

Designation and Support of Strategic Research Initiatives

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Cross-disciplinary research themes and funding calls, often addressing global challenges through large-scale collaborative efforts, are an increasing part of the research and funding landscape. In this environment, exerting influence on the future funding agenda and delivering an effective response to major calls often depends critically on a pre-existing framework of collaborations and strategic plans. Provided that there is strong academic leadership with clear goals, large cross-School thematic initiatives can be significant vehicles by which the University can address new research opportunities, raise its profile, attract leading researchers, encourage new collaborations and increase research income.

The University's Research Policy Committee (RPC) recognised in 2009 that such cross-School initiatives may require some level of institutional coordination and support. The Strategic Research Initiatives (SRI) scheme was launched by RPC in 2010 and further SRI awards were made in 2011, 2013, 2017 and 2018. The scheme was the subject of a detailed report to RPC in 2015¹ and in 2016 the first SRIs graduated to become Interdisciplinary Research Centres (IRCs). There are now 12 Interdisciplinary Research Centres (IRCs), 4 Strategic Research Initiatives (SRIs) and 4 Strategic Research Networks (SRNs).

This document outlines RPC's objectives for SRIs and the process for their designation and support.

Key criteria for an SRI

The SRIs extend the research priorities and strategy that exist within the individual Schools, building on this research base to tackle cross-disciplinary challenges and aiming to create a shared cross-School vision and development plan in key thematic areas over the medium to long term.

Specifically, SRIs should be built on existing networks and collaborations and bring together a critical mass of researchers from across at least three Schools to:

- Address large-scale multi-disciplinary research challenges, building on areas of existing expertise.
- Strengthen research collaboration and knowledge transfer across disciplines.
- Increase research capacity by providing a platform for large-scale funding applications, recruitments and international research partnerships.
- Enhance our ability to influence national and international research, policy and funding agendas.

Successful applications are expected to demonstrate:

- Leadership by one or more academic champions who are prepared to make a commitment to developing and promoting the SRI, for example through convening and fundraising.
- A clear vision and objectives that have been shaped by a Steering Committee of senior representatives from across the relevant Schools and Faculties/Departments.
- Evidence of widespread interest from individual researchers in the University and, where appropriate, local research institutions.
- Awareness of the activities of national and international peer universities in the field of the SRI.
- Understanding of the research funding environment and the potential for partnerships with industry and civil society organisations.
- Specific opportunities for the involvement of early-career researchers.

¹ Valuing and Sustaining Cross-School Research Initiatives: Strategic Research Initiatives Scheme 2010–2015; Gill Rands and Rosalyn Gregory, Sept 2015 (presented as RPC 767, October 2015).

SRI awards

The initial award of SRI status is for 3 years, subject to annual review by RPC. The award includes funding of £55k p.a., which is normally expected to be used to support a coordinator role and some associated activities. This funding comes from a central Administered Fund under the stewardship of RPC.

A member of the Research Strategy Office attends SRI Steering Committee meetings on behalf of the PVC Research, and provides advice and support to the SRI leaders and coordinators. RPC receives annual written reports from the SRIs and at key stages these are used as the basis for face-to-face peer review: a pair of RPC members may meet with the SRI leadership team and report back to RPC, or the academic leaders of an SRI may be interviewed by the full RPC.

In the 3rd year, the SRI leadership may apply for renewal for a second and final period of 3 years. By the time of the 5th year review, it is expected that the SRI will be demonstrably embedded as a prominent part of the University's research landscape, in which case they may apply to graduate into the status of Interdisciplinary Research Centre (IRC); otherwise, the SRI will be wound down at the end of 6 years.

Applications

The first stage of the application process is a brief Expression of Interest (EoI). EoIs are reviewed by RPC and then the leaders of a small number of shortlisted proposals are invited to develop full applications.

At the full application stage, applicants are asked to identify measures of success that will be monitored over the life of the SRI. Such measures might include, for example, level of external funding, major funding bids, strategic recruitments, new collaborations and partnerships, research publications, events, network expansion, industry links, impact on government and funders' policies etc., as appropriate.