



Research England

Engagement Forums

Report of discussions
RE-P-2018-09

Research England held two Engagement Forums, on 28 June and 4 July in London and Manchester. The main aim of these events was to introduce Research England to the higher education sector and share developing thoughts on our vision, mission and strategic priorities. The events also provided an opportunity for senior representatives of universities and sector bodies to meet with the leadership of Research England and UKRI.

Both events followed a programme of introductory talks from David Sweeney, Executive Chair of Research England, and Rebecca Endean, Strategy Director at UKRI, followed by Q&A.¹ The plenary sessions were followed by ten facilitated discussion sessions on specific topics, with a closing plenary session to draw together recurring or cross-cutting themes from the day.

The facilitated discussions provided an opportunity to discuss key themes and priority issues for Research England and UKRI and the sector. Research England was keen to gain feedback from the sector, to inform Research England's future strategy, policies and activities. Each discussion was held either four or six times over the two forums. Through these sessions, we engaged with 30 to 60 senior representatives of the sector and sought their advice and insight. A short, combined record of these discussions is provided below.²

RECORDS OF DISCUSSION

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¹ Helen Cross, Head of Strategy Co-ordination at UKRI, attended the Manchester event in place of Rebecca Endean.

² Discussion four; the role of Place in Research and KE funding, was run as an 'information session' on the current Strength in Places Fund (SIPF). There is already extensive documentation about the SIPF on the UKRI website and therefore it was felt additional documentation was not required.

Key comments from participants for Research England/UKRI

Discussions through both Forum events were wide-ranging and varied, with diverse views expressed on most topics. However, some clear overarching feedback points for Research England/UKRI emerged from discussions at both events:

1. The overall funding and policy landscape was seen as encouraging competition between institutions and researchers, particularly where new funds are predominately being allocated competitively. However, participants in both events felt that addressing the major challenges faced by the sector, for example around early-career research sustainability, and addressing the real social challenges of our time such as ageing populations or climate change, could only be achieved through collaboration between institutions and researchers. The resulting strategic tension between collaboration and competition is challenging to balance within institutions. Research England and UKRI were asked to consider particularly how these tensions could best be addressed, not only in national policy and initiatives, but also in working with institutions on how to determine priorities on the ground.
2. Britain's exit from the European Union was felt to pose significant risks to the higher education sector's abilities to deliver on national priorities. The forthcoming Spending Review offered opportunity to make the case for the resources that the higher education sector needs to deliver Government priorities, but there are also risks in this. While the government had committed to increasing overall national expenditure on R&D to 2.4% of GDP, this was felt to be very difficult to achieve without increased public investment

in university research and KE at a time when pressure on other areas of public spending is also likely to increase. It was acknowledged that the sector played a vital role to support funders to make the case for this investment, through providing the best possible evidence of the value and impact of public funding for research and KE that the sector has delivered.

3. Participants stressed that Research England should continue to take a holistic view of the higher education sector, including through funding and assessment mechanisms that support and recognise institutional strategy and by continuing to work closely with the sector to inform its detailed policies. It was felt that Research England could also play an important role in UKRI as an 'interpreter', both of higher education sector issues to others within UKRI and of UKRI strategic priorities and developments to individual institutions and sector bodies.

Facilitated Discussion 1:

Evidence of importance of formula funding for research

Context

Using formula-driven methods, Research England allocates £1.6 billion in quality-related research (QR) funding and £0.2 billion in Research Capital Investment Fund (RCIF) funding to support the underpinning research capacity and maintenance of research infrastructure in institutions. Institutions can spend this largely as they choose, provided it is spent on activities that Research England is empowered to fund.

There is a need to ensure that evidence demonstrating the value of QR and formula-driven capital funding streams is kept up to date. This evidence informs government considerations on the balance of funding within the dual support mechanism. The government is advised by UKRI.

Key discussion points on the value of QR and RCIF funding

1. The participants felt strongly that the flexible and unhypothecated nature of QR and RCIF funding allowed them to build strategic areas for the future and nurture new areas of research, including those that have not been identified as current Government priorities.
2. Furthermore, institutions can contribute to the sustainability of research by providing long-term employment contracts for staff, bridging contracts for early-career researchers and providing transitional funding for staff between externally funded projects.
3. QR funding can be transformational for smaller institutions that receive relatively small amounts of research funding overall. These institutions can use QR funding for pump-priming to build capacity and increase research activity in new areas.
4. QR funding can leverage additional funds from external sponsors of research by showing that the institution can put money on the table.
5. It is not always obvious which research projects will be successful at their inception, and therefore QR funding can allow institutions to invest in perceived riskier initiatives.
6. QR funding facilitates researchers to pursue curiosity-driven research without being overly restricted by time pressures.

The group discussed ways of gathering information that could help to evidence the importance of QR and formula capital funding:

1. Case studies. Case studies were seen as a preferred approach, and the participants were confident that they had good examples. They would like guidance from Research England and UKRI on the type of information that should be included.
2. Research strategy. One large research-intensive institution suggested that, given enough notice, they could produce a research strategy similar to those produced currently for the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) and Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). This option received a mixed reception from other group members.
3. Methods for detailed accountability were also discussed, for example, staff timesheets. This was the least desirable option.

Other points of note were:

1. Participants stressed the importance of stability in QR and RCIF funding. Abrupt changes in funding would have detrimental effects on institutional stability and strategy.
2. Participants reported mixed practice in the distribution of QR funding to subject areas within institutions, with some institutions allocating the funds using the Research England calculations (usually with a top-slice towards central costs), and others using a different pattern of distribution.
3. Participants felt that there could be value in updating international comparisons of different research funding methods in different countries.

Facilitated Discussion 2:

HEIF and Commercialisation

Context

It is important that Research England can demonstrate high performance in university commercialisation and that institutions have used HEIF effectively, as well as contributing to the wider UKRI commercialisation approach. This is particularly pertinent for making the spending review case for HEIF, demonstrating how institutions have used additional HEIF funding. Greater emphasis has been placed on commercialisation to achieve the Government's Industrial Strategy and support the 2.4% target. It is acknowledged that there is an opportunity to seek synergies when addressing commercialisation across the nine councils within UKRI, and hence this is an important element of UKRI's agenda.

Key discussion points

1. There was recognition that research commercialisation is not just about technology transfer, but includes a wide range of partnerships with business, and therefore is relevant to most or all of the sector.
2. Commercialisation within higher education institutions (HEIs) may be fragmented, and needs more strategic approaches to create activity that is more collaborative with key external partners and sustained over longer periods of time. In this regard, there are particular challenges for smaller and specialist institutions. Some activities are expensive, and HEIs could collaborate more effectively, such as in exploitation of intellectual property.
3. As well as specific commercialisation activities, HEIs make important contributions in developing and sustaining the wider ecosystem necessary for commercialisation, such as incubators and other capital developments, networks, access to finance and training. Commercialisation will be more effective where these elements can be linked, including spatially and sectorally. Local and regional collaborations are considered effective as staff and partners can talk to each other more regularly to build collaboration.
4. There is also an international dimension to commercialisation. Work with overseas universities could add insight to UK commercialisation, and potentially bring additional work from overseas businesses and investors.
5. There is recognition that UKRI will need to understand the workings of the research and innovation system better, through a deep understanding of supply and demand. This expertise will ensure appropriate policies are adopted across UKRI.
6. It is acknowledged that significant funding is needed for the proof-of-concept stage. This will progress technologies to the stage where investors and businesses will engage. It was noted that translation funding is valuable and that Research Councils and Innovate UK have schemes that facilitate this stage of development. The sector would like to have a better understanding of the suite of UKRI schemes that could support this work, with commonality where appropriate.
7. The near-to-market, Innovate UK schemes are considered helpful, but have to be deployed predominantly to businesses (70% business and 30% academic). Participants commented that it would be useful to explore whether Innovate UK (and the Research Councils) could have more of a mix of schemes, e.g. 50:50. Access to escalator funding (small scale through to scale up) should be considered by UKRI, although it was unclear whether this should be generic or for distinctive exploitation pathways/technologies.
8. Participants felt Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) had little capacity to engage and understand complex commercialisation agendas, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) did not have the absorptive capacity to utilise research outputs. HEIs would need to prioritise and use their resources to increase their understanding and identify potential opportunities when working with these partners. Both UKRI schemes and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund can help to address these challenges.

Summary of discussion

1. All participants flagged the importance of using a broad definition of commercialisation, and also recognised that we needed to work with and gain the support of the investor/business community. Different institutions flagged different aspects of commercialisation, playing to their own strengths. This highlighted the importance of demonstrating that HEIs worked together in a complementary way.

Facilitated Discussion 2: HEIF and Commercialisation

2. Discussions flagged the opportunities of working across UKRI funding schemes, and the importance of the interface with local funds.
3. There was a clear difference in comments at the two events. In London, there was a stronger focus on ideas for more public funding for commercialisation and how to link up existing assets and opportunities to make more impact, tapping into private sources. Demand was less of an issue. In Manchester, the focus was on the challenges of low absorptive capacity in businesses, and hence how to build demand for university commercialisation. Manchester discussions were also more focussed on local funding sources and bodies such as UK Shared Prosperity and LEPs. This reflects different economic contexts to commercialisation across the country, which present different challenges.
4. Discussion will inform Research England contributions to work across UKRI to develop strategic approaches to commercialisation; as well as work within Research England to understand and promote the effective commercialisation practices adopted by HEIs, as part of HEIF evaluation and spending review case.

Facilitated Discussion 3:

KEF

Context

Research England were asked to implement a knowledge exchange framework (KEF) by the then Universities minister, Jo Johnson, in October 2017. Since then, Research England has been engaged in design work ahead of formal sector consultation and implementation from autumn 2018.

Participants from both Engagement forums discussed the effect the KEF will have on institutions. As the framework is still in development, participants understandably focussed largely on their concerns.

Specifically, they spoke about their concerns about:

1. The KEF's purpose and audience,
2. The burden
3. Deciding suitable metrics
4. Whether there will be links to funding through HEIF distribution

1. Purpose and audience

It was clarified that the KEF metrics exercise has a dual purpose:

- a. to provide institutions with more accessible information for understanding and improving their own performance;
- b. as a tool for businesses and other users of University knowledge to find partners.

Both of these purposes will also contribute to the aim of improving public visibility and accountability.

There were concerns raised about the overall scope of knowledge exchange (KE). It was clarified that Research England's definition of KE is very broad, and a holistic approach needs to be taken. It was confirmed that Research England is not solely focused upon commercialisation.

2. Burden

Participants asked how much work would be involved, given the existing burden of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and other data-collection activity. It was clarified that Research England anticipates a largely metrics-driven, institutional-level framework, relying heavily on existing metrics for its first iteration. It is anticipated it will be a low burden to the sector. It was discussed that the metrics are likely to be supplemented by narrative statements in some areas of KE due to a paucity of metrics.

3. Metrics

Participants felt that the focus would be on the easiest-to-measure elements of KE, not necessarily the most impactful. Institutions were also concerned about aligning the KEF with institutional capabilities and strategic priorities. Whilst reassurance was given to institutions through Research England's work on clustering to compare similar institutions to each other, caution was given that the KEF would be likely to expose underperformance. On the contrary, KEF does present an opportunity for institutions to demonstrate their strong performance.

There was general concern on measurement. Participants wanted to know how Research England was able to measure the less tangible or non-monetised impacts, such as contributions to society and influence on policy. The difficulties were acknowledged. Some types of KE are inherently hard to measure, and may be tackled via the submission of narrative statements. It was also noted that KEF metrics collation will be a journey of development and new metrics can be incorporated at a later date. It was also recognised that getting closer to the ultimate impacts of KE (and away from income as a proxy for the impact) brings with it a much higher potential burden.

Each participant was shown their proposed cluster of peers, as one way of ensuring fair comparison. These were largely well received (and no alternatives were proposed), although there were some concerns from specialist institutions that they did not fit easily into a single cluster.

4. Links to funding

The conversation on links to funding was largely around the incentive such a link would create to participate, and concerns that, if HEIF worked well, why change it? It was explained that Research England had been asked to create a KEF the whole of the UK could participate in if they wished, whilst HEIF funding was England only. We also noted that HEIF's stability and flexibility was well recognised as an important factor in its success and that we would need to evaluate very carefully how best to link the KEF to funding. Finally, we noted that a link to funding could take many forms and it was not necessarily a choice between nothing or a complete replacement of HEIF.

Facilitated Discussion 5:

REF 2021

Context

The REF is the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK HEIs. It first took place in 2014. The next exercise will be conducted in 2021. The REF is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies: Research England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE).

The Engagement Forums took place before the UK higher education funding bodies had published their consultations on the detailed guidance on submissions and panel criteria, which addressed some of the uncertainties expressed during discussion, as set out below.³

Overall discussion points

In line with the feedback received through the REF2021 consultation process, the participants at the event were generally supportive of the exercise. Participants recognised the value of the REF as providing an evidence base to underpin confidence in the research funding system, and that the REF is broadly successful at doing this across a diverse sector. Overall REF is seen to work well and is a known and trusted approach.

General approach to ongoing consultation

1. Participants were generally supportive of the opportunity to input into the shaping of the next REF through the consultations conducted so far by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Research England.
2. It was considered that the 2017 consultation was too late in the REF cycle for the responses to have sufficient impact on the overall shape of the exercise, with resulting changes being minor and more radical options rejected. However, participants felt the ongoing consultation process was helpful in finding a pragmatic way forward.

Resource impact on institutions

1. Overall, the REF was felt by participants to place a significant resource impact on institutions, which, if possible, it would be desirable to reduce. However, participants recognised that this must be balanced against ensuring the overall effectiveness of the exercise.

2. The wider use of metrics as an alternative approach was discussed, though noting that there is poor correlation with peer assessment and that metrics are sometimes used without good justification and with poor practice.

Stability

1. Participants expressed a strong desire for stability in future REF exercises to save expense and the effort required in adapting to change.
2. For REF 2021, the participants would have liked processes carried forward from 2014, or greater clarity earlier on changes to allow them to adapt more quickly.
3. Participants recognised a need to present a more unified voice for stability in future exercises, including highlighting positives as well as improvements.

Open access

1. The open access requirement for REF2021 was generally viewed positively; however, it was acknowledged that implementation can be difficult and time consuming, particularly with less-established research administration, e.g. in smaller institutions.
2. Institutions have found it difficult to establish compliance rates, and participants felt they would welcome clearer advice on exceptions.
3. The overall problem was felt to be related to the existing model of publishing in subscription journals. This has placed significant power in the hands of large publishers that have resisted moves to open access and have made implementation of the REF policy difficult. It was felt that ongoing subscription negotiations with publishers should help resolve this complex issue.

Codes of practice and equality and diversity (E&D)

1. The codes of practice on E&D were felt to be the most anticipated element of the forthcoming guidance, with significant desire for clarity in institutions to allow implementation. Participants expressed concern that significant changes for REF 2021 would mean unpicking existing processes.

³ www.ref.ac.uk/publications/2018/draftguidanceonsubmissions201801.html

Facilitated Discussion 5:

REF 2021

2. There were also concerns over audit requirements, if changes to staff contracts were to be implemented as part of the evidence base for selection, and also due to any additional burden for evidencing staff circumstances.
3. Participants would generally be happy with an REF commitment to looking at E&D systematically to discourage unfair recruitment.
3. There were concerns that institutions might now need to read and rank every output to identify candidates for submission, which would be much more difficult than selecting individuals as in the previous exercise. Participants questioned whether panels would be able to penalise suspected 'game playing' (e.g. 0.2 FTE submitting 5 outputs) if they could identify this.

Submissions

1. Participants stressed the need for clarity on the REF definition of 'significant responsibility for research', proposing that variability between similar types/sizes of institution be acceptable if aligned to transparent, consulted-on criteria.
2. It was generally felt that inclusion of all staff with significant responsibility for research would help to address the negative perceptions of any researcher being excluded from the REF, but some participants considered that staff with a small number of attributed outputs would be seen as equally excluded.
4. There were concerns that the inclusion of a single additional person's output can tip requirements of number of impact case studies significantly.
5. Participants discussed that rapid growth within an HEI would work against that HEI due to the increased case study requirements, where they would have fewer relevant studies available.

Facilitated Discussion 6: The Future of Research Assessment

Context

The sector has, by now, largely adapted to REF processes. These sessions considered whether the future of research assessment requires incremental change or a radical change, with participants encouraged to think openly and creatively about future approaches.

Key discussion points

1. When considering how a future research exercise might be delivered, the sector may wish to think of ways to avoid a competitive 'build up' to a specific date. A peak every six to seven years may not foster a stable research environment. There may be room for a continuous assessment of research rather than a single assessment; this would, however, draw heavily on resources (for example, through a continuous peer review process).
2. Technology also has a pertinent role to play in the future of research assessment. Processes could be streamlined and made more efficient, including through greater interoperability between systems. Technology can also play a role in open research by encouraging the sharing and reuse of data.
3. Digital technologies could also open up opportunities to bring in evidence of the summation of the research, a form of curation of processes and outputs. This could work for outputs aligned with the arts and practice-based outputs.
4. In addition to this, future models of research assessment could explore the use of text mining to define disciplinary structures and to create 'cluster narratives' that are inclusive of broader subject areas. It was noted that the funding bodies would need considerable input from universities on how this would work structurally. An appropriate group of assessors would also need to be appointed as part of the peer review process.
5. Impact was also a common theme across both forums. Participants noted that we need a way of recording impact accurately. At the moment, we don't capture all of the impact taking place, as some of it is very complex to measure. Collaboration with industry also has the potential to change the nature of impacts and output. There may be a need to focus more on

impact assessment and value for money (VfM) in comparison with traditional assessment of research. Could case studies be used to replace outputs, providing a narrative about the impact in order to support the output? Participants also noted that impact benefits are not always numbers and cannot always be assessed through econometrics, even though the sector is pressured to produce numbers to show VfM.

Other items discussed include:

1. Project-level funding is felt to be shifting increasingly to more challenge-led projects, for example GCRF. Will future research assessment reflect the different type of research that is carried out as part of these projects?
2. Though the REF was not seen a ranking exercise, research assessment was generally felt to encourage HEIs to be assessed against their peers, rather than encouraging the HEI to assess progress against itself. REF could therefore be seen as a measure of competition in the UK, rather than simply a measure of excellence. Participants noted that REF outcomes were also being used (sometimes irresponsibly) by institutional marketing departments for student recruitment.
3. Participants felt that the sector needed to alter its attitude about what constituted 'excellent research', feeling that it was not appropriate to have excellence measured through papers published in 'top' journals with high impact factors, and that there was a clear need to foster a culture where responsible metrics were used. This was felt as particularly pertinent for academics in the early stages of their career.
4. The UK distributes research funding based on performance, but participants stressed the need for the funding environment to protect the ability to carry out research that may be 'unsuccessful' initially, as this work often leads to later successes.

Facilitated Discussion 7: Healthy Research Environment

Context

The discussions focussed on what constitutes a healthy research environment, seeking views on how this could best be supported through policy or funding approaches by Research England and UKRI. The discussions at the two forums covered a lot of ground, demonstrating different perceptions of what is considered a 'healthy research environment'. While there were some common themes, conversations were on the whole divergent both within and across regions.

Key discussion points

1. National approaches and inter-institutional collaborations were a common theme. Whether calling for the (re)creation of new national research institutions, reducing inter-institutional competition/increasing cooperation, establishing impact partnerships, collaborative doctoral schools/programmes, or national doctoral fellowships, the need for national approaches was clear, and it was felt Research England and UKRI should play a lead role in developing these. Interdisciplinary collaboration was raised as an area for improvement. Currently there is a degree of uncertainty around interdisciplinary research (IDR) in the context of REF assessment, potentially preventing HEIs from submitting and deterring academics from undertaking such work.
2. The researcher career 'talent pipeline' was also discussed at length across the forums. A lot of concern was expressed for post-doctoral candidates and early-career researchers. It was felt that a healthy research environment should retain and motivate post-doctoral researchers more than it is currently doing. This would require providing more entry-level opportunities, but also an appropriate approach to staff at the end of their careers. To unblock the talent pipeline, career pathways would need to be considered strategically and by individual institutions, including supporting early-career researchers in finding work outside of academia and providing transition pathways from 'real-world' jobs back into academia (and vice versa) throughout research careers. Research England was seen as ideally placed to facilitate this nationally.
3. The concept of the 'whole academic' was raised during discussions at both forums. In thinking about how best to support and develop research talent, the groups discussed the need to take account of the multiple roles the academics undertake and the need to ensure that the drivers in the system which may target different elements of these roles do not conflict or contradict.
4. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion was raised, it was felt that the Athena Swann programme had stopped being a driver for change and that universities had to go a lot further in diversifying their research talent pool, particularly with regard to minority ethnic groups. It was felt that Research England and the Office for Students had a responsibility to help create supportive environments and that policy and culture needed to change to combat discriminatory practices, sexual harassment and generational passing on of bad practices ('we worked in these conditions; so should you').
5. It was felt it would be beneficial if funding levels were more predictable and if the language around funding calls was more encouraging of less research-intensive institutions. Small institutions noted that their research offices were not as well resourced or advanced at dealing with constant cycles of change in the funding environment. Should Research England or UKRI provide assistance in building up research office capabilities?

Facilitated Discussion 8:

Open Research

Context

How research is undertaken and communicated is changing, with the Internet and other technologies providing new opportunities to work more openly and collaboratively, and to communicate scholarly outputs more widely, than ever before. Participants were invited to consider how these changes might affect the research landscape over the coming years.

Discussions primarily focussed on open access (OA) to research publications, but also touched on open data, open peer review, and open infrastructures. Participants in London and Manchester discussed the role of publishers, interoperability of systems, and the need to streamline funder policies. Manchester participants specifically spoke about the tensions between complying with OA policies whilst working with business partners.

Key discussion topics

1. Publishers were perceived to be key stumbling blocks on the road to OA, with many participants expressing a view that there was a need to break the monopoly of the larger commercial presses. The sector would need to continue to create pressure on publishers, e.g. to stop the practice of 'double dipping', with the same journals charging for OA publishing and for subscription access. Some suggested that we move away from the prestige of certain journals, although noting it was unlikely that this will happen given the established reputation of these journals within the academic community.
2. Participants felt that Research England should be more explicit about what it hopes to achieve through its OA policy, including by addressing issues around gold OA and ensuring that the benefits of OA outlined in the Finch report are not lost.
3. Multiple funder policies are difficult to operationalise across, with a number of systems being used manually to implement and track funder policies. UKRI needs to streamline funder OA policies: the REF OA policy emerged as the preferred model. Monitoring compliance is resource-intensive, with staff often cross-checking compliance using a number of different tools and systems.
4. Current infrastructure was felt to be insufficient to support open research; a central national infrastructure could potentially resolve current issues.
5. Participants noted the distinction between research carried out in academia and in industry. In academia, research leads to publication; in business, research leads to growth and productivity. It was felt there was a contradiction of working with industry and working openly, where intellectual property issues would arise.

Facilitated Discussion 9:

Barriers and opportunities for international collaboration

Context

There are challenges and opportunities for universities in international collaborative work and how good practice can be shared. The discussion ranged from how individual universities are engaging with international collaboration, the current priorities of different universities and the development of universities' international strategies. The sessions also addressed where there is potential for Research England and UKRI to be involved in the international agenda to benefit both individual universities and the broader national interest.

Key discussion points

The international dimension was felt to be a great strength for the UK higher education sector, but there is a shifting landscape, particularly in relation to the opportunities and challenges posed by Brexit. UKRI should be a strong voice internationally, given the history and reputation of the research councils and the REF. Of particular importance for UKRI will be the need to continue to support the promotion of the UK as a destination of choice for world-class researchers and for strong international collaborative work.

A variety of observations were made by participants including:

1. Funding schemes should include appropriate lead times for the formation of new international relationships. The approach by funders to ask for expressions of interest for initiatives was appreciated.
2. Being involved with both inward and outward (national level) delegation visits is seen as very positive; universities' commitment to sustainable development versus the need for face-to-face meetings in international collaborative projects was seen as a dilemma.
3. Sources of intelligence on international collaboration are important, and the role of UUK International (UUKi) was seen as important in this respect.
4. The response of various embassies in the UK (to the issue of research collaboration) is very varied.
5. Good practice in due diligence around the legal framework for international collaborative relationships is vital. There could be a role for UUKi in delivering some advice.
6. Intellectual property is an issue, in that it is treated differently (both ethically and legally) in different jurisdictions around the world.
7. The inevitable tension of bottom-up collaborative ventures between individual (or teams of) researchers and the strategic, top-down approach of universities was aired, although there was no agreed approach to resolving this issue.
8. The critical mass of some academic disciplines (the example quoted was African history) can be seen as a bar to productive relationships.

Facilitated Discussion 10:

Universities and the 2.4% target

Context

The government has announced an ambition to increase the UK's investment in research and development (R&D) to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. Currently, two-thirds of R&D is conducted in the private sector and around 24%, accounting for most of the remaining third, is undertaken by HEIs. Early analysis suggests that this balance exists in most other developed countries. The Government will set out plans for how the 2.4% will be achieved, including who will perform the proposed additional R&D and who will pay for it, in the 2.4% roadmap in the Autumn Budget.

The facilitators focussed the session on what the role of HEIs should be in stimulating higher R&D investments from businesses, assuming that levers may be needed beyond operations of the market on businesses. The facilitators also narrowed this question down by asking how HEIs can play a role in:

1. Attracting companies to invest in the UK;
2. Providing the support to help businesses be more R&D active;
3. Supporting small R&D-intensive businesses to grow

Key discussion points

1. Showcasing the UK: UK HEIs need to 'up their game' and make the UK's capability for research and innovation more visible to potential overseas investors and global R&D businesses, making it more obvious that the UK is the partner of choice. HEIs will need to collaborate rather than compete to do this. Selling our capability is key.
2. Making the UK 'sticky': it is not enough to just attract foreign investment, we need to land the value from such investments in the UK so that new technologies and companies stay and grow here.
3. The talent pipeline: the groups tended to think that the UK would need to import researchers from overseas rather than rely on 'home-growing' talent, as the UK would be unable to produce the requisite number of researchers in time to meet the demands of the 2.4% target. Some participants also thought it was important to boost 'home-grown' talent at the same time, to aid 'stickiness' and embed the conditions for increased R&D long-term. We need to consider

what skills we need to develop.

4. Scaling up rather than start-ups: the sector needs to think about scaling up spin-offs and start-ups rather than simply initiating new businesses, as this will have greater and longer-term impact through creating technology giants that can become future research partners, stimulate spin-offs themselves, etc.
5. The impact of the marginal pound: consideration is needed of where the marginal pound of public expenditure to achieve the target will have most impact, and where the greatest impacts can occur (e.g. public/private or research discipline/area).
6. Big business vs SMEs: the differences in working with big business and SMEs must be acknowledged, and the sector should tap into the fact that different HEIs have different business links. Small HEIs may have stronger links with SMEs, as an example.
7. Creative sector: the 2.4% challenge is not articulated in a way that fits well for the creative and cultural sector/industries, so the sector needs to consider how we can bring these areas in.
8. Services industry: the UK economy is predominately services based, so we need to consider how we can drive up R&D in this area. In particular, how can we engage HEIs in this sector, and what R&D partnerships or initiatives are effective for services?
9. Infrastructure: capital investment will be needed to meet the needs of scaling up the talent pipeline and number of researchers.

Other points raised:

1. Regions: HEIs have regional connections that the sector should exploit.
2. Defining R&D: a question was raised over whether Frascati definitions for R&D work for all sectors and whether the current statistics properly capture R&D activities of SMEs.
3. Stability of the research base: if increasing research activity, we need to consider the underpinning stability of the research base, e.g. full economic costing of research.
4. The stretch in the 2.4% target also relates to the strength of GDP growth.