

Summary Report | University of Surrey

HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) Award – 12-year renewal

1. Context of the Institution

The University of Surrey is a research-intensive institution, with 13 Schools within three faculties: the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences (FEPS), the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences (FHMS) and the Faculty of Arts, Business and Social Sciences (FABSS), and two pan-University Institutes: the Institute for People-Centred Artificial Intelligence, and the Institute for Sustainability. The University continues to refine and deliver on its Research and Innovation Strategy to drive the economic and societal benefit of Surrey's research. Central to this strategy is fostering an inspiring researcher community dedicated to the career development of Early Career Researchers (ECRs¹). This includes dedicated provision for Postgraduate Research students (PGRs) through the University's Doctoral College and a new initiative to support Early Career Researchers called the "ECR Academy", formally launched in February 2025. From 2024/25 onwards, the ECR Academy will be responsible for our HR Excellence in Research (HREiR) strategy and action plan.

The University of Surrey has approximately 350 members of research staff who are contracted to work either solely or primarily on research, across a wide range of disciplines with a variety of contract types at various stages in their career. About half of our ECRs are on fixed term contracts, while the rest are junior lecturers or hold proleptic appointments. Our Forward Looking HREiR Action Plan is intended to inclusively support this varied population. However, we understand that ECRs on fixed-term contracts have very specific support and development needs. Therefore, where appropriate, specific actions have been targeted solely to benefit this staff category, supporting them to meet their individual development needs. All HREiR documentation is currently available on the [Doctoral College Website](#) and will move to the new "ECR Academy" website during 2025.

The ECR Academy builds on Surrey's significant investment in ECRs in 2022/3 with the recruitment of ~30 Surrey Future Fellows (SFF). The SFF initiative offers Fellows an attractive 3-year research post with a pathway to a permanent Teaching and Research position from year 4 onwards. There were over 1,000 applicants for the SFF, with winners representing the very best internationally in their respective fields. The ECR Academy began piloting a dedicated package of ECR training through late 2023-24, starting with the SFF cohort and then rolling it out more widely to the whole ECR community.

2. Internal evaluation

An internal evaluation of our ECR community was conducted in December 2023. First, we ran a [campus-wide survey of our ECR community](#), which some ~50% of the ECR community responded to (FEPS 22%; FHMS 48%; FABSS 57%). The results of the survey were discussed via two committees: the ECR Forum and the ECR Working Group. These have broad representation from the ECR community, academic and professional services staff (see section 3). Collectively, the ECR Forum and Working Group worked with the ECR Lead to make an action plan in response to the Survey that has informed our gap analysis and HREiR Forward Looking Action Plan.

A key result from the ECR survey was that strong mentorship is by far the most important support that ECRs in Surrey are looking for. Where this is well-served locally, ECRs are very happy with the provision they receive. There are, however, notable gaps where some ECRs do not have access to the mentorship they need. ECRs would also like a package of training that is better tailored to their career stage. Finally, communication with the ECR community needs improving, with more bespoke content that address their concerns and aspirations. These key findings have led to the development of the "ECR Academy" – a bespoke support service for ECRs in Surrey which will provide a new mentorship scheme for ECRs who are not receiving sufficient local support, and deliver a new package of pan-campus training specifically tailored to the ECR community (§5).

3. Governance Structures

¹We define an ECR as anyone post-PhD (or equivalent) who is either not in a permanent position or is less than three years into a permanent academic post, excluding career breaks. However, anyone who considers themselves an ECR is welcome to join the community.

Up to October 2023, support for ECRs in Surrey was provided by the Doctoral College (DC), with oversight and reporting of the HREiR action plan led by the Researcher Development Concordat Steering Committee. However, following a review of the DC structure in 2023, it was proposed that support for ECRs should move out of the DC and into a new dedicated support structure that recognises the distinct needs of ECRs: the *ECR Academy*. The Academy will maintain strong links with the DC via a DC representative who will sit on a new “ECR Forum”. The Academy and DC will offer joint support and events, where appropriate. Development of the ECR Academy plan began in late 2023 with the appointment of a new academic “ECR Lead” role, Prof. Justin I. Read. It has been developed in broad consultation with the wider academic community through the ECR Forum, and through input from a dedicated Surrey-wide ECR Survey that ran in December 2023 (§2). This Survey will be run yearly going forwards to measure the impact and success of Academy.

Oversight of the ECR Academy will be undertaken by the PVC&I (whom the ECR Lead reports to) and was initially supported by an ECR Working Group that had representation from all three Faculty Research & Innovation Offices (FRIOs); an ECR Representative, the ECR Lead (Chair), Human Resources (staff Learning & Development); the DC; and the three faculty Associate Deans of Research & Innovation (ADRIIs). This replaced the previous Researcher Development Concordat Steering Committee, and, following the sign-off and launch of the ECR Academy, was merged into the ECR Forum, which is the primary interface going forwards between the ECR Academy and the broader ECR Community. The ECR Forum comprises the ECR Lead, ECR Representatives from each School in the University and a representative from the Employability & Careers team. One ECR Forum Rep also sits on the University Research & Innovation Committee (URIC), while another sits on the University Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Forum. One ECR Rep from the Forum sits on each of the three Faculty Research & Innovation Committees. This ensures that we have effective communication between the Academy and all key stakeholders.

4. HREiR and the Researcher Concordat

The HREiR award and the Researcher Concordat are standard agenda items on the ECR Forum and ECR Working Group agendas (both of which meet at least quarterly) to encourage awareness of, and deeper engagement with, the Concordat’s principles. Surrey’s submission to the HREiR award, including its backwards and forwards looking action plans, has been devised in consultation with both groups. The ADRIIs and DC representative have also raised awareness of the Concordat at Faculty Research Committees and Faculty Research Degree Committees. Progress against the HREiR action plan is reported in the Doctoral College’s (DC) newsletter, and on a new, dedicated, ECR web-portal – the ECRWiki. This ensures that knowledge of the Concordat is filtered throughout the University and that key stakeholder partners are held accountable for the implementation of its principles. Finally, implementation of the Concordat’s principles is also assessed through regular consultations with key stakeholders. Surrey participated in the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) pilot in 2020, for example, gathering 109 responses from PGRs and ECRs to inform policy and actions. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that the University did not run the survey in 2021 and 2022. From 2024/25, we will support our ECR community through a dedicated Surrey ECR Survey that will run yearly in the spring (§2).

5. Progress Against the Previous Action Plan (2020—2024)

The University of Surrey maintains its commitment to delivering upon its aligned HREiR and RDC action plan 2020—2024, which includes details of measurable objectives supported by actions that will improve opportunities for our community of researchers and their support staff. The [University’s strategy refresh](#), published in 2021, has benefited from, and further promoted, the implementation of the Concordat principles. This is evidenced by Surrey successfully gaining an [Athena Swan Silver Award](#) (Sept 2023) and [Bronze Race Equality Charter Award](#) (August 2022), both of which included actions aimed at ECRs (see Principle 2 below) and new training opportunities developed by HR and the Surrey EDI team that include provision for ECRs and managers of ECRs.

The transition from the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) that was last undertaken in 2019 to the Culture, Employment and Academic Research Survey (CEDARS), in whose pilot Surrey participated in in 2020 has meant that references to CROS ‘success measures’ in the backwards looking

action have been revised to align with the new survey. From 2024/25 onwards, we will run a dedicated Surrey ECR Survey every spring to monitor success against our Forwards Looking Action Plan.

5.1 Principle #1 – Environment & Culture

A key objective for this pillar was raising awareness of the Researcher Development Concordat. Up to October 2023, this was done via the Doctoral College and its newsletter, the Researcher Development Concordat Steering Committee, and the ECR Forum. Unfortunately, this was not successful, with 55% of respondents reporting an awareness of the Researcher Development Concordat in CEDARS 2020, falling to 36% in CEDARS 2023. For this reason, with the launch of the ECR Academy, we will take a different approach from 2024 onwards. The Concordat is now promoted through the refreshed ECR Forum, with direct lines through to the three faculty ADRIs and FRIOs (see section 3). We have also launched a new “one-stop-shop” web-portal for ECRs called the “ECRWiki” and a refreshed, monthly, ECR coffee morning open to all ECRs where they can meet and network with one another and their ECR Representatives. The Concordat is regularly promoted via all of these channels. We will formally measure the effectiveness of these interventions in promoting awareness of the Concordat in the next ECR Survey that is running in May/June 2025.

Our Diversity 200 initiative provides inclusive recruitment guidance to all hiring managers and teams involved in recruitment to ensure they are proactive and alert to inclusive practices and accountable for addressing bias. Across the University, a suite of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training is delivered in person and also via e-learning modules and incorporates anti-bias material, effective allyship, and comprehensive learning relating to all aspects of workforce diversity and inclusion. EDI content has been weaved through the management training portfolio. We recognise that growing the diversity confidence of managers is crucial to building inclusive team cultures and attracting and managing diverse talent. Talent development programmes such as the Springboard Women’s Development Programme offers tailored support to increase representation and career progression for underrepresented groups.

At an institutional level, HR continue to run workshops focused on unconscious bias and race equity as part of the compulsory university induction programme, including those involved in the recruitment of researchers, as well as revamped line management training open to all staff, including staff who manage researchers. HR have also led institution-wide ‘People & Culture’ workshops, allowing all staff, including ECRs, to help clarify the trusting and empowered culture desired at the university and the institution’s now guiding values of inclusion, inspiration, innovation, and integrity.

Researcher-led events continue to form key points in the University’s calendar. The University’s flagship event for PGRs and ECRs has long been the Doctoral College Conference. Secretarial support was provided by the DC, but all other aspects are in the hands of the organising committee, formed exclusively of PGRs and ECRs. The latest Conference, on the theme of “Bridging Disciplines”, ran successfully in May 2025. In addition, the “Building Research Culture and Innovation” event in 2020-21 included three ECR talks, two from FABSS and one from FHMS. Two ECR-led events have been run through 2023/24 led by our new “Surrey Future Fellows” cohort. Finally, Prof. Emily Farran founded the Research Culture Steering Group in autumn 2022 to collaborate on pioneering a more positive research culture. Its [official launch event in February 2023](#) was attended by over 300 people, raising awareness of the importance of embedding an inclusive research culture across the University. A [follow-on event ran in January 2024 focussed on Open Research Culture](#). Further events will be run, led by two new Research Culture Leads at Surrey appointed in autumn 2024. They will collaborate with the ECR Lead, to ensure that events also engage and support the ECR community, addressing their specific needs. They will also liaise with Surrey’s EDI Manager and Faculty EDI Committees (FEDICs) to ensure where appropriate that activities are aligned with the new EDI plan priorities (2025-2029).

5.2 Principle #2 – Employment

Initiatives of benefit to ECRs have emerged from Surrey’s Athena Swan Silver Award (Sept 2023) and Bronze Race Equality Charter Award (February–August 2022). Among other examples, this includes tailored support to help ECRs from minority ethnic groups gain permanent academic posts. The University has updated its maternity and paternity leave policies to cover all academic staff, independently of how long they have worked at Surrey. And, we now ensure that all managers of

researchers and those involved in the recruitment of researchers have undertaken the university's compulsory race equity and EDI training.

A University Promotions Committee, led by our new Provost & Senior Vice President, recently reviewed academic career pathways with HR (2022/23). As a result of this, the University has rolled out a revised appraisal format that better-rewards the balance of research and teaching responsibilities. And, all researchers, whether on fixed-term or open-ended contracts, are now eligible to apply for promotion. This is advertised to ECRs on our new ECRWiki web-portal.

A key objective for this pillar was to secure 10 days of protected development time for ECRs, written into relevant contracts. We are pleased to say that as of summer 2024, this objective has been completed and this commitment is now advertised to ECRs on our new ECRWiki web-portal. A second key objective was the more robust collection of data to aid the evaluation of existing initiatives and design of future action plans. This has also been successfully delivered. The new ECR Lead worked with HR to set up a new ECR E-mail list that launched in 2024. This is updated monthly and shared with key stakeholders (the ECR Working Group, the ECR Forum and relevant FRIO staff). This is already significantly improving our communication with ECRs in Surrey. Finally, we have introduced more robust data collection via the new annual ECR Survey.

5.3 Principle #3 – Professional Development of Researchers

Since 2020, the Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) has run a [Commercialisation Fellowship programme](#) aimed specifically at ECRs. In 2021 five ECRs from across all faculties successfully took part in the programme, and the call for applications for 2022 was advertised through more channels to increase uptake. The IAA also launched “Business Boost” in 2020, a funded project to encourage PGRs and ECRs in the social sciences to collaborate with business. Support for ECRs in applying for fellowships has also been revised across the University. Research Strategy rolled out [Pivot RP](#) in early 2022, a database that gathers funding and fellowship opportunities from across the globe. Faculty initiatives aimed at supporting ECR fellowship applications are numerous (see the retrospective action plan for more detail), but include: a fellowship network meeting every other month, linking ECRs applying for fellowships with senior members of staff to share advice and review applications (FEPS); a fellowship academy that launched in May 2022 after a successful pilot cohort (FHMS); and one-to-one bid development mentoring offered by a Research Facilitation Officer (FABSS).

Learning and development opportunities are available to ECRs provided by Surrey's Learning & Development team: e.g., in-person and online workshops focused on management skills and wellbeing, and access to the LinkedIn Learning platform that provides a wide variety of technical, personal and professional development resources. A new, bespoke, package of training is also being trialled (2024) as part of the new ECR Academy initiative (§5). Two training days have already been piloted on Research Strategy and Turning your Research into Impact, with 100% positive feedback.

While the ECR Academy plan is being developed and rolled-out over 2024/25, careers support for ECRs remains primarily within the remit of the Doctoral College (DC). This includes access to the DC careers consultants and support for developing a narrative CV. The ECR Academy successfully ran a Narrative CV training event in April 2025, which was oversubscribed and will be run again (provisionally in the autumn) to meet demand.

6. Strategic Objectives & Implementation Plan

A critical part of Surrey's new strategic vision is *“To be a leader in advancing frontiers of knowledge and translating research discoveries to outcomes beneficial to local and global communities.”*. The activity to further develop and support our ECR community is critical to support this outcome. Our primary goal for the next three years is to launch a new, dedicated, package of support for ECRs at Surrey called the “ECR Academy”. The Academy demonstrates Surrey's strong commitment to its ECR community, and to the Concordat principles. Its development began in late 2023 with the appointment of a new academic “ECR Lead” role (50% FTE commitment), Prof. Justin I. Read. Following approval by the University Research & Innovation Committee, it was fully launched in February 2025 with a strategic plan, aligned with our HREiR Forward Looking Action Plan, focussed around three pillars:

P1: Communication, Engagement & Events | The ECR Academy will engage with the Surrey ECR community, and the wider world via: a new ECR Academy website; new social media accounts; a monthly ECR newsletter; a dedicated ECR E-mail list; and a new ECRWiki “one-stop-shop” web portal

to better-communicate and share information. Information will also be disseminated through the ECR Forum (see section 3). An annual “Festival of Research” will showcase research and innovation from our ECRs, with sessions to encourage interdisciplinary research. “Postdoc Appreciation Week” will run yearly in September. And, a new ECR coffee morning will run monthly for networking and to ensure ECR Representatives regularly engage with the ECR community.

The impact of Pillar 1 on the key Concordat audience will be evaluated according to a variety of success indicators. We will track participation in ECR networking events, working with ECR reps to understand reasons for (non-)attendance and making iterative improvements. Similarly, we will monitor activity on the ECRWiki, and complement this with qualitative feedback from reps at the ECR Forum to optimise the Wiki so that ECRs can and do access the information they need. The annual ECR survey will yield data on awareness of key initiatives, policies, and services. This data will assist in prioritising awareness gaps where improvements to the ECRWiki, social media activity, and other communication channels can deliver the most value.

P2: Training & Mentorship | Addressing a key gap (see section 2), the Academy will provide a new package of centralised, bespoke, training for the ECR community. This will optimise, align with, and further augment training already offered through the Learning & Development team, the DC, and more specialised training offered by Schools, research groups and the pan-campus Institutes. The training will take the form of 8 training half-days, delivered in rotation throughout the year, covering *Research Strategy, Turning Research into Impact, Grant Writing, Core Skills, Digital Skills, Leadership & Management, Public Engagement and Future Directions*. Two pilot training days have already been successfully delivered with 100% positive feedback.

A second gap identified by our internal review (§2) was in ensuring that all ECRs receive regular and effective mentorship. The ECR Academy will work with line managers to ensure that all ECRs have a mentor whom they meet regularly. The Academy, in conjunction with HR who are leading on a new university-wide platform, will also facilitate ECR engagement with the central mentorship programme.

The impact of Pillar 2 on ECRs will be assessed primarily via direct feedback from participants in the ECR Academy training events, as well as feedback in the annual ECR Survey on training and mentorship provision more generally relative to ECRs’ self-identified needs. As detailed in the Forward Action Plan, we have come up with supplementary objectives to understand, evaluate, and continually increase the value of training and mentorship for ECRs at Surrey. These include working with the HR L&D team to ensure that line-managers are fully informed and equipped to provide a conducive professional-development environment for ECRs, with planned follow-up both with line managers (via focus groups convened by the ECR Lead) and with ECRs (via rep-led discussion at Forum meetings on the training and mentorship topics that reps judge as most important at the time of each meeting).

P3: Future Directions | This pillar of the ECR Academy will support ECRs transitioning to the next phase of their career, that can be in or out of academia. Industry events will offer networking opportunities, careers talks and careers advice from academic and industry leaders. As of 2025, one ECR rep per Faculty has been designated to lead on careers events for each Faculty, for example a regular external speaker series in FHMS. The ECR careers-event leads will record attendance numbers and work with fellow ECR reps in their Faculty to elicit qualitative feedback and shape the programme according to suggestions received. They will report on the progress in each Faculty at the ECR Forum meetings.

Equally, a primary objective of the Future Directions pillar is to deliver training on career management and career strategy embedded in the overall programme in the previous pillar. We will ensure that opportunities such as the university’s ECR Commercialisation Fellowships (currently funded by an IAA) are widely disseminated and well understood. Together with HR, the ECR Lead is beginning to formulate a robust exit-survey mechanism to benchmark and track one of the key concrete impacts of the Future Directions preparation, namely ECRs’ transition to their next position.

An annual review of ECR Forum minutes each December, coordinated by the ECR Academy Lead and reporting to the PVCRI, will ensure that all objectives are being progressed, and that lines of accountability remain clear; i.e., that all standing agenda items (corresponding in turn to the ECR Academy Pillars and our HREiR Forward Action Plan) are being meaningfully attended to and that targets (e.g., event delivery) are being met. This review will complement the annual (early-summer) analysis of ECR Survey results in such a way that monitoring and improvement will regularly iterate across the various aims and principles of both the ECR Academy and the Concordat.