



**EASTERN
ARC** Academic Research
Consortium

Annual Report 2020-21

Introduction

In 2019 Eastern Arc launched its second phase.

We undertook a wide-ranging consultation that resulted in a new strategy for 2020-25, the parameters of which we set out in last year's Annual Report.

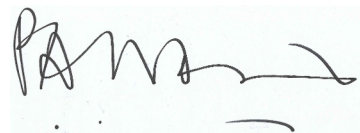
This year we began implementing this strategy. We did so at a challenging time, as the Covid pandemic disrupted the economy and society and changing the way we worked and lived.

Eastern Arc has supported our members in meeting this challenge. From providing funding for research on a Covid vaccine, to analysing the effect of the pandemic on our staff and students and developing new platforms and avenues for supporting collaborations, 2020-21 has shown how the consortium can flex and adapt, responding to the specific and changing needs while continuing to focus on our longer term collaborative aims.

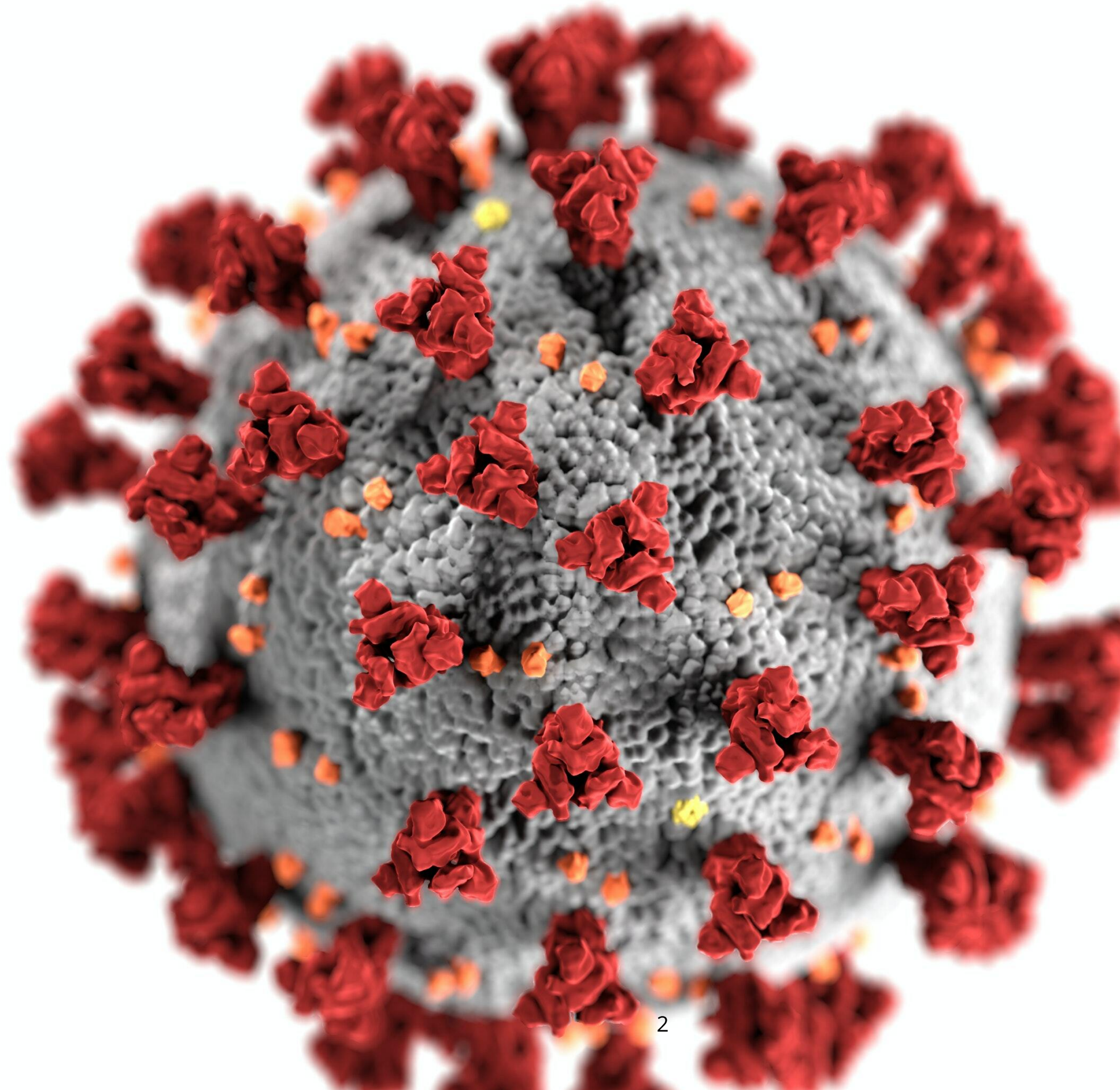
In this Annual Report we will set out how we have done so, highlighting key achievements of the past year and how these have taken forward our three objectives: to develop collaborations, to support risk-taking and experimental activities, and to engage and advocate externally.

None of these achievements would have been possible without the continuing support of the three universities through the Eastern Arc Board and Steering Committee, but also through the active engagement of research leaders, academics, researchers and professional services staff on the ground.

I'm grateful to all of them for their vision, energy and creativity, and their understanding of how, by working together, we can achieve more for our region and our individual civic universities than we can alone.



Phil Ward
Director of Eastern Arc



Objective 1

To develop a strong collaborative core within our themes

The first of our objectives is at the heart of all we do: to develop collaborations within our themes. However, we go further, and support colleagues in all areas across our universities in reaching out, and sharing knowledge, skills and experience for the benefit of all.

Our champions, below, are central to this and guide our work, identifying 'communities of common interest' in specific sub-thematic areas of academic strength, but also supporting the EARC directorate in bringing together special interest groups in our professional services.



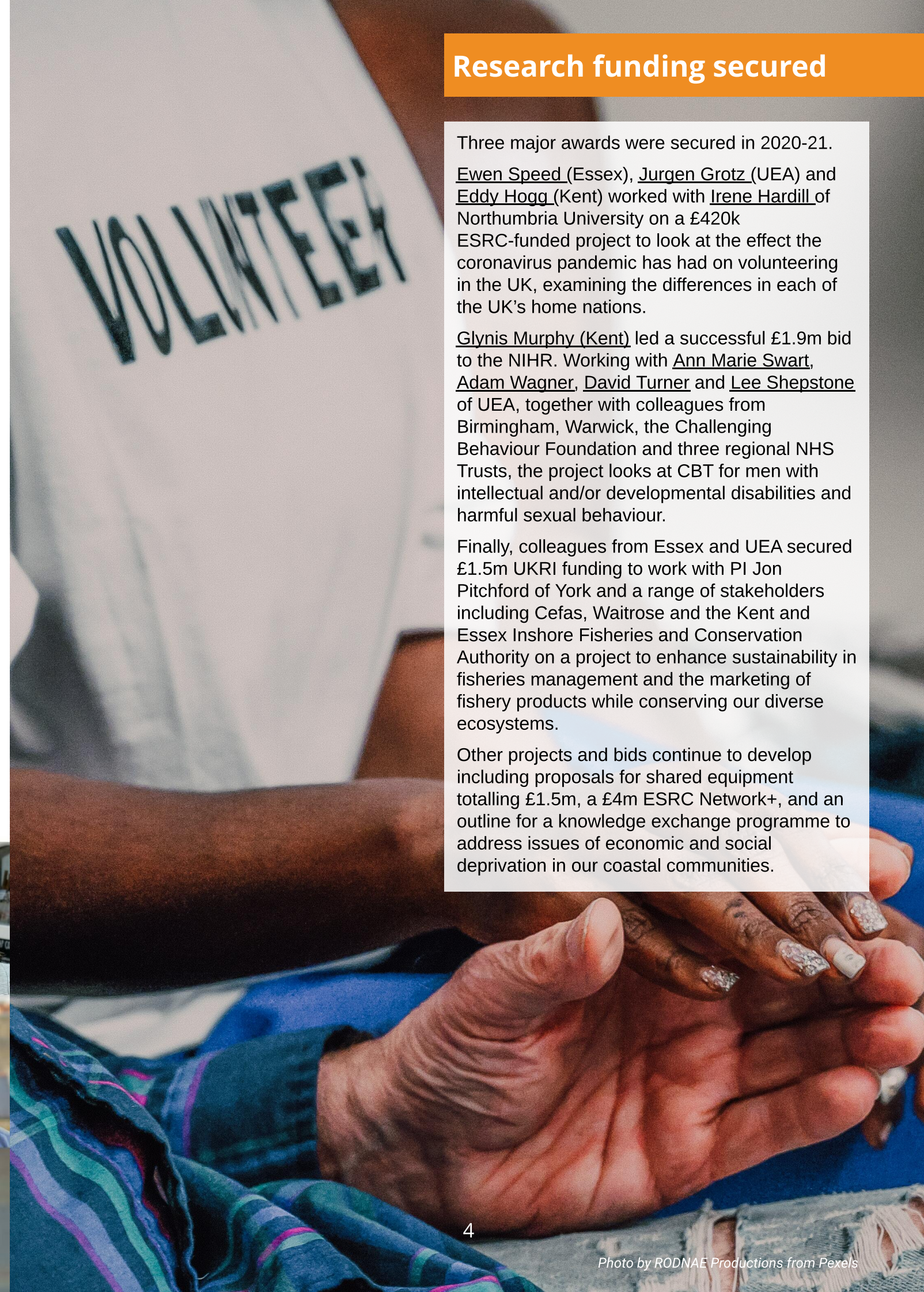
Research funding secured

Three major awards were secured in 2020-21. Ewen Speed (Essex), Jurgen Grotz (UEA) and Eddy Hogg (Kent) worked with Irene Hardill of Northumbria University on a £420k ESRC-funded project to look at the effect the coronavirus pandemic has had on volunteering in the UK, examining the differences in each of the UK's home nations.

Glynis Murphy (Kent) led a successful £1.9m bid to the NIHR. Working with Ann Marie Swart, Adam Wagner, David Turner and Lee Shepstone of UEA, together with colleagues from Birmingham, Warwick, the Challenging Behaviour Foundation and three regional NHS Trusts, the project looks at CBT for men with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and harmful sexual behaviour.

Finally, colleagues from Essex and UEA secured £1.5m UKRI funding to work with PI Jon Pitchford of York and a range of stakeholders including Cefas, Waitrose and the Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority on a project to enhance sustainability in fisheries management and the marketing of fishery products while conserving our diverse ecosystems.

Other projects and bids continue to develop including proposals for shared equipment totalling £1.5m, a £4m ESRC Network+, and an outline for a knowledge exchange programme to address issues of economic and social deprivation in our coastal communities.



Two further thematic champions appointed

As we develop and grow, our thematic champions change, with additional colleagues joining us and others moving on to other roles. Together, they provide leadership in our four thematic priorities:

- Culture, Connection and Creativity
- Health Systems, Social Care and Wellbeing
- Human Rights, Equality and Conflict
- Sustainability, Natural Resources and Food

In 2020-21 two colleagues joined our team.

Dr Rob Barker (University of Kent) *Health Systems, Social Care and Wellbeing*



Rob took over from Prof Michelle Garrett as the thematic champion for Kent with Prof Julie Anderson. He brings an invaluable perspective to the theme, with an interdisciplinary interest that crosses fields as diverse as engineering, physics, chemistry, forensics, biology, medicine and computing. He is also the innovation lead for the Division of Natural Sciences at Kent, so will ensure that knowledge exchange, engagement and impact are central to our discussions.

Dr John Gordon (UEA) *Culture, Connection and Creativity*



John is the Academic Chair of UEA's new interdisciplinary research theme, CreativeUEA. This combines the University's long history of high quality research in the creative arts with new interdisciplinary research activities that will bring together colleagues from across all four faculties. Through the consortium and working with the existing UEA CCC champion (Prof Melanie Williams), John will have the opportunity to work with those galvanising interdisciplinary work elsewhere, including Kent's Signature Research Themes and the areas of excellence at Essex.

For details of all of our champions, go to <https://easternarc.ac.uk/champions/>

Real-time funding opportunities identified



In partnership with Research Professional, we developed live lists of funding opportunities in each of our thematic priorities.

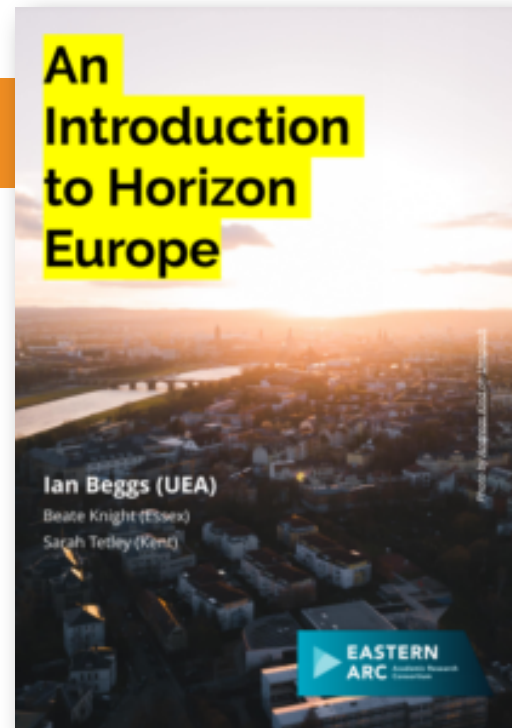
Research Professional holds an exhaustive list of all the research and innovation funding opportunities available to those working in the UK.

The lists are updated in real-time, and are available to all those who work at our universities on our dedicated page, who can either login with their institutional accounts, or set up their own individual one.

Guide to Horizon Europe published

With the launch of the new European 'Framework' Programme for research and innovation, the three EARC universities have been working together to support and inform their academics about the opportunities available and the current issues facing UK researchers who want to take part.

This collaboration resulted in a joint seminar series led by the UK Research Office in Brussels (see our third objective, p16) and a joint publication drafted by Ian Beggs of UEA, with contributions from Beate Knight (Essex) and Sarah Tetley (Kent). This, together with all our publications, is available on our Issuu site: <https://issuu.com/easternarc>.



New collaborative app supported

Developing creative, sustainable research collaborations can be difficult, particularly in a world in which the opportunities to meet in person have been limited. Early career researchers (ECRs) can find it especially hard, as they may not yet have developed a broad network of contacts, but academics at all career stages can face an uphill struggle in making links beyond their own discipline or with colleagues outside of academia.

To help to overcome this, Eastern Arc supported the development and roll out of a new app. This was created by TRN – The Research Network, led by Dr Andy McElroy, who formerly headed the External Research Solutions team at Pfizer Sandwich, Dr Jennifer Hiscock, a reader in supramolecular chemistry and UKRI Future Leader Fellow at Kent, and Dr James Bentham, a lecturer in statistics, also at Kent.

The app is a platform that uses AI machine learning algorithms to support the development of research collaborations. It is very simple to use and takes less than five minutes to sign up. The more people that sign up, the more effective the algorithms will be in finding potential collaborators.



'Communities of Common Interest' developed

Each of our themes is deliberately broad in order to encourage wide-reaching interdisciplinary discussion and collaboration. However, we recognise the opportunity for those working in specific areas across the three universities to link together. To facilitate this we have established 'communities of common interest' (CCIs), and this year we doubled these, making a total of eight overall. These will continue to be developed over the course of our five year strategy.

- Ageing
- Cancer
- Environmental humanities
- Medical humanities
- Mental health
- Migration
- Natural capital
- Heritage management

For a full list of our CCIs, and to get details of those involved in them, go to <https://easternarc.ac.uk/directories/>

Special interest groups established

Last year we began to facilitate discussion groups in a number of key areas of our work, including archives and special collections and equipment sharing.

This year we have continued to develop these, and there are now six:

- Archives and special collections
- Equipment and technical support
- Europe research funding
- IT and high performance computing
- Open access and scholarly communication
- Visas and immigration.

AFTERMATH

The Eastern Arc Conference 10-14 May 2021

PROGRAMME

Photo by Todd Trepani on Unsplash



A flagship conference hosted

2020-21 saw a huge change in our politics, our society and our personal lives. The 2021 EARC conference looked at the broader landscape following these changes. Entitled 'Aftermath' and held virtually, it examined different facets of this, from post-Brexit agriculture to cultural responses to lockdown, from our post-covid health system to the rise of extremist organisations online. Over the course of a week 16 speakers debated and discussed, talking with knowledge and insight, and providing delegates with a clearer understanding of where we are.

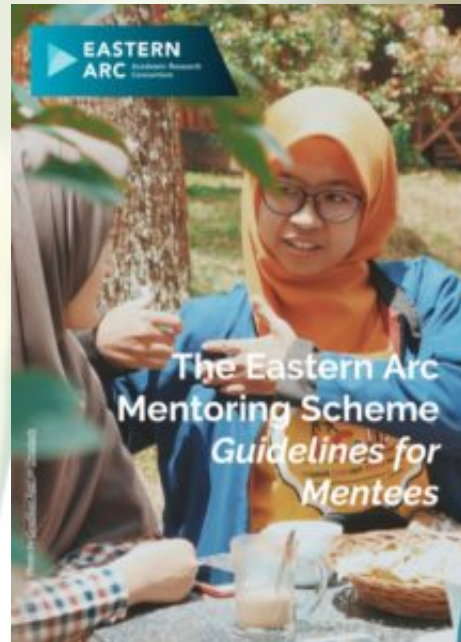
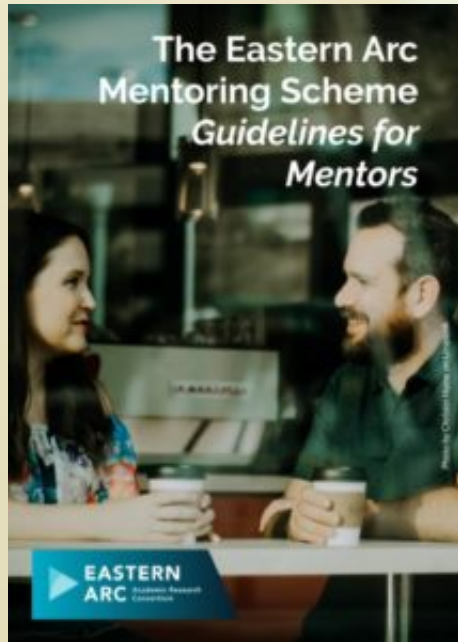
To read a summary of the event, and access recordings and slides, go to <https://easternarc.ac.uk/earc2021summary/>

Objective

2

To support experimental, risk-taking activity

Our second objective builds on the foundational principles of our universities, to 'do different' and be freer, more daring, more experimental. This includes providing funding for small scale pilot projects, encouraging cross-university initiatives, and questioning the status quo.



Cross-institutional mentors supported

In 2020 we launched our ground-breaking mentoring scheme. 93 colleagues took part as either mentors and mentees, and at the end of the first year we conducted a survey to understand the experience of participants. 80 per cent said the scheme met their expectations. When asked what the most valuable aspect of the scheme was, responses included:

- 'Shaking up set ways of thinking, whether that be 'It doesn't have to be done like this' or 'Thank God my institution doesn't do things like that': both are equally illuminating and helpful.'
- 'Having support and guidance from someone who isn't part of my uni. Being able to ask their opinion objectively.'
- 'Having the opportunity to speak with someone completely separate from my department or institution, knowing that I can be more honest with them as a result.'
- 'It has enabled me to write a first draft of a paper for publication which has been something I've wanted to start for a long time'.
- 'Finding someone who 'gets' me and having unconditional support from someone with lots of experience of what you have been through'.

"I am not exaggerating when I say this experience has been life changing - it made me realise I do have a place in academia and that I am allowed to take up space, and find meaningful ways to work"

3

To engage with external policy-makers and end users

Our final objective is to act as an avenue of engagement for our members. In a fast-changing and turbulent world it is essential that we are part of the wider conversations around policy, practice and place, supporting our members in looking outwards, engaging with stakeholders, and advocating for our members, our communities and our regions.

Photo by Rovelyn Camato from Pexels

Policy positions outlined

In 2020-21 we advocated for our universities and our region as national policy was being developed. This included submitting evidence to formal inquiries, such as that led by the Rt. Hon. Chris Skidmore MP and Lord Norton of Louth, which is looking at how the higher education sector can work with with business to deliver innovation, economic growth and prosperity throughout the UK.



We also challenge decisions made by government. In an open letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer we expressed our concern over the reduction of funding for overseas development assistance (ODA), and offering alternative ways forward for the sector in a difficult budgetary situation.

All of our responses - and the position papers that inform them - are available on our dedicated webpage: <https://easternarc.ac.uk/position-papers>

Podcasts released

During the first Covid pandemic we recorded and released a series of podcasts to enable engagement and collaboration when lockdown prevented in-person meetings. These have continued throughout 2020-21, including episodes on:

- **Natural Capital**, which brought together Andrew Lovett (UEA), Alex Dumbrell (Essex) and Rob Fish (Kent).
- **Developing Resilience to human or natural disasters**, featuring Gina Yannitell Reinhardt and Paola Di Giuseppantonio Di Franco (Essex), Roger Few (UEA) and Vicky Gookool (the Open University of Mauritius)
- **Decolonising the curriculum:** a series of three podcasts looking at the background to the movement and its future, together with an exploration of 'how white is my curriculum'.
- **'Deplorables' and the deep web'**, which was a recording of Prof Alan Finlayson's EARC conference session (p10).

In addition, we released a podcast on the ESRC-funded volunteering project (p4), as well as two special editions in which we talked to some of the charities involved. All of our podcasts are available at <https://easternarc.ac.uk/podcasts/>



Photo by George Milton from Pexels



Webinars hosted

We hosted 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 \(p14\)](#), which set out where we stand in relation to current issues in the wider research and innovation environment.

In 2020-21 we hosted the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Work and Pensions, who spoke about their new 'areas of research interest' (ARIs). We also talked to charities and funders (including Wellcome, NIHR and MQ) about the future of funding for mental health research, UKRI and UUKi discussing the future of ODA funding, UKRO explaining the new European funding programme (see p6), and colleagues across the three universities discussing issues of institutional racism in higher education (see also our podcasts, p14).

The webinar with MoJ resulted in a subsequent training opportunity for our doctoral students in the Ministry's latest software, which attracted students from all three universities.

We launched a webpage to highlight these events, and to also act as a repository for recordings and slides from previous events. It is available here: <https://easternarc.ac.uk/events/>

Staff surveys analysed

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.

All three of the EARC universities surveyed their staff at different points in 2020, and we collated and analysed the results to understand the effect of the pandemic on our work.

Of the respondents, 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, our academics quickly recognised the need to prioritise the education of their students. As a result, much of their own research was put on hold.
- **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.
- **The necessity of responding to changes at home:** 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'.

We recognise the huge pressure that our staff have been working under for the past year and hope that, by working together and facilitating conversations, we can share knowledge and experiences to help mitigate these. Our report on the surveys is available here: https://easternarc.ac.uk/covid_and_earc/

Keeping in touch

Eastern Arc newsletter launched

As Eastern Arc continues to grow it can be hard to keep up with what's going on. New ideas are constantly being developed and tested, new collaborations formed, and new initiatives launched.

To keep those across Eastern Arc and beyond updated, we launched a newsletter series in 2020.

Together with all our publications they are available on our Issuu page here: <https://issuu.com/easternarc>.



With radical hearts and open minds

Eastern Arc is the regional research consortium that brings together the universities of East Anglia, Essex and Kent.

All three universities were established in the 1960s to be a different type of institution, aiming to work across disciplinary boundaries, and to offer alternative ways of thinking.

In addition, they are all situated on the eastern seaboard of England, in regions shaped by agriculture, but also by transport, trade, and migration

As a result they are both outward looking and believe in the value of 'doing different'. Eastern Arc was established to support and develop this, to encourage and support collaboration, and to work together for the benefit of our universities, the people who work within them, and the regions of which we're part.

www.easternarc.ac.uk

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