff appraisals, providing a comprehensive understanding of the researchers' needs and aspirations. The proactive approach of our university to engaging with staff responsible for research demonstrates a commitment to fostering a supportive and enriching environment and promoting the growth and success of its researchers.

### **Strategic Objectives and Implementation Plan (2023-2026)**

The introduction of initiatives because of the HR Excellence in Research Awards signifies the University of Suffolk commitment to enhance the research environment and support the career development of researchers. These initiatives include implementing the research mentoring programme, providing comprehensive training and development opportunities as part of the Researcher Development programme, fostering interdisciplinary research collaborations, and promoting a culture of research integrity and good governance. University of Suffolk is strongly focused on continuously improving the experience and development of research-only staff and early career researchers.

Recognizing the unique needs and challenges they face is essential for fostering their growth and success in the research environment. The development of the Looking Forward Plan for the next three years demonstrates our commitment to ongoing improvement and addressing the evolving needs of research-only staff and early career researchers. It provides us a roadmap for implementing targeted initiatives and strategies that will enhance the researchers' experiences and support their professional development. The Looking Forward Plan (2023-2026) allows for the identification of new areas of research focus, the exploration of innovative approaches, and the implementation of measures that align with the evolving landscape of research and the specific needs of research-only staff and early career researchers.

Using various communication channels, such as newsletters, emails, and 1-2-1 meetings, workshops, networks, School committees and staff development days, the university will reach out effectively to research staff and their line managers. By continuing to provide comprehensive support and guidance, we will empower research staff on research contracts to engage effectively with promotion and redeployment processes. This not only promotes their career progression but also contributes to a thriving research environment where talent is nurtured and valued.

The University will continue to facilitate networking and collaboration opportunities for research staff to enhance their visibility within the institution and beyond. We will encourage their participation in conferences, workshops, and research events where they can showcase their work to establish connections with colleagues and potential collaborators. Such opportunities will expand their professional network, open doors for collaboration, and increase their chances of promotion or successful redeployment. While we understand why fixed-term contracts are frequently utilized for research-only staff, we will continue to monitor and evaluate the use of fixed term contracts via the institutional research management committee on a six-monthly basis over two years. We aim to reduce the number of research-only staff on fixed term contracts from 67% (2022/23) to less than 50% by 2025. This aim demonstrates a commitment to providing more stable employment options for research staff. We will ensure all research staff on fixed term contracts have equal access to career development and training opportunities. We aim to increase the fixed term research staff engagement with training (monitored via appraisal system) to 100% of fixed term staff engaging with at least one institutional training opportunity annually.

To measure the success of the initiatives and action plan (2023-2026), we have identified specific indicators that can be used to track progress, some of which are listed below:

- Researcher Development Programme: Increase staff attendance from 50% to 80% by 2026.
- 100% new Principal Investigators and line managers of staff with significant responsibility for research access “management and leadership development opportunities” by 2026.
- 100 % of FTC research only staff will engage with at least one institutional training opportunity per annum.  
Reduce the number of research only staff on Fixed Term Contracts from 67% (22/23) to less than 50% by 2025.
- 100% of staff with significant responsibility for research are engaged with mentoring program, as either a mentor or mentee.
- 100% staff with significant responsibility for research take their 18 professional development and scholarly activity days.