

THE EASTERN ARC STRATEGY 2020-25

Eastern Arc is a strategic consortium of three radical, interdisciplinary universities on the eastern seaboard of England: the University of East Anglia, the University of Essex and the University of Kent.



1 Background

All three universities were established in the early 1960s, a time of optimism and change, when old conventions were being questioned and traditions challenged. **All three aimed to be different, to work across disciplinary boundaries, and to offer alternative ways of thinking.**

This is enshrined in UEA's motto ('do different'), and in the founding principles of Essex ('freer, more daring, more experimental') and Kent ('a community...where people of the various disciplines mix up').

The result has been fifty years of socially aware, radical and disruptive research and education, forged in communities built on equality, respect, and intellectual freedom.

Within these communities, research and education are not held to be separate, but part of a whole: research is integral to education, and education to research, with both underpinned by innovative professional support.

This is clear when research excellence is mapped against teaching excellence. The three Eastern Arc partners are in the top 10% of UK universities that have achieved the highest scores in both research intensity and teaching excellence.¹

As well as a shared outlook, the three universities are similar in size² and location. All are on the southern North Sea rim, **a region rooted in the land but shaped by travel, trade and migration, resulting in a mind-set that is outward looking, accepting of change and welcoming of external influences.**

In 2013 Eastern Arc was established to encourage closer ties between these three ideologically-aligned universities. It took a 'five and fifty year' view: setting the foundations in the first five years for its development and growth in the next fifty. In this, the second phase of the collaboration, we are taking the next step and building on those foundations in order to respond to pressing global issues.

¹ Source: Morris, David: 'TEF results – How do REF and TEF results compare?' (Wonkhe, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/tef-results-how-do-ref-and-tef-results-compare/>)

² The three universities have between 14,760-17,995 students, and their income is between £268-327m (Source: HESA (www.hesa.ac.uk/)). Each university submitted 455 (UEA), 339 (Essex) and 591 (Kent) FTE to REF2014 (Source: REF2014 (www.ref.ac.uk/2014/)).



2 Vision

Our vision is to deliver real and tangible change through a close collaboration to address pressing issues of sustainable development.

We are living through a time of unprecedented change and increasing economic disparity. The UK Parliament has declared a climate emergency,³ and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has stated that we are 'at a tipping point,' with inequalities at their highest levels in 30 years and widening.⁴

We need to act now, and we need to act together. By collaborating, we believe that we can achieve more than if we acted alone. By sharing our resources, our knowledge and our skills, we will be more effective in overcoming the specific challenges to a sustainable, peaceful and equitable future.

³ Source: UK Parliament (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmagenda/ob190501.htm>) In July of the same year, almost 200 institutions – including UEA – and over fifty networks representing 9,000 others, signed a letter also declaring a climate emergency, and agreeing to undertake a three-point plan to address the crisis.

⁴ Source: OECD (www.oecd.org/inclusive-growth/#introduction)



3 Mission

Our mission is to focus our radical and collaborative principles on four areas of strength and opportunity, creating interdisciplinary networks that will stimulate and galvanise research with social, environmental and economic impact.

In these broad areas we have complementary research and regional strengths, and it is here that we will build our collaborative effort. They are:

- Health systems, social care and wellbeing
- Human rights, equality and conflict
- Sustainability, natural resources and food
- Culture, connection and creativity.

These areas address or inform many of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁵ The SDGs are an 'urgent call for action' to the international community, and as such they are both our starting point and our lodestar.

They will help to frame and measure our progress, and we will encourage all our academics, PGR students and professional service staff to consider how they can address them.

However, we also recognise that the nature of any challenge can shift and change, and, by working to our specific strengths rather than an external framework, we will remain flexible, agile and adaptable.

Through our mission we hope to return to our founding principles. We will take risks. We will challenge and we will question. We will cross boundaries, and we will engage. We will be bold, and daring, and experimental. We will do different, and we will be different.

⁵ Source: UN (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>)



4 Guiding principles

We recognise that achieving this mission will not be simple. In the past fifty years higher education has become increasingly competitive and combative, and this has been exacerbated by the rise of league tables.

We must work to counter the most corrosive effects of this. To do so, we will be guided by four basic principles: trust, understanding, creativity and risk.

- **Trust:** Each university, each individual, must trust each other and see the mutual benefit of collaboration.
- **Understanding:** We must understand our individual strengths, as well as the contexts in which we work, and the needs of our regional, national and global communities.
- **Creativity:** we must be creative, flexible and adaptive in the way we work.
- **Risk:** we must be willing to take risks, and we must be willing to fail.





5 Strategy

5.1 Four themes

Our strategy will focus on four themes. These are areas of clear and defined need, for which we have shared strength and critical mass,⁶ and by which we can make a difference to both our regional and global communities.

Health systems, social care and wellbeing

Although significant advances have been made globally in improving health, increasing life expectancy and tackling communicable diseases, the UN has recognised that progress has slowed or stalled.⁷

We can play a part in reversing this. Our work ranges from the clinical and scientific (through the Norwich Medical School and our biological and life sciences) to the study of public health and health systems (through centres such as Kent's Centre for Health Services Studies (CHSS) and the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU)), and the examination of wider issues of wellbeing and mental health through our psychological research.

We also look at the social drivers of health and long-term change through world-leading centres such as the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at Essex, which allow us to examine issues around deprivation, equality of opportunity and life choices.

The breadth and complementarity of our work, the way in which we balance different methodologies and alternative perspectives, gives us the opportunity to examine issues in the round, offering a comprehensive analysis of the scientific and social challenges we face in health and wellbeing.

Human rights, equality and conflict

According to the World Justice Project,⁸ an estimated five billion people have unmet justice needs globally, including people who cannot obtain justice for everyday problems, people who are excluded from the opportunity the law provides, and people who live in extreme conditions of injustice.

This has been exacerbated by the rise of extremism, political instability and the climate crisis. Issues of migration, gender inequality, corruption and free speech mitigate against sustainable and fair development.

Challenging these issues is at the heart of what we are. The three Eastern Arc universities have always had a strong belief in the need to act on behalf of those within society who are not able to do so. This is clear in the strong, critical research in our law schools, which includes public protest at UEA, gender at Kent and the Human Rights Centre at Essex.

It is also manifest in our world-leading research on government, institutions, history, politics and international relations. Our schools, such as the Department of Government at Essex and the School for International Development at UEA, are recognised for the excellence of their research, and for the real world impact of their research globally.

We influence globally, but we also act locally. For instance, the law clinics of UEA, Kent and Essex provide pro bono advice to those unable to access justice, while also helping to train the next generation of lawyers.

6 A mapping analysis using SciVal data, REF2014 results, grant capture and a series of qualitative data was undertaken between November and December 2019 to identify these broad areas.

7 Source: UN <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg3> (accessed 10/12/2019)

8 Source: World Justice Project (<https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/access-justice/measuring-justice-gap>) (accessed 10/12/2019)





Sustainability, natural resources and food

Food production is central to the economy of the Eastern Arc region, and our universities work closely with independent institutes in this area, including the Quadram Institute, John Innes Centre and East Malling Research. We also focus on the wider issues of logistics and the supply chain, of trade, transport and consumption.

Such a focus comes at a crucial time for the global community: the UN has indicated⁹ that, after decades of steady decline, world hunger has slowly been on the rise since 2015. An estimated 821 million people in the world suffered from hunger in 2018. At the same time, obesity continues to increase in all regions of the world.

However, food needs to be seen in the wider framework of how we use natural resources, how we manage biodiversity and how we ensure sustainability. Understanding how we interact with our natural environment is a significant strength for Eastern Arc, from the climate research within UEA's Environmental Sciences, to Kent's Durrell Institute for Conservation Ecology and Essex's recently established flagship interdisciplinary focus on environment, sustainability and society.

Culture, connection and creativity

Culture, creativity and the way in which humans connect is central to our identity as individuals and communities. To face the future, we must understand our past, our cultural differences and our common reference points. We must understand how we communicate and how we engage. UNESCO summarised this simply: 'development is inseparable from culture.'¹⁰

Placing culture at the heart of our endeavour towards a fairer, more sustainable future is the only way to ensure human-centred, inclusive and equitable development. For us, culture and creativity are both academic and performance-based, both theoretical and applied. They are engaged locally, nationally and internationally.

In the first phase of Eastern Arc, one of our three foundational themes was around digital humanities. This will continue, but we will explore the use of connective and communication technology more broadly.

Technology has already transformed the way we interact, the way we see, and the way we comprehend. For it to be used constructively, it is important that there is a dialogue between our cultural and scientific understanding.

We have the structure and outlook to make this happen. In both the arts, humanities and digital technology, as well as in our special collections, we encourage dialogue and cross-disciplinary working.

For instance, engineering and digital arts come together in a single school at Kent, the Faculty of Humanities at Essex has at its heart a 'flexibility of spirit and collaborative ethos,' and practice research, including the world-leading creative writing programme at UEA, informs and interacts with disciplines across the University.

⁹ Source: UN (www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/food/index.html) (accessed 10/12/2019)

¹⁰ Source: UNESCO (www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/culture-and-development/) (accessed 10/12/2019)



5.2 Three objectives

To achieve our mission we will focus on three objectives: to develop a strong collaborative core within our themes, to support experimental, risk-taking activity, and to engage with external policy-makers and end-users.

i A strong collaborative core within our themes

The four themes are at the heart of our strategy. World-leading research is already taking place within them, and fruitful collaborations exist across the three universities. We want to build on these to develop a strong and robust base from which to address the challenges we face in developing a sustainable, peaceful and equitable future.

To do so, we will:

- Work with our associate and deputy deans to map our strengths within the themes, and identify the potential links between them.
- Scope our regional strengths and our global needs to identify particular foci for our work.
- Provide a framework of strategic support for these areas, which will be led by academic champions with the resource necessary to nurture projects and facilitate collaborations.
- Build a platform and an agreement by which we can share high-value equipment, databases, collections and other resources.

ii Experimental, risk-taking activity

The three Eastern Arc universities were founded on radical, interdisciplinary principles. Our strategy will safeguard this spirit, and encourage our staff to be 'freer, more daring, more experimental.'

To do so, we will:

- Examine what it means to effectively collaborate and develop creative and supportive communities, building on the work of the Wellcome Trust and others in 'reimaging research'.
- Provide a dedicated small grant scheme to fund experimental work that has a significant chance of failure.
- Encourage academics to go beyond their discipline, and beyond the traditional ways of working, to engage with internal and external stakeholders who can provide different perspectives, different knowledge and different skills.

iii Engagement with external policy-makers and end-users

The three Eastern Arc universities are situated in regions that have historically been open to new ways of thinking and new ways of working, influencing and being influenced by them. We will continue and build on this tradition by engaging meaningfully with external stakeholders.

To do so, we will:

- Raise the profile of Eastern Arc, its aspirations and achievements, lobby on its behalf, and encourage a broader audience to engage with it.
- Host regular guest lectures, seminars and workshops with key policy-makers, funders, and regional, national and international stakeholders.
- Provide training for academics in effective engagement with the end-users of their research.

Realising our vision will be difficult, but our shared history has shown that we can take a disruptive idea and create a new way of thinking. By coming together as the Eastern Arc, by sharing our resources, our knowledge and our skills, we will seek to overcome the specific challenges of our time to help create a sustainable, peaceful and equitable future.





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University of Essex

University of
Kent