



# **Sector Engagement Strategy for Research England**

**2024 - 2030**



# Sector Engagement Strategy

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# Foreword

Research England first published an “Institutions Engagement Strategy” in 2019. Since then, the English higher education sector has been through a period of unprecedented change. The impact of the pandemic and political instability, shifting international markets and changing business models, inflation and the cost of living crisis have all left our sector facing enormous challenges.

In the context of this rapidly changing landscape, we have reviewed and refreshed that original strategy. We considered how best our engagement function can respond to new challenges, how engagement can help us understand the key areas of risk and opportunity for the sector, and how we can combine qualitative, trust-based intelligence with the available hard data and evidence.

The process of reviewing and refreshing this strategy has highlighted some key areas of consensus about what is valuable about our engagement. There are several aspects of how and why we engage with the sector which remain central to Research England’s identity and purpose, including:

- Building on trusted relationships with university research leaders and a range of sector representative groups;
- Retaining the breadth of our engagement activities, giving us a sector-wide overview across different regions and institution types;
- Adding value to policy workstreams and decision-making; and
- Making an effective case for research.

We recognise that our future engagement must be sufficiently agile to respond quickly. We must be ready to pivot and respond to new issues, risks and opportunities.

Going forward, financial sustainability will be a key challenge for the research community and the sector as a whole. We will continue to explore the questions of how research is funded, how institutions can maintain and improve their estates and infrastructure, the impact of financial pressures on particular disciplinary areas, and the consequent changes in university business models.

At a time of ongoing change, engagement is an invaluable tool for Research England. I am pleased to present our new Sector Engagement Strategy, setting out our intentions for the next six years.

Jessica Corner  
Executive Chair, Research England



# Introduction

## **Who we are:**

Research England (RE) is part of the UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) family of funders, alongside the seven discipline-focused Research Councils and Innovate UK. It provides funding to English higher education institutions (also referred to as “universities” and “institutions” in this document) for research and knowledge exchange (KE), and works collaboratively with its counterparts in the devolved nations to deliver the Research Excellence Framework (REF), our national research assessment exercise.

RE is unique in that over 90% of our funding is allocated as annual, largely unhypothecated grants to institutions as a whole, rather than via funding competitions in specified disciplines.

Our funding is designed to be strategic and enabling, pump priming research and knowledge exchange activities and supporting universities to maintain the ecosystems needed for research and KE to flourish. It gives universities the freedom and flexibility to prioritise the growth and development of their research portfolios, systems, infrastructure and communities. This flexibility supports all those working in the research ecosystem – talented researchers, professional services staff, specialist technicians – as well as the wider public who are the beneficiaries of research outputs and applications.

## **Our stakeholders:**

Our interest in universities is in their strategic direction of travel and the development of their research and KE portfolios, rather than excellence in any specific discipline. RE has always had a listening role. By engaging with and listening to institutions, we are able to better understand the sector, its needs and the impact of the wider policy climate on it. As such, we have a unique position and remit within UKRI to work with our principal stakeholders at the institutional level.

We recognise the importance of a range of higher education and research sector stakeholders – mission groups, geographical sector groupings, other funders, representative bodies (referred to as “sector groups” in this document). These sector groups offer perspectives on diverse cohorts of universities, helping us understand how policies and developments are impacting differently in different parts of the sector.

Our engagement with all these stakeholders provides crucial primary intelligence to inform and shape our policies and activities.



Our engagement is evolving to reflect new priorities in relation to a broader range of stakeholders and agenda. The interface between institutions and wider partners – local government, the NHS, businesses and communities – will become increasingly significant, bringing a more diverse range of stakeholders into our field of vision.

### **An updated Sector Engagement Strategy:**

Now that Research England is six years old, we have looked back and reviewed our engagement activities and updated this strategy. This new, refreshed six-year strategy is based on an evaluation of what has been achieved through our engagement with the English higher education sector. It takes account of the changing policy and financial landscape and the new challenges – both domestic and international – facing the sector.

This refreshed strategy sets out why and how we will interact with our sector stakeholders through the period 2024 - 2030. We recognise the uncertainties in the policy, financial and political climate, both in the UK and globally. With this in mind, we are committed to ensuring that this strategy remains fit for purpose and have built in the flexibility to respond to a swiftly changing landscape.

### **The journey so far:**

Over the last six years, we have made progress in a number of ways, including:

- Research England's Engagement Leads – previously known as Institutions Engagement Managers – have established trust-based relationships with research and KE leaders, notably the Pro-Vice Chancellors for Research and Directors of Research, across a diverse range of universities in England;
- Through its engagement function, RE has gathered a huge amount of intelligence, from which insights were drawn and fed into policy discussions;
- We have identified examples of excellence and innovation, and developed a more nuanced understanding of the research ambitions, risks, challenges, opportunities and different perspectives across the sector, including the differing institutional contexts in which research takes place;
- During the pandemic, our early Engagement Forums morphed into online events and webinars, bringing together a more diverse range of participants from across the research community;
- Regular liaison with sector mission groups and regional representative groups has been established and embedded in our insight and engagement functions;
- Connections between engagement and policy functions have been strengthened, enabling sector intelligence to contribute to the shaping of policy across RE and UKRI. There are positive examples of where engagement has contributed to and supported decisions about monitoring, funding, and communicating with the sector.



### **Building on strengths:**

The informal nature of our engagement – built around trust-based conversations, attentive listening, and the frank sharing of ideas, observations and perspectives – is the most highly valued aspect of RE’s engagement function. Feedback suggests that RE has engendered trust and credibility by working in this way.

Because we have taken a broad, holistic, inclusive approach to our engagement, we have been able to develop a bird’s eye view of the sector. RE has recognised the diversity of the sector and positioned itself to understand the way in which policy developments are affecting different types of institutions in different regions, and why there are differences of experience and opinion across the sector. The diversity of the sector will also determine how we shape and target our future engagement, reinforcing RE’s commitment to continue engaging with a diverse range of universities.

### **Future intentions:**

Engagement with the sector remains essential to RE because it positions us to have a nuanced understanding of issues across the higher education sector, to extract insights, to identify risks and opportunities, and to respond swiftly to the changing policy landscape.

Our intention – and the purpose of this strategy – is to build on our strengths and successes and to address challenging areas where we lack capacity or face barriers. We will continue to actively listen to and engage closely with universities and sector groups to build awareness and intelligence about how they are responding to research and knowledge exchange priorities. We will continue to use engagement as a mechanism to identify and respond to broader issues affecting universities, building on our overview of the sector.

Engaging across the breadth of the English HE sector remains absolutely central to our approach. We will continue to take a broad view across the diversity of institution type, seeking a sector-wide understanding of how new issues, policies and challenges are playing out for different types of universities and sector groups.

We recognise the huge diversity of issues impacting on research and KE – the Research Excellence Framework, financial pressures, new relationships with public sector partners, AI and new technologies, environmental challenges, funding reform, reducing bureaucracy and burden, changing business models, infrastructure and campus maintenance, and changing patterns of student and staff recruitment. We will tailor our ongoing conversations with the sector to reflect the changing policy landscape, but our engagement will continue to have a universal focus on all institution types.



We will also be looking at RE's particular approach to engagement in the wider context of the UKRI family. Given that we are the only part of UKRI specifically focused on universities, we can bring a unique perspective to the table in our work with the Research Councils and other parts of UKRI, as well as with the devolved funders. As we develop our future strategic delivery plans across UKRI, our engagement will retain the flexibility to respond to new priorities and areas of focus.

We recognise the catalytic potential of our engagement to engender collaboration within and across a dynamic sector. We are interested in finding and promoting models of collaboration between sector partners, particularly where risks have been mitigated and challenges overcome. Our engagement will evolve to become more proactive in driving collaborative practices and promoting examples of innovation, combining both support and challenge.

Operating in an uncertain and unpredictable political and policy context, RE – and its strategic investment in the form of Quality-Related Research (QR) funding – can and should be a dependable point of solidity for the HE and research sector. Our ongoing engagement with the sector will help us reinforce this role.

We recognise that we will sometimes have to make difficult decisions about where to focus our energies and attention. In deciding how best to use our resources, we will take into account a number of factors, including: our objectives as set out in this strategy; the diversity of the sector; particular opportunities and risks in the sector; changing government priorities; and commissions from our internal stakeholders. Any activity that involves prioritising our resource in this way will be informed by the EIA that accompanies this strategy.

In the following chapters, we set out our vision and ambition for what we are trying to achieve through engagement with the sector, the resources we have at our disposal to meet our goals, and how we intend to make sure that we are effective in doing so.



# Our Engagement Vision

Our engagement vision encompasses the wide diversity of institutions and sector groupings across England, giving us the flexibility to respond to changes in the higher education landscape.

It aligns with UKRI's vision of an outstanding research and innovation system in the UK, connecting discovery to prosperity and the public good. Our role is to maximise the contribution that English universities can make to a thriving research community. At Research England, we see universities, mission groups and sector stakeholders as vital partners in achieving our aims.

Our vision for engaging with the sector, therefore, has a number of dynamic and interacting strands:

**1. We want to be an authoritative, credible source of comprehensive intelligence on the sector's research and knowledge exchange functions and the wider factors impacting on them.**

Our engagement with universities will allow us to gather intelligence on issues affecting their wider sustainability and performance. We will develop a nuanced understanding of institutional strategies, capabilities and capacities, and how these are being mobilised to respond to risks and opportunities, as well as national research and innovation priorities.

Our engagement will allow us to understand what underpins sustainable success in research and knowledge exchange at the sector level and how this relates to drivers and barriers elsewhere. We recognise that some changes in the sector are happening so quickly that it may not be possible to measure risks and consequences in real time, so we are committed to adding value to other analyses and data sources in order to triangulate intelligence with evidence. Above all, we aim to see the big picture of how the sector is evolving and responding to national and global priorities, so that engagement informs policy development in RE and beyond.

We will do this by:

- Building on existing trust-based relationships with PVCs, Directors of Research, regional sector groupings, mission groups, and, if resources permit, other senior leaders in the sector;
- Continuing to take a broad overview of diverse institution types;
- Framing engagement themes across the whole institution, including finance, estates, business models, student and staff recruitment, while taking care not to place additional burden on universities;



- Identifying and understanding the wider factors that are impacting on the research and knowledge exchange functions of universities;
- Recognising the diversity of the sector and the different forms that research excellence and innovation can take;
- Triangulating qualitative intelligence with other information and data sources.

**2. We want to build on our trusted relationships with research leaders, universities and sector groups, developing a breadth of soft intelligence from which we can draw insights to influence and inform policy.**

RE has worked hard over the past five years to build credibility with the sector and to develop strong, trust-based relationships with research leaders. Looking externally, this open dialogue enables us to both support and challenge universities to tackle the priorities set by government and UKRI. Looking internally, these relationships form the basis of the intelligence and insights we use to add value to policy-making and strategic decisions.

We will do this by:

- Continuing to actively work with Pro-Vice Chancellors and Directors of Research, building on existing trusted relationships and enabling frank, open, supportive and challenging conversations;
- Respecting the confidentiality of informal engagement, where observations, experiences and different perspectives are shared;
- Offering thought leadership, supporting sector collaboration, discussion and responses to key challenges;
- 
- Continuing to work with RE policy specialists and analytics colleagues to maintain a nuanced, holistic understanding of the English universities, encompassing both soft intelligence and data from a range of sources.

**3. We want to support and enhance the resilience, health, sustainability and effectiveness of the English higher education sector.**

Through our engagement we will build close and collaborative relationships with universities and sector stakeholders. Our engagement will enable us to advocate for the sector's strengths. We want to promote the sector's contribution to national and international research and innovation systems, to economic growth and productivity, and to quality of life. Engagement will give us the contextual knowledge that can support effective policy development and help provide assurance on the use and impact of our funding.

We will do this by:

- Using our convening power and encouraging sector collaboration;
- Promoting sector models and case studies that illustrate good practice, mitigate risks, use innovative approaches;



- Driving proactive sector responses to priority areas and boosting their policy impact; and
  - Using sector intelligence to inform funding policies and practices in RE and UKRI that incentivise efficient and effective approaches in the sector.
- 4. We want to ensure that the advice that UKRI provides to government is appropriately informed by sector intelligence.**

By gathering robust and practically useful sector intelligence, our engagement will identify how university research and knowledge exchange strengths can best be deployed for national and international benefit.

We will do this by:

- Using our insights to equip teams across UKRI with anonymised sector intelligence;
- Using sector intelligence to support UKRI's role in the Place agenda, including any future decisions on spatial funding, to contribute to Government priorities and missions, and to add value to the sector's engagement with these;
- Working with specialist teams in RE to combine quantitative evidence with qualitative sector intelligence;
- Identifying the right intelligence channels across UKRI and, where relevant, to DSIT.

## Our Engagement Objectives

In the last six years, our engagement has gone through the different stages of establishing key relationships, building trust and credibility with the sector, and building up a big picture of the changing landscape.

As we move forward, we recognise that we are moving into a new phase of engagement, where our priorities may shift depending on current issues, such as the financial sustainability of the sector, funding pressures on research and knowledge exchange, international policy changes, and regional priorities. Therefore, while our overarching engagement objectives may remain the same, our activities will be flexible, enabling us to move swiftly in response to a changing world.

Our engagement will be dynamic, responsive and proactive. We recognise that we may need to have challenging conversations with the sector. There may be instances in which we need to undertake deep dives on particular topics, pivot quickly to respond to new challenges, or focus our engagement resource on specific issues. Given the uncertainty of the current climate, we will endeavour to be nimble in order to respond to changes impacting the sector and shaping RE's future role.

Equitable engagement is central to our approach. We are committed to continuing to engage across different institution types, taking a universal overview of the sector, while retaining the flexibility to respond to emerging issues and tailor our interactions with different parts of the sector. We see the great diversity of institutions that exists within the English higher education sector as one of its strengths, resulting in a national research base with both breadth and depth.

The health of this research base is our principal concern. While our funding is currently allocated on a sliding scale predicated on research excellence, we acknowledge the importance of ensuring that all institutions participating in research and innovation are enfranchised, and that all parts of the sector are supported. Our success as a funding body depends on the success of the institutions we fund, and it is in our interest to support an environment in which all institutions can succeed in diverse ways that align with their own missions and strategies.

Our engagement is informed by an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA), which has also been updated alongside this strategy, which gives due consideration to the possible impacts of our engagement on different groups.

In addition to looking at the characteristics protected by equality legislation, the EIA acknowledges that our engagement approach should take account of

different types of institutions at different stages in their organisational development, with different student demographics, and with different levels of research intensity. These differences are key to our understanding of the diversity of the higher education sector and, therefore, a core part of our engagement function. We strive to ensure that an understanding of equality, equity and diversity runs through this strategy and is reflected in our approach to engaging with the sector.

There are four overarching objectives that will apply to all our engagement activities at all times:

<p><i>1 Gather real-time, nuanced intelligence from universities to guide our actions and influence policy development</i></p>	<p>We recognise that universities and sector groupings have unique perspectives on the research and innovation system.</p> <p>Through our engagement, we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respond to the changing opportunities and challenges across the HE landscape by tailoring our engagement to current issues and their impact on research and knowledge exchange.</li> <li>• Seek to understand how the current financial sustainability challenges are affecting different types of universities, and look for examples of where institutions have found ways to mitigate the risks.</li> <li>• Identify early signs of shifting patterns in different parts of the university ecosystem, including campuses and infrastructure, international collaborations, workforce changes, reductions or changes in PGR numbers, discipline-specific losses, student recruitment, changing business models.</li> <li>• Sign-post risks and provide early warning of the consequences of very rapid change before a full evidence set can be obtained.</li> <li>• Seek university feedback on RE and UKRI policies and practices, including their experiences of implementing policies, responding to consultations, and bidding for and / or receiving funding.</li> </ul>
<p><i>2 Use our engagement with universities to augment evidence on the health and dynamism of the research and</i></p>	<p>Engaging with the sector directly will enable us to build a bigger picture of the research and innovation system across England. This will give us an understanding of whether universities are equipped to respond to government priorities and where the system could be supported to work more effectively.</p> <p>We will:</p>

<p><i>innovation system in England</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take a more directive role in promoting greater collaboration between higher education partners and showcasing examples of effective partnerships.</li> <li>• Use the intelligence gathered from individual institutions to develop a sector-wide overview of the health of different types of institution, different disciplinary areas, different regional groupings and / or different parts of the research community and pipeline.</li> <li>• Work closely with the RE Analytics Team to develop the capability to combine soft intelligence with evidence and data.</li> <li>• Work closely with policy colleagues across RE and UKRI so that feedback from the sector informs and adds value to their work.</li> </ul>
<p><i>3 Highlight the contribution our funding makes through the intelligence we gather from the sector</i></p>	<p>Our engagement interactions support our assurance role, providing a light-touch mechanism to highlight how our funding enables universities to make a wider societal, economic and cultural impact in alignment with Government Missions.</p> <p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify examples of universities making a clear societal impact, including their work with public and private sector partners, their civic roles, and where their research contributes to their regions.</li> <li>• Gather case studies and examples that illustrate the impact of QR and HEIF funding, as well as other RE competitive funding streams.</li> <li>• Seek evidence that RE funding is making a difference to the development of research communities across the English HE sector and contributing to impactful research.</li> </ul>
<p><i>4 Ensure that our engagement is inclusive and that analysis is objective</i></p>	<p>The English higher education sector is diverse, comprising a mix of institutions of different sizes, with different specialisms, strategies and missions, and with diverse student populations. While our financial support varies in scale across the spectrum of institutions that we fund, we recognise the need for our engagement to be inclusive and for our analysis to be robust and objective. In practice, we will sometimes target particular cohorts or types of universities in order to maintain our</p>

understanding of diverse sector experiences. In addition, we will continue to focus primarily on research and KE, which will shape our decisions about how we use our engagement resources and where we direct our attention.

We will, therefore:

- Continue to engage with a diverse range of universities, maintaining a nuanced overview of the whole sector, so that we understand how and why policies are being experienced in different types of institution.
- Ensure our engagement aligns with RE's strategic EDI ambitions and aims, supporting its commitment to EDI.
- When drawing out insights, ensure that we incorporate intelligence from diverse institution types in order to gain an understanding of how EDI challenges are playing out across the sector.
- Seek examples of where the research pipeline is diversifying and continue to identify the inequities that impact on researchers and research careers.
- Understand the contribution of institutions with diverse student communities to the diversification of the research pipeline.

# Evaluation of Our Engagement

To ensure that we discharge the commitments of this strategy effectively, we plan to regularly evaluate our progress against our objectives. We have identified indicators of successful engagement and will continue to measure how well we are delivering this strategy by considering the following questions:

- Are we well-informed and well-placed to brief leaders about the key issues, opportunities, risks and trends across the HE sector?
- Do we have sufficient trust and credibility for research leaders to share sensitive information with us and do we need to adapt our approach in a climate of financial pressures, hard decisions and sector risks?
- Are we able to use our influence and credibility to both challenge and support the sector, driving forward particular agenda and promoting successful examples?
- Do we have the right engagement products that meet the needs of government and senior audiences?
- Do policy leads access and interrogate our pool of intelligence and how does this intelligence influence and inform RE's decisions and policies?
- Is engagement evidence adding value to other RE and UKRI policy workstreams, such as the sustainability and health of the sector, the regional agenda, people, culture and environment, talent, transparency, open access?
- Do we have the capacity and capability to triangulate soft intelligence with evidence and data from existing sources in order to develop an observatory function?
- Does our engagement function help to identify and promote examples of effective practice within the sector?
- Does RE have a diverse pool of good practice examples and case studies that illustrate the difference made by our funding?
- Has the quality of bids to RE increased and have we increased the diversity of HEIs bidding to RE funding streams?
- Do we tailor our approaches to engagement with different cohorts of the higher education sector?
- Has our engagement supported institutions to collaborate with each other, through the growth of networks/consortia?

We will re-visit these challenging questions as part of an interim evaluation in 2027, when we will evaluate information and experiences across RE, UKRI and, where possible, the sector. This will give us an overview of the impact of our engagement activities, enabling us to monitor and evaluate the delivery of this strategy and to respond where changes need to be made.

This strategy is designed to provide the foundations for our engagement with the sector through to the end of the Academic Year 2029-30, at which point we



will re-evaluate, refresh and, if necessary, redraw our Sector Engagement Strategy.