

do different

The termly newsletter of Eastern Arc

Summer 2021

Conference Special

We report on our week of discussion and debate

How has the pandemic impacted our research productivity?

We look at the findings of staff surveys across EARC

Two new champions join EARC

Decolonising the curriculum across the Arc

Finding funding in our themes



**EASTERN
ARC**

Academic Research
Consortium



A note from the Director

Our annual conference is our flagship event, drawing together colleagues from across our three universities of UEA, Essex and Kent, but inviting others to join in the conversation. This year, for the first time, we held the conference online, and it allowed us to have an even broader and more diverse range of colleagues joining us. Around 120 delegates took part in events over the course of a week, discussing everything from sustainable agriculture after Brexit and the dangers of online extremism, to the response of cultural organisations to lockdown and the future of healthcare in the UK. If you weren't able to make any of the sessions, you can read about them on page 6 and 7.

Elsewhere, we've been continuing to develop and support collaborations in a number of different ways, from setting up dynamic funding lists in each of our themes and joining together to host training sessions (page 9), to hosting a discussion around decolonising the curriculum (page 8). As ever, we finish our update by highlighting a range of ways you can get involved. Do drop me a line if you want to find out more (p.ward@easternarc.ac.uk).

Two new champions join EARC

Dr John Gordon (UEA) and Dr Elke Van Hellemont (Kent) have joined Eastern Arc as champions in two of our themes.

John is joining Melanie Williams in representing UEA in the Culture, Connection and Creativity theme; Elke is stepping in to the Human Rights, Equality and Conflict theme while Erin Sanders-McDonagh is on maternity leave.

John is the Academic Chair of UEA's new integrated interdisciplinary research theme, CreativeUEA. This combines the University's long history of high quality research in the creative arts (in particular in literature, arts, media, and drama) with new interdisciplinary research activities that will bring together colleagues from across all four faculties, as well as with the institutes and centres within Norwich Research Park.

Elke's work is also highly interdisciplinary and radical. She is based in Kent's School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, and her multi-method research explores the seduction of crime within the global mediascape, and she has recently been focusing on cybercrime. As such, her work touches on other Eastern Arc themes, including Culture, Connection and Creativity, understanding how technology can enable us to reach out and develop new communities and ways of working, but also how it can divide us and corrode trust.



Hon Rishi Sunak MP
HM Treasury
Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

17 March 2021

Dear Chancellor

We are writing on behalf of Eastern Arc to express our concern about the decision to halve the official development assistance (ODA) budget to the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

Eastern Arc is the regional research consortium comprising the universities of East Anglia (UEA), Essex and Kent. As civic universities rooted in our region and working for those within it, we fully understand the difficult choices you have had to make in focussing on the recovery from the pandemic and supporting the UK population.

Indeed, we have been working hard throughout the lockdown to support the national effort: we have turned our labs over to processing Covid tests, put aside part of our ongoing research to work towards developing a vaccine, and repurposed equipment to provide emergency PPE equipment.

However, the pandemic has demonstrated that we as a nation are not alone. We are part of a global community. What happens in other parts of the world affects us. Our futures are inextricably linked and, as such, it is crucial to balance our immediate needs with the long-term needs of those in countries who are least able to address them.

As one of the richest countries in the world we have a certain duty to do so, but it is more than that. By helping those in the global south, by ameliorating their problems and working with them in their development, we are also building the foundations for our own future sustainability and wellbeing.



ODA Funding: open letter to the Chancellor

In March we wrote an open letter to the Chancellor Rishi Sunak expressing our concerns with the decision to halve the official development assistance (ODA) budget to the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS). Signed by the PVCs Research at UEA and Essex, and by the DVC Research & Innovation at Kent, the letter also went to the CEO of UKRI. To read the full text of the EARC letter, go to <http://bit.ly/ODAletter>

New Eastern Arc events page

Eastern Arc hosts a range of online debates, discussions and information events to help colleagues across the consortium to understand and engage with the issues that will affect them, their research and their innovation.

These complement our position papers, which set out where we stand in relation to current issues in the wider research and innovation environment.

We've launched a webpage to highlight these events, and to also act as a repository for recordings and slides from previous events. The page is available below; have a look at what's coming up, and bookmark it so that you can stay updated.

<https://easternarc.ac.uk/events/>

The effect of the pandemic on our research



Photo by [tam.wai.on](#) on [Unsplash](#)

All three of the EARC universities surveyed their staff at different points during the past year. There are clear commonalities, and we have called on external funders to support our academics as we slowly return to normality

For many of those undertaking research across Eastern Arc, the pandemic has meant that their work has had to be altered, adapted, curtailed or postponed.

Of the respondents to the surveys, the majority (ranging from 54 to 67 per cent) had experienced a significant drop in research productivity due to different aspects of the pandemic. The results reflect the three broad causes of this, and the degree to which it had done so.

- **The importance of focussing on students:** when the pandemic first broke, academics quickly recognised the need to prioritise the education of their students. As a result, much of their own research was put on hold while they adapted to the new online or blended model of delivery, or responded to the concerns and questions of the students. At UEA and Essex, around a third of respondents (33 per cent and 29 per cent respectively) reported that their work had been affected by this, and over half (53 per cent) of those at Kent said that their work had been affected to a 'great' or 'extreme' extent.
- **The need to work within imposed limits to access and travel:** with the restrictions of lockdown, investigators at all three universities reported that they were not able to access essential labs or resources, could not travel nor see collaborators. A similar percentage of respondents at each university had been affected by this: 34 per cent at UEA, 35 per cent at Essex, and 37 per cent at Kent.
- **The necessity of responding to changes at home:** the need to adapt to their changing personal circumstances also affected our academics, as it did many of those working from home across the country. Additional caring responsibilities and/or coping with personal illness affected 15 per cent of respondents at UEA and 24 per cent at Essex; at Kent 29 per cent were affected 'to an extreme extent'.

'Homeschooling means that I am now working effectively part-time,' suggested one respondent at Kent. 'I now start working at 5am, then spend half the day teaching my children and then try and work five hours in the afternoon. In the evenings I am usually too tired and need to catch up on housework and prepping teaching for the next day. I have a number of research deadlines...and it is going to be a real struggle to meet them. I simply do not have the time to produce new work.'

This experience is representative of many of the comments we received, and we recognise the huge pressure that our staff have been working under for the past year. As we come out of lockdown we know that the repercussions of such pressure will continue to be felt for some time to come.

We will work with them to try and mitigate the worst effects of this. At the same time we call on external funders to do the same. At the height of the pandemic they demonstrated an invaluable flexibility and understanding in supporting our research. They postponed calls, extended grants and even supplemented funding for those who have been directly affected by the disease.

As the immediate threat of Covid recedes, we would ask that they continue to offer this flexibility and understanding and, by doing so, enable our researchers to return to full capacity and continue – as our vision sets out – 'to deliver real and tangible change.'

Eastern Arc Conference 2021

This year's conference looked at the aftermath of the seismic shifts in our politics, health and society in the last 18 months. Here we give an overview of the week-long debate.

The challenges to research collaboration

On the first day, the EARC Director, Phil Ward, and the British Academy's Director of Research, Vanessa Cuthill, looked at how the past year had changed their organisations. Phil gave an overview of the achievements of EARC, the challenges and opportunities of the past year, and what the focus will be in the year ahead. After his talk, he chaired a discussion with the [theme champions](#) to understand how they had been leading the collaborative work in their areas.

Vanessa explained the work of the BA, and explained how political changes, such as the appointment of a new Science Minister, the integrated review, the departure from Europe and changes to government funding, had meant that the Academy had had to be flexible and agile. It had also responded to the pandemic by identifying nine significant areas of long-term impact, and seven strategic policy goals to help society recover.

Sustainable agriculture after Brexit

Day two brought together a panel of landowners, farmers, advocates and policy-makers to explore the government's new framework of payments that are intended to encourage more sustainable practices. Replacing the current system of EU funding, they offer the most significant change to farming support and land management in 50 years.

The panel recognised the need for a change of focus, and that farmers were no longer just the producers of food but rather 'asset managers', balancing the 'natural capital' on their estates. To do so successfully would be challenging but essential in helping to tackle the climate crisis.

The speakers finished by discussing opportunities for academics to work with landowners to address issues that resulted from this change, from understanding the wider context and enabling informed decision-making to developing systems to accurately measure national capital.

How cultural organisations had adapted to lockdown

On the third day Mark Richards (Metal Culture), Moya Stirrup (Turner Contemporary) and Ghislaine Wood (Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts) discussed how each of their institutions had adapted to the challenges of Covid. They had had to respond rapidly, moving much of their activity online. This had been positive in widening access to those who hadn't been able to go to galleries in the past, but they were aware of 'digital poverty' and some being excluded by this move.

They also recognised the important role they played in supporting the mental health of the nation, and they had developed creative and inspiring responses to it. One simple action had been setting up a webcam feed outside the Turner Contemporary that pointed out to sea, creating a meditative and contemplative portal in troubled times. They finished by highlighting the importance of bringing humour and joy to the arts, which helped offset the effects of an otherwise bleak environment.

The threat from online extremism

Prof Alan Finlayson opened up the penultimate day by looking at how extremism and intense politicisation had developed through social media, 'displacing the university from the centre of discussion.' The status of knowledge had been contested, and 'ideological entrepreneurs' had flourished. There were no easy answers to countering this: the frustrations and anger that had led to it were still there and keenly felt. It was necessary to engage with and understand it if universities were going to continue to play a part in informing and challenging debate.

In the second half of the discussion Dr Gareth Mott moved the focus to the challenge of cyber attacks, painting a dystopian picture of multiple threats, but finishing with a glimmer of hope in 'cyber serenity'. To make this happen would require a change in political structures and political thinking. 'The playbook of the 21st century will not just be written but coded,' he said.

AFTERMATH

The Eastern Arc Conference 10-14 May 2021

PROGRAMME



Integrated care systems and the post-Covid world

On the final day Prof David Croisdale-Appleby explained how the UK's health and care provision was being transformed to enable a more 'joined-up' approach, bringing together the NHS, local authority and third sector bodies within a local area with the focus on improving health outcomes and reducing health inequalities. It would move the current system based on competition to one based on collaboration.

He looked at how the ICSSs would work in practice, and

what this may mean to those undertaking research, particularly in the EARC universities. There were clearly huge opportunities, and David outlined 10 areas in which the universities could benefit the ICSSs – and vice versa.

In the second half of the session the focus shifted to the effect of Covid on the delivery of support for those affected by the virus. Lisa Smith looked at the long-term effect of Covid from a personal perspective, and the difficulty faced by doctors and researchers in understanding and tackling a new and disease. Sema

Etuknwa and Antonina Semkina closed the session by exploring the significant effect of the pandemic on mental health, and how this should be addressed as the initial impact starts to wane.

The week had enabled us to explore our changed – and changing – landscape. It showed us the path we had travelled, and indicated the road ahead. But it was clear that the map was still being redrawn, and that the aftermath of the past 18 months would be felt for months and years to come.

Decolonising the Curriculum



In April we recorded three podcasts and hosted a webinar exploring the history, progress and current situation in decolonising the curriculum across EARC.

They involved three members of staff and three students: **Barbara Adewumi** and **Patrice Mighton** at Kent; **Hannah Gibson** and **Samira Diebire** at Essex, and **Claire Hynes** and **Aimee Ibarra Hempel** at UEA.

All of them are continuing to share experiences and knowledge across the Arc, and we will work with them to prepare an EARC position paper on tackling racism in HE, building on the recommendations of UUK's working group led by UEA's VC Prof David Richardson.

The podcasts and webinar recording are available below.

- <http://bit.ly/EARCdecolonising>
- <https://youtu.be/k4xg-eQ6JlI>

Photo by [Lucas Gouvêa](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Joint training on EU funding

What is the new European research and innovation funding programme, and what are the opportunities for staff at the Eastern Arc universities of UEA, Essex and Kent?

Between **9 June - 1 July**, our three universities are working together to coordinate our annual visits by UKRO, the UK Research Office in Brussels.

By sharing access to these across EARC, we avoid duplication and thereby cover more issues and gather more information about the opportunities presented by the EU's new framework programme, Horizon Europe.

In addition, it allows us to invite the national contact points (NCPs) for each of the areas to speak specifically about the UK's involvement in the programme.

The events are an opportunity to get an overview of the programme, but also understand the details of different aspects of it. To register, go to <https://easternarc.ac.uk/ukrovisits/>

An important part of our work within the thematic priorities is to identify funding opportunities that will support our collaborations, facilitate our research, and enable us to work keep pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge in each area.

To do so, we have been working in partnership with Research Professional to create live lists of current calls and schemes.

Research Professional holds an exhaustive list of all the research and innovation funding opportunities available to those working in the UK.

Included in the list are all opportunities with a closing date of more than two months away, with a value that is either £20k or more (or those where neither amount nor deadline has been specified). They cover both smaller, individual grants and fellowships, and larger, strategic calls.

The lists are available to all those who work at our universities; have a look at the full thematic lists here: <http://bit.ly/EARCFundingOpps>



Innovation month

EIRA, the Research England-funded programme for supporting knowledge exchange across Eastern Arc and beyond, is hosting a month-long series of virtual events and activities for 'Innovation Month' this June 2021. Spread across its three core themes, it will be hosting Digital Creative Week from the 7th – 11th June, Biotechnology Week from 14th – 18th June and a joint AI and student-focused week from 21st – 25th June.

Innovation Month will culminate in the final EIRA Showcase on Thursday 24th June. This event will be an opportunity for businesses, academics, student / graduate interns, knowledge exchange professionals and senior management to come together and find out more about the rich and diverse projects supported by EIRA, and what other support is available for business.

To find out more, look at the timetable below and click here for details:

<https://eira.ac.uk/news/june-is-eira-innovation-month/>

8 June	Digital Creative: Beyond Reality: Testing New Dimensions
9 June	Digital Creative: Twitter Conversation - Lessons for the Libraries and Archives Sector
10 June	Digital Creative: Twitter Conversation - Improving mental health and wellbeing through Digital Creative innovations
15 June	Biotechnology: 'Doing more with less' webinar
16 June	Biotechnology: 'The role of the Knowledge Exchange Manager in successful Biotech collaborations' with Praxis Auril
22 June	AI & Student: Student Knowledge Exchange and Innovation
23 June	AI & Student: Artificial Intelligence: First steps to productivity
24 June	24 - EIRA Showcase

Getting involved in Eastern Arc

Eastern Arc has a range of opportunities for colleagues at our three member universities – and within our region – to engage with us and benefit from our work. We close each of our newsletters with a reminder of how you can get involved. However, we're constantly exploring new ways of developing collaborations. If you have an idea for an initiative or activity that doesn't fit within these categories, contact info@easternarc.ac.uk.

Be part of a large interdisciplinary network

In this, the second phase of Eastern Arc, we are focussing our efforts on four areas of common strength. Find out what these are and contact the academic champions who are leading our collaborative efforts in these areas.

<http://bit.ly/EARC4themes>
<http://bit.ly/EARCchampions>

Find research collaborators

As well as developing thematic networks, we are compiling directories of EARC academics working in specific areas, such as [Healthy ageing](#), [Mental health](#), [Migration](#), [Medical humanities](#). These can be used to identify potential collaborators and colleagues.

Contact info@easternarc.ac.uk to find out more.

Forge links with local industry

The EIRA programme is funded by Research England to support business-academia links. The EARC universities are at its heart. It's currently developing its next phase, and there's never been a better time to get involved. Look at its website to understand the opportunities and funding available.

<https://www.eira.ac.uk/>

Get advice outside of your university

With EARC we can go beyond the limits of our own university and benefit from the opportunities offered by working with others. Mentoring is one way of doing that, giving us a different perspective and alternative insights. The next round will open shortly with an autumn deadline.

<http://bit.ly/EARCmentoring>

Talk to the public about your research

Last year we launched our podcasts as a way of helping to inform the public about what was going on and the research behind the headlines, but also to enable us to continue collaborating during lockdown. We've now recorded 13 episodes, and are always on the lookout for new ideas.

<http://bit.ly/EARCpodcasts>

Learn how external policy affects us

EARC [lobbies](#) on behalf of the EARC universities and other stakeholders in our region. As part of this, We have set out our position on key issues affecting us, including the levelling-up agenda and post-Brexit research funding. Click on the link below to get briefed on the issues that affect you.

<http://bit.ly/EARCpolicy>