



**EASTERN
ARC** Academic Research
Consortium

**Annual
Report
2023-24**

Welcome to Eastern Arc's Annual Report 2023-24



The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex, Prof Sasha Roseneil, joins the VCs of Essex (Prof Anthony Forster), UEA (Prof David Maguire) and Kent (Prof Karen Cox) at the signing ceremony for Sussex to join Eastern Arc.

2023-24 marked a key milestone for Eastern Arc: it was our tenth anniversary, and my fifth year as Director. It was a time to take stock and celebrate our achievements, but also to look forward and consider how we should develop as a partnership of equals, rooted in our region but with an international impact.

At this important turning point, it felt entirely right that we welcomed a fourth member to the consortium. The University of Sussex formally joined us with a signing of a new memorandum of understanding (MoU) at the Royal Society in January.

Sussex, with its open, interdisciplinary and creative outlook, is a natural fit with Eastern Arc. It shares a similar geographic location and complementary research strengths but, just as importantly, it has the same ethos, encouraging interdisciplinarity and being 'disruptive by design'.

Drafting a new MoU was also an opportunity for us to think about what we are and what we wanted to be as a consortium. We recognised the value and importance of being inclusive in our collaborations, encouraging all of those in our universities to reflect on and consider how we can work together for the benefit of our universities and of our region.

As such, we have now explicitly included activities beyond our historic foundations in research, and will be working, in the years to come, in areas including 'education, innovation, knowledge exchange, training, and equipment-sharing.'

2023-24 also saw some significant grants being awarded to the consortium.

The ARISE Initiative received £2.9m from UKRI to develop resilience in our coastal communities and seas, an issue which we highlighted in our last Annual Report.

In addition, the T-PIKE programme received £1.5m from EPSRC, with a further £1.5m of matched funding from a range of regional organisations. T-PIKE will develop innovative training, exchanges and placements for technicians to develop an understanding of the drivers of innovation, and skills in working with external businesses and other organisations.

And, on the horizon, a third grant, which will develop a shared tech transfer office, to help our academics build on and commercially develop their research. We'll showcase this in more detail in our next annual report.

In 2025 we launch our next five year strategy, building on our three core competencies (collaboration, culture and advocacy) whilst also focussing on four areas of real strength and need for our universities and our region: coast, food, heritage and sanctuary.

We have built this report around those three competencies, whilst also reflecting on the work that is already ongoing in each of the focus areas.

Do join with me in celebrating all we have achieved in this momentous year, and get in touch if you want to play an active part in our work in the second decade.

Phil Ward
Director of Eastern Arc

£2.9m grant for new coastal project

June 2024

In June Eastern Arc secured a new multi-million pound grant to explore the complex challenges facing our diverse UK coastal areas. Led by Prof Gina Yannitell Reinhardt at the University of Essex, it also involves a range of other key stakeholders including the universities of Aberystwyth, Birkbeck, Manchester, Suffolk, as well as the Centre of Environment Fisheries and Aquaculture Science.

The £2.9 million [ARISE project - Advancing Resilience and Innovation for a Sustainable Environment](#) - is one of four projects to receive a total of £14.8 million from the UKRI and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

ARISE will focus on the Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Kent coasts, which include communities from England's highest and lowest levels of deprivation. This coastal region also has more inequalities in health, wellbeing, life expectancy, earnings and education compared to nearby inland communities.

"Our coasts provide food, jobs, coastal protection,

cultural enrichment and benefits to health and wellbeing," said Prof Yannitell Reinhardt. "However, our UK coastal areas are facing increasingly complex, interrelated challenges from factors like climate change, population and infrastructure pressures and the cost-of-living crisis.

"We want this ARISE Toolkit to be a legacy, offering ways to confront and mitigate these pressures to help strengthen coastal community resilience and our collective ability to thrive after disruption and change."

The aim of the project is to benefit policymakers, local communities, public managers, voluntary groups, researchers, landowners, businesses and residents along the entire UK coast.

The project followed the catalyst of the 2023 Eastern Arc conference, which focussed on the 'Collaborative Coast', and provides a focus for one of the consortium's focus areas for 2025-30: 'working together to build a strong, resilient future for our coast'.

To find out more about the ARISE programme, go to <https://easternarc.ac.uk/arise/>

Launch of the Coda Network

May 2024

In 2021 the Chief Medical Officer [looked at health in coastal communities](#), and highlighted the paucity of data available on health and wellbeing. He recommended that this should be addressed in order to support the development of policies aimed at improving the health of coastal communities.

The Coda - or Coastal Data - Network was established as a step towards this. It had hosted a workshop in 2021 to explore issues arising from the Whitty report, but a further larger-scale workshop in May brought together a range of speakers to explore coastal data more broadly.

Co-hosted with the Essex Centre for Coastal Communities, the event included delegates from a diverse range of organisations, including Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board, Suffolk County Council, Health Innovation East, East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust and Brighton and Hove City Council.

The workshop included a discussion as to how best to use Eastern Arc's convening power to address the Whitty recommendations. Coda had a unique offer in being able to bring together a range of stakeholders with significant existing strengths in data collection and analysis.

It was agreed that the Network would build on this in a number of ways, including:

- Developing a 'test-bed' for translational research
- Working with stakeholders to co-develop research questions
- Exploring ways in which datasets that may not be publicly available could be shared anonymously and in confidence.
- Facilitating and enabling links with those working elsewhere in the country on coastal health issues.

Since the workshop, the Coda Network has expanded and invited others to join it. In the new year a programme of workshops and seminars will continue to develop its capacity and explore opportunities to work together for the benefit of our coastal communities.



'Food in a time of crisis'

September 2023

Our food system is increasingly dysfunctional. Events such as the pandemic and the Ukrainian war have demonstrated how fragile it is, with production and supply disrupted and costs spiralling.

When food is available, there is a fierce debate about the nutritional benefits of processed products, the long-term impacts on population health, and even the morality and sustainability of dietary choices.

Our conference in 2023 was a chance to debate these issues. Bringing together academics, researchers, businesses, policy-makers, charities and other organisations, it was an opportunity to explore the issues, make connections and start to work together to identify solutions to the current crisis we're in.

Over 140 delegates joined us at the University of Kent's Canterbury campus. Together, they explored issues including:

- The challenges and opportunities of charitable food supply chains
- ManufacTuring food with robotics and AI
- Strengthening the link between academia and the food & drink industries
- The 'Right to Food' university
- Developing equitable and sustainable regional food systems in East Anglia and Kent
- Urban agriculture, food and global crises
- Migration, food and story.

As we move towards our new strategy 2025-30, 'Food' will be one of our key areas of focus, and we will build on the conference to develop active, interdisciplinary collaborations and networks that will act as effective platforms by which Eastern Arc academics can work with external stakeholders to address these challenges and opportunities.

To find out more, go to <https://easternarc.ac.uk/earc2023resources/>, where recordings, photographs and slides from the event are available.



Developing an 'arc of sanctuary'

November 2023

Ours is a region of migration and movement, and this is reflected in our universities commitment to supporting sanctuary. UEA, Essex and Sussex are already 'Universities of Sanctuary'; Kent has committed to being so, and sanctuary is one of its priority areas.

In November a small group of colleagues met at the University of Essex to explore how to work together to develop an 'arc of sanctuary'. Such an arc would allow us to share knowledge, insights, training and practice to support those in our universities and our communities who are affected, directly or indirectly, by issues of sanctuary.

The meeting led to the formation of a Sanctuary Network, which will continue to develop this strategically important area in 2025-30.

Extending our Heritage and Culture Network

January 2024

In 2024 we extended our existing heritage and culture network to include a wide and diverse range of stakeholders from across our region, including local authorities, charities, museums, galleries and other arts and heritage organisations, some of which are shown below. The Network now has over 120 members, and it acts as a forum for academics and external stakeholders to work together. The Network has already collaborated on funding bids, and worked to develop the 2024 Eastern Arc Conference.



Collaboration

Immersive technology sandpit

March 2024

Working with Kent's Institute for Cultural and Creative Industries, EARC hosted a facilitated workshop in Stratford in March. It acted to catalyse collaborations across the Arc around the use of new technologies, particularly in the arts and heritage.

The workshop was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and Allan Sudlow (its Director of Partnerships and Engagement) opened the event with a 'provocation' that galvanised participants in their discussions.

The workshop led to two applications for external funding (to the ARHC and Wolfson Foundation), and provided a foundation for further collaborations.

Research culture: a manifesto and framework

April 2024

The importance of a positive and supportive research culture for Eastern Arc goes back to the founding principles of its members. The EARC universities were all 'plate glass' universities, founded in the early 1960s to be a different kind of institution: socially-aware, radical and disruptive. As part of this, they were more collegiate and egalitarian by design, offering support and development to all of their staff and students, whatever their role or position, and encouraging creativity and collaboration.

Eastern Arc has built on this, reaching out to others in the sector to prioritise the development of a positive research culture. In 2019 we worked with the Wellcome Trust to address the 'toxic culture' the charity had identified, hosting one of its regional town hall meetings and giving a voice to those affected, and feeding into the report and actions that led to a framework of change.

In April we formalised this by drafting a manifesto and framework, built around the UKRI People and Culture Strategy, and setting out four areas in which we can support each university in developing a positive research culture: mentoring, training, networking, empowerment.

With this framework in place, we will explore ways in which we can actively share resources and knowledge for the benefit of all in our next five year

"We hold open collaboration to be central to engendering a positive research culture, and believe that this is made stronger and more beneficial by working across institutional boundaries. We believe that, by working together on an equal, equitable and reciprocal basis our staff and students can benefit from the strengths and opportunities of all our collaborators."

EARC mentoring scheme reaches a significant milestone

In 2020 we launched our mentoring scheme, which gives academics, professional service colleagues and technicians an opportunity to talk to a mentor at one of the other EARC universities, and get an objective perspective on their own position, career and concerns.

The scheme has proved to be hugely beneficial to its participants, with over 90% of them finding it useful, and half planning to continue their mentoring relationship after the initial period ended.

In 2023-24 we passed a significant milestone with over 300 members of staff having taken part since we began.

One mentee described the experience as '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, I don't just have to be grateful for whatever scraps my employers throw my way.'

There have been benefits for mentors too. One described it as '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.'

Understanding the challenges facing mid-career researchers

July 2024



Mid-career researchers (MCRs) face significant challenges in developing their careers, and these are increasing as the pressures and expectations within modern higher education have mounted. In 2024 Eastern Arc commissioned the Women in Academia Support Network (WIASN) to undertake research to understand and evidence these pressures. The resulting report led to a national debate and call for action.

The report makes clear that the barriers faced by MCR are 'pervasive and entangled in their complexity', and an academics mid-career is a 'pinch point' at which academics face a 'competing number of additional roles, responsibilities and activities.' The report's authors, Dr Kelly Pickard-Smith, Dr Helen Ross, and Dr Amy Bonsall, analysed 254 responses to a survey open to academics at Eastern Arc universities and beyond. Narrative questions within the survey elicited a total of 2,147 written responses, and 13 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted.

Findings

The results of the research were disturbing. Over 80% of respondents reported experiencing barriers to their mid-career progression, and more than half reported experiencing and/or witnessing structural issues or discrimination that have hampered their own or others' success. Other findings included:

- 98.8% felt mid-career was not clearly defined by

- universities;
- 62.8% reported their university didn't provide training specific to mid-career;
- 79.9% reported they felt universities do not provide a good level of career support at mid-career stage.

Recommendations

The report makes eight recommendations, based around a 'RAIL' framework: Rethink; Attain; Include; Lived experience.

The framework provides a structure by which universities can actively support MCRs. It encourages them to rethink what mid-career means, being a time of expansion and not reduction, and to provide training for MCRs to make the most of the opportunities that arise through this. In doing so, MCRs should be included in wider discussions at university-level, and contractual idiosyncracies should be addressed, so that the lived experience of MCRs are valued and recognised.

Following publication of the report, Eastern Arc worked with the N8 Consortium of northern research-intensive universities, leading a workshop with key funders and other organisations, such as Vitae, to discuss how to take it forward.

In addition Eastern Arc ran a pilot training series for MCRs. In 2024-25 the consortium intends to develop a network to ensure that MCRs will have a stronger voice, and work together to address the challenges identified in the report.

Empowering technicians and enabling equipment-sharing

Last year we launched the Imaging Platform Alliance (IPA), a pilot project to test the viability of equipment-sharing across the Arc. The results were positive, with a significant impact upon individual staff and students; a case study of one exchange is given below. In the year ahead, we will extend this to include a wider range of equipment and facilities.

At the same time we are continuing to support the development and expansion of the Technicians' Network, including the T-PIKE project, which will provide training and opportunities for technicians to engage with external organisations and expand the use of our equipment further.

Case study: equipment sharing

April 2024

This year we saw the first beneficiaries of the IPA agreement. One such was Will Edwards, a doctoral student at Kent. In April, he was faced with a problem. He wanted to run some analytical tests to establish the protein content of black soldier flies, but the University didn't have the necessary elemental analyser.

He talked about his options with his supervisor [Anastasios Tasousis](#) and co-supervisor [Rob Barker](#). 'The only option seemed to be investing £50k in a new analyser, or paying commercial rates for running the tests,' said Will. And then Anastasios said, 'Have you thought about Eastern Arc?'

Will looked at what each

university had, and saw that UEA had the equipment he needed: an Exeter Analytical CE440 elemental analyser. He dropped a line to [Antony Hinchcliffe](#), Instrument Platform Manager at UEA, who was supportive and agreed to host him. Eastern Arc provided the funding for him to travel to Norwich and use its equipment.

'It was a brilliant experience,' said Will. 'Antony was incredibly helpful, giving us the necessary training to use the equipment, and then allowing us to go ahead with the tests.'

The results helped Will and the team to understand the potential for the fly larvae to be used as poultry feed, offering a cheap and sustainable alternative to soya-based food.

'We could have spent £50k on new equipment, or even paid over the odds to get a commercial organisation to run the tests. As it was, UEA was able to run the tests at cost. It also gave us the opportunity to meet people there, to see their labs, and understand the work that they are doing. It helped us make links for future work and collaborations.'

Second Technicians' Network Conference

July 2024

Sussex hosted the second annual TN Conference in July. The event was an opportunity for technicians across the consortium to meet, to share knowledge and experience, and explore opportunities for career development.

As part of this, Sarah Allen (Career Pathways Lead at the UK Institute for Technical Skills and Strategy) gave the keynote about the work that ITSS had been doing in developing a national framework for career development for technicians.

The day also included a facilitated workshop to understand the role and remit of technicians at different universities, their commonalities and differences.

It also offered a chance to tour the University's facilities. The next Conference will take place at Kent on 27 June 2025.

£3m funding for Technical Platform for Innovation and Knowledge Exchange (T-PIKE)

March 2024

In March we were awarded £1.5m by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), with a further £1.5m provided by businesses and other organisations. The funding was provided to develop the Technical Platform for Innovation and Knowledge Exchange (T-PIKE), a ground-breaking project designed to train and empower technicians in working with industry.

Technicians, or research technical professionals (RTPs), play an essential role in research across all disciplines, particularly in the sciences.

They are responsible for the equipment used to run experiments, and often undertake the research itself, including the collection, analysis, and management of data. They have an in-depth and practical understanding of research facilities, including how they can be adapted to benefit external partners.

However, RTPs are typically not included in discussions between academics and industry, and often don't get the training and support they need to actively engage with KE.

The funding will enable us to provide a training, mentoring and exchange framework for research technical professionals (RTPs) to engage with industrial and commercial partners, charities, and third sector organisations.



Working with funders and policymakers

With a change of government the landscape for universities -- and for the UK's regions -- has changed, and the need for us to understand how these changes affect us and ensure our voice is heard has never been more important.

To this end we established an advocacy and policy engagement group in June to share insights with each other, to discuss strategic developments and, where appropriate, to speak with with a united voice.



UKRI and 'place'

October 2023

Eastern Arc took part in the UKRI visit to UEA, with a specific focus on the 'place' agenda. This included:

- A presentation to the Chair of Research England, Dame Jessica Corner, on the consortium's report on mid-career researchers.
- A roundtable with Ottoline Leyser (CEO of UKRI), Stian Westlake (Chair of ESRC) and others on the opportunities of place-based research, innovation and engagement.
- Chairing a panel with Leyser and others.

UKRI appreciated the 'perspective across Essex and Kent, as well as East Anglia, [which] helped us to ensure that the important topics discussed throughout the programme were considered more broadly.'

Hosting the MRC's first regional event

May 2024

Eastern Arc was asked to host the first of Medical Research Council's new format regional events, intended to engage with stakeholders within a region rather than a select number of MRC-funded institutes and universities with considerable MRC funding.

Hosted at the University of Essex (left), the MRC set out its strategic vision, inviting comment and discussion on it. It also invited Eastern Arc colleagues to highlight particular health-related research, including coastal and diet-related health.

EPSRC and the Greater South East

July 2024

The Eastern Arc Director was invited to take part in a panel discussion at EPSRC's regional event for the greater southeast in London, participating in a panel that explored how the GSE should engage with the place agenda, feeding into the continuing development of the funder's position on this in readiness for the new Government's plans for devolution.

The critical role of universities in devolution

July 2024

In 2023-24 we commissioned a report looking at the critical role of universities in the implementation of devolution.

The report was written by [Breaking Barriers Innovations\(BBI\)](#), which had taken the lead on a number of initiatives that seek to address issues of place-based inequality and deprivation, particularly in our coastal communities.

The new Government has made its commitment to devolution and regionality clear. In its manifesto for the 2024 General Election, it made stated that 'too many areas have been held back because decisions are often taken in Westminster,' and that, when in government, it would 'transfer power out of Westminster, and into our communities, with landmark devolution legislation to take back control.'

Eastern Arc is keen to support our local authorities in working with the national Government to make this happen. The BBI

report is a first step towards this, setting out the opportunities for universities to strengthen connections and contribute to the economic, social and cultural development.

It is a fast-moving situation; the research and report were undertaken before the election and prior to a decision being made about a devolution deal for Norfolk and Suffolk, but the primary issues remain as salient and important as ever.

'Enhanced collaboration can broaden the influence and impact of universities within their regions, fostering innovation, human capital, and entrepreneurship,' said Dr Jon Bashford, the report's lead author. 'However, devolution requires a shift in strategy that encompasses more active engagement and participation in strategic planning, policy development and implementation and active partnerships with regional stakeholders.'

'This is an important

and timely report,' said Phil Ward, Director of Eastern Arc. 'Our region is complex, with at least four devolution deals being considered under the last administration. The report gives a clear-sighted and comprehensive overview of the challenges our region faces, with recommendations as to how our universities can proactively and productively engage with local, regional and national stakeholders to ensure that all will benefit.

'Over the next few months we will explore how we, as a consortium, can implement its recommendations and work with local authorities, industry and others to ensure that our universities play a central role in ensuring that devolution works for all of those within the region, and thereby supports the growth of the nation as a whole.

The full report is available at bit.ly/EARCdevolution



With radical hearts and open minds

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

All four 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 engage with and embody their regions, acting to develop societal and economic benefit for them.

As a result they are both grounded in their communities but also 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.

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