

Engagement Forum

Report of Discussions

20 February 2019

Report of discussions at Research England's third Engagement Forum
in Birmingham on 20 February 2019



Engagement Forum: Report of Discussions

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Introduction

Research England held the latest in its series of Engagement Forums on 20 February 2019 in Birmingham. This third event explored how universities interact with and contribute to the national policy agenda, and gave delegates the opportunity to share their insights and experiences. Over 100 delegates representing 82 universities and 9 stakeholder and mission groups offered a broad range of viewpoints to the day's discussions.

Research England Council member and Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost at the Royal College of Art, Professor Naren Barfield, provided the opening remarks, commenting on Research England's progress one year into its existence. He also touched on Research England's commitment to engaging directly with the sector through its Institutional Engagement Managers and other mechanisms, and why that dialogue is so important.

The next Forum will be held on Thursday 26th September 2019.

Plenary address: the policy context for universities in 2019

Speaker: David Sweeney, Executive Chair (Research England)

Context

In developing policy, Research England recognises the essential role of higher education institutions, and the valuable knowledge and insights they are able to provide in shaping and delivering the national policy agenda. This is particularly crucial given the present challenges to the higher education (HE) sector, where Research England works with institutions to address and capitalise on opportunities in an uncertain environment. Research England aims to ensure open and trusted lines of communication with institutions by holding Engagement Forums every six months, in parallel with the Insight and Engagement Managers' ongoing institutional engagement activities.

Key discussion points and Q&A discussion summary

1. Challenges facing the HE sector were highlighted, specifically surrounding tuition fees and overall policy uncertainty. There was recognition that institutions play an essential role in how these challenges can be managed, particularly in responding to local, national and global issues.
2. Institutional partnerships with stakeholder organisations (e.g. industry, third sector) are key to establishing the foundation for reaching the Government's commitment to increase research and development (R&D) expenditure to 2.4% of UK GDP. There is a need to record and evaluate at-scale collaborations better, whilst also noting that aggregating smaller-scale activities will also make a positive difference in achieving this commitment.
3. Incentives created by the REF and KEF are of interest to Government. There is a need for greater understanding as to how relevant funding streams may best be deployed to make a positive impact.
4. Discussions surrounding open-access publishing and, more specifically, Plan S, are ongoing in the sector. It was noted that Plan S will challenge the way that funding processes work within institutions. Institutions should fully engage in ensuring that research can be freely used around the world. Positive aspects of open access include greater opportunities for people to access and use research, and openings to build relationships for future collaborations, thus strengthening a scholarly community that can tackle complex global challenges.

Plenary:

universities delivering for the economy

Panel

Chair: Ben Johnson, Associate Director, Insight and Engagement (Research England) standing in for Alice Frost, Director of Knowledge Exchange (Research England)

Joe Marshall, Chief Executive (NCUB)

Hamish McAlpine, Head of KE Data and Evidence (Research England)

Dean Cook, Head of Regional Engagement (Innovate UK)

Context

Joe Marshall, Chief Executive of the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) examined how universities deliver for the UK economy, and considered the opportunities and risks for universities as they endeavour to meet the Government's 2.4% target.

Universities have adapted and ultimately flourished in an era of constant change, but need to remain relevant and impactful. Seen by big business as being the 'life blood' of the economy, collaborations between business and higher education (HE) across the UK are beneficial to both business and place. However, 75% of all UK research and development is delivered by just 400 companies. More needs to be done to attract new users through understanding the drivers for businesses to collaborate with universities.

The UK's performance in research commercialisation is internationally excellent, and it is important that we celebrate this success and harness the collective strengths of our universities. By placing universities in a critical position, the Industrial Strategy (IS) provides opportunities for universities to drive top-down supply chain innovation and create spin-outs, responding to the grand challenges by pushing new cross-disciplinary frontiers. Universities can also respond to the pull of more companies investing and developing research and innovation, creating more demand for higher, interdisciplinary, technical and applied skills.

Referencing the recently published Research England Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) [synthesis report](#), Hamish McAlpine considered the diverse ways the sector is using additional funding to invest in critical IS priority areas with industrial partners. Hamish also highlighted the importance of place, with 80% of HEIF plans featuring local partners, developments and initiatives. The HEIF plans also demonstrated a marked increase in the contributions made by partners and programmes such as Innovate UK, Catapults, Knowledge Transfer Networks ([KTNs](#)) and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs).

Research England has welcomed the value placed by Government on knowledge exchange (KE) activities. However, with more money comes more responsibility, and it is vital that Research England and the sector continue to work together to demonstrate the vital role of universities for the economy. The forthcoming Knowledge Exchange Framework ([KEF](#)) is an important and transparent way of demonstrating the sector's commitment to honest reflection and continuous improvement.

Dean Cook contemplated the future role and contribution of Innovate UK. Reflecting on the value of cross-council working with Research England, for example, Innovate UK are co-leading the delivery of the Strength in Places Fund ([SIPF](#)). Innovate UK will develop relationships with individual universities through programmes such as the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF), KTPs, Catapults and Small Business Research Initiatives (SBRIs). Major Innovate UK programmes such as KTNs can also benefit from the innovations of partner organisations via NCUB's innovation brokerage tool, [konfer](#).

Key discussion points and Q&A discussion summary

1. Intellectual Property (IP) and international comparisons

The panel discussed international comparisons and the difficulty in getting good news stories into the press. The UK HE sector performs very well in international comparisons and we need to engage with the loud voices of dissent. Attendees also queried why the Government cannot do more to fund development higher up the translational research (TR) scale to improve international comparisons. The panel considered this to be a complex question: this would require a solid understanding of each country's economic base to enable real interrogation of international comparators. This would then need to be augmented by consequent understanding of how performance can be improved and how work can be more joined up at the lower end of the TR scale.

2. Industrial Strategy: the 4th industrial revolution?

The panel discussed what is meant by the 4th industrial revolution but felt the primary impact to be the speed of change. Change that used to take years now takes months, and universities need to embrace this and grasp the resultant opportunities to work with other sectors to flourish.

3. Tech transfer income compared to spend

The panel discussed how the upcoming review of the [HE-BCI](#) survey can be used to collate information on tech transfer. Initial work has been undertaken to incorporate business perspectives.

The Place Agenda:

UKRI's developing strategy for place-based research and innovation

Panel

Chair: Rachel Tyrrell, Associate Director of Knowledge Exchange (Research England)

Dean Cook, Head of Regional Engagement (Innovate UK)

Kevin Richardson, Local Growth Consultant (Research England)

Context

As a new organisation, UKRI is inviting strategic input on its approach to the place agenda. The purpose of this session was to identify the considerations UKRI could make in developing its strategy for place-based research and innovation funding.

There are concentrations of research and innovation across the UK that could be supported to grow in localities where research strengths align with the needs of local businesses. This activity will be key to reaching the research and development target of 2.4% of GDP by 2027.

Considerations suggested by the panel included:

1. The resilience of different places to economic shocks varies, and while most are able to recover, some might not bounce back fully. Outside London and Bristol, cities underperform, and many industrial, rural or coastal areas experience significant economic stress. Is it possible to achieve 2.4% investment in R&D fairly and evenly across the UK?
2. Over the last 30-40 years, a common practice has been investing in universities at a local level. Universities are now actively engaging with their local leadership on Local Industrial Strategies but is this engagement forming a new dialogue, or codifying existing activity?
3. Defining clusters within an economic geography can be challenging: what makes a good innovation cluster? Factors could include: good absorptive capacity; good ecosystem; and effective campuses and innovation parks.

The following discussions addressed a number of questions put to participants by the panel.

How do universities contribute to local strategies and priority setting?

- The political geography of a region is often complex, comprised of overlapping local leadership bodies who may represent different political groups and deliver conflicting strategies.
- Universities' level of influence on local leadership varies. Factors include the type of institution, number of universities in the area, and historic levels of collaboration with local leadership. Should neighbouring universities establish 'ground rules' amongst themselves to guide their interactions with local leadership? Universities collaborate on some fronts but compete on others, so this could be challenging.
- Local leaders have to relate their strategies to constituents whose needs may not directly correlate with what universities offer. It is important that universities articulate what they do in a way that is understood by the community.
- If attention becomes overly focused on the immediate community, there is a risk that problems come to be seen as local when in fact they may be widespread, relevant to similar communities elsewhere in the UK or the world. Furthermore, global challenges with potential for significant local impact (for instance, climate change) may not be included in local strategies.

How do universities interact with their immediate communities?

- How is a university's 'place' defined? And how does this relate to its 'immediate community'? Physical, cultural and economic geography plays a part – and the digital environment can also be considered. Universities are a heterogeneous group and one model is unlikely to suit all.
- Universities have diverse objectives and use a wide range of approaches to engage with their local communities. The importance of their locality will have differing levels of priority in their strategies.
- Positive impacts in one place may have negative impacts in another. For example, are places with universities thriving at the expense of those without?
- In many places the local university is the biggest employer, supporting related businesses. When there is negative publicity about the HE sector, this could heighten the need to promote universities' positive impact.

How could national funding complement other streams of R&D funding?

- UKRI could consider taking a systems view. World class research is necessary but not sufficient on its own to tackle the issues faced. Funding calls could consider what else needs to be in place alongside high-quality research.
- Could national place-based funding be more effective than funding distributed at the local level? For instance, could drawing funding applications into a national competition result in an overall higher quality of projects; help prevent funding being awarded to very similar projects from locally managed funds based in different places; and facilitate more effective sharing of good practice across the country?
- The structure of the UK economy means that businesses face challenges in scaling-up, and tackling these may be just as important as focusing on the specifics of place. In order to achieve impact where other schemes have struggled, a new approach may be needed. In addition to high-quality research and innovation, it is important to consider a target business sector's whole supply chain.

Summary

In developing a strategy for place-based research and innovation funding, UKRI could create clear definitions for place, community, excellence and innovation. It could recognize the diversity of the HE sector, and the places in which universities are situated. The benefits that universities can bring to a local area could be emphasised. There could be a number of modes of delivery of economic growth to a locality – hub and spoke, clusters, supply chain – but the strategy should recognize a systems-based approach.

The audience for the strategy should be clearly defined, and material presented appropriately. All types of economic activity and wider global effects could be taken into account when considering local development.

The Global Agenda:

equitable partnerships to address global challenges

Panel

Chair: Steven Hill, Director of Research (Research England)

Paula Eaves, Research Development and Operations Manager (University of Lincoln)

David Prior, Director of Research (Falmouth University)

Jeremy Phillips, Reader in Physical Volcanology (University of Bristol)

Vivienne Stern, Director (UUKI)

Context

Introductory presentations raised a number of issues relating to the importance of global partnerships and the current political landscape.

Matters relating to EU exit have provided a platform to explain and assert a better understanding of the importance of investing in being globally networked. The government is thought to now recognise the benefits of productive international collaboration and its effect on the overall quality of the UK research base.

The sector needs to be ambitious in supporting international relationships in a sustainable and mutually beneficial way. Quality-related research (QR) funding offers a mechanism to support relationship building, attracting talent and supporting universities before they can apply for project-specific funding, and allowing them to support relationships with counterparts abroad. It is important to be able to explain the value of QR in providing a flexible resource that enables the development of strategic partnerships that might otherwise not exist.

There is a real risk that UK funding becomes short-term and narrow in focus, not enabling such good quality or high impact research endeavour. The principles of a long-term, predictable, visible funding stream are imperative to successful international partnerships.

The panel members representing the University of Lincoln, Falmouth University and University of Bristol described their approaches to developing their GCRF strategies, all of which have been [commended by Research England](#).

The strategies presented tended to align with existing institutional research priorities and strategic planning in cross-disciplinary areas. The strategies use funding to pump-prime activities to stimulate and develop effective partnerships, putting co-creation at the core of collaboration. For example, University of Bristol focuses its funding on building capacity and capability in partner countries. Spending time with individuals in those countries was recognised as key to developing well-embedded relationships. The university makes efforts to simplify any procedures that are not trivial overseas (for example, contracts/expense claims/MoUs), and to understand the importance of the historical and ethical complexities of the partner countries to build relationships and trust across cultural and economic differences.

Key discussion points and Q&A discussion summary

Institutions commented on the challenges, burden and resource associated with GCRF due diligence processes, and expressed a desire for these processes to be minimised and streamlined as far as possible.

There were concerns about the durability of the GCRF funding stream and how long-term/stable it is likely to be. Institutions are considering the costs and benefits of their investment of time and resource in this area if the funding is not maintained.

There is a need to be more strategic about the ways universities get involved in international partnerships. Bottom-up international research activity has the potential to result in spreading the sector too thin. It might therefore be helpful to form clusters of partner universities to work together in common locations. Research England has a role to play in understanding the research strengths in this country and the ability of English universities to invest in capacity building.

Smaller universities may be disproportionately disadvantaged when building effective international research partnerships. It is difficult to make an impact with low levels of funding. Smaller universities are therefore forced to develop GCRF strategies that are relatively narrow in scope, as dictated by their QR allocation. This makes it difficult to use QR flexibly.

Funding mechanisms impact universities' ability to develop meaningful partnerships. Short lead-in and turn-around times can be challenging and make it difficult to build meaningful partnerships. Such relationships and related research agendas need to grow organically and should not simply be built on the back of a funding call. The importance of QR funding to supporting a flexible approach to growing partnerships is critical in seeding relationships and can provide the strategic funding needed at the outset.

Universities have an important and interesting role to play in brokering relationships. In order to encourage long-term and sustainable partnerships there must be mutual benefits. There are important conversations to be had in relation to the ethical considerations of international partnerships and the co-creation of research. There is international admiration for the sophisticated research management of UK HEIs. This wisdom can be shared through opportunities to educate and extend invitations to overseas counterparts to learn about these skills and processes. We can also learn from collaborators in partner countries. It is important to actively list and jointly develop research questions to ensure there are benefits to both sides. Other important features of an equitable partnership include:

- understanding cultural/economic/societal differences
- spending time in both locations to fully appreciate each environment, culture, pressures, etc.
- moving from a colonial to post-colonial approach
- considering research integrity
- supporting the research sustainability of partnerships.

UKRI have a role to play in making funding opportunities more accessible and ensuring a joined-up approach across Research Councils.

UKRI EU-exit update

Facilitators

Fiona Armstrong, Deputy Director of Community Engagement (UKRI)

Gavin Salisbury, Head of European Funding Policy (UKRI)

Context

Five weeks' from the UK's departure from the European Union, the Engagement Forum provided a timely opportunity for an update from UKRI on its work on EU-exit and the underwrite of the Horizon 2020 programme. UKRI colleagues provided reassurance that the underwrite will take place and that to date all universities had registered on the UKRI portal to share their project information. Participants were then invited to share the questions and issues that are still causing concern within their institutions in relation to EU-exit.

Key discussion points

Resulting discussions raised a number of themes that appeared to be common to many of the institutions represented in the room. These can be distilled into three broad concerns:

1. Protracted uncertainty

Concerns centred on the lack of clarity surrounding the future and stability of funding opportunities after EU-exit. Participants emphasised an inability to plan or provide training to access any future funds without having the necessary information in good time.

Participants noted that while the UK government has agreed to underwrite projects funded through Horizon 2020, the continuity of funding to replace other European schemes, such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Research Fellowship Scheme, is unclear. Participants also questioned when there might be a consultation on the UK's proposed Shared Prosperity Fund, which is tipped to replace European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF).

Some participants questioned the value in continuing to apply for (non-Horizon 2020) EU funding opportunities if the stability, or UK institutions' eligibility, in those schemes is uncertain. A small number of participants reported a decline in academics' interest in applying for EU funding schemes though this did not seem to be a widespread issue.

2. 'The devil is in the detail'

There were general concerns about the level of detail thus far released regarding the underwrite of Horizon 2020. Participants noted that the greatest cause of concern currently are the mechanics of how the underwrite will work at the granular level. This includes a lack of detail about the anticipated administrative burden, the complexities of converting euros into British pounds, ensuring the continuity of timely cash flow to projects, and understanding the rights and privileges of researchers in receipt of funds.

UKRI agreed to publish further detail about the underwrite of Horizon 2020 as soon as possible.

3. External perceptions of the UK

Discussions touched on how the UK is now perceived by observers from other countries, including research institutions, academics and potential international students. The UK is perceived to have lost influence in other countries, and all aspects of the academic and research community have been affected by EU-exit. In particular, the loss of eligibility to participate in EU schemes and the withdrawal of large industry partners from the UK were raised in support of these concerns.



Some participants noted anecdotally that a small number of research projects with European partners had fallen through at the last minute, or that the UK partner had been asked to step aside, though most European partners are sympathetic and still willing to collaborate. Participants noted the difficulty in knowing how to reassure partners about future eligibility to receive funds or participate in projects in the absence of relevant details.

Finally, the knock-on effect of EU-exit on immigration policy, particularly for European students, academics, and the Erasmus Plus scheme, was raised as another concern.



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