

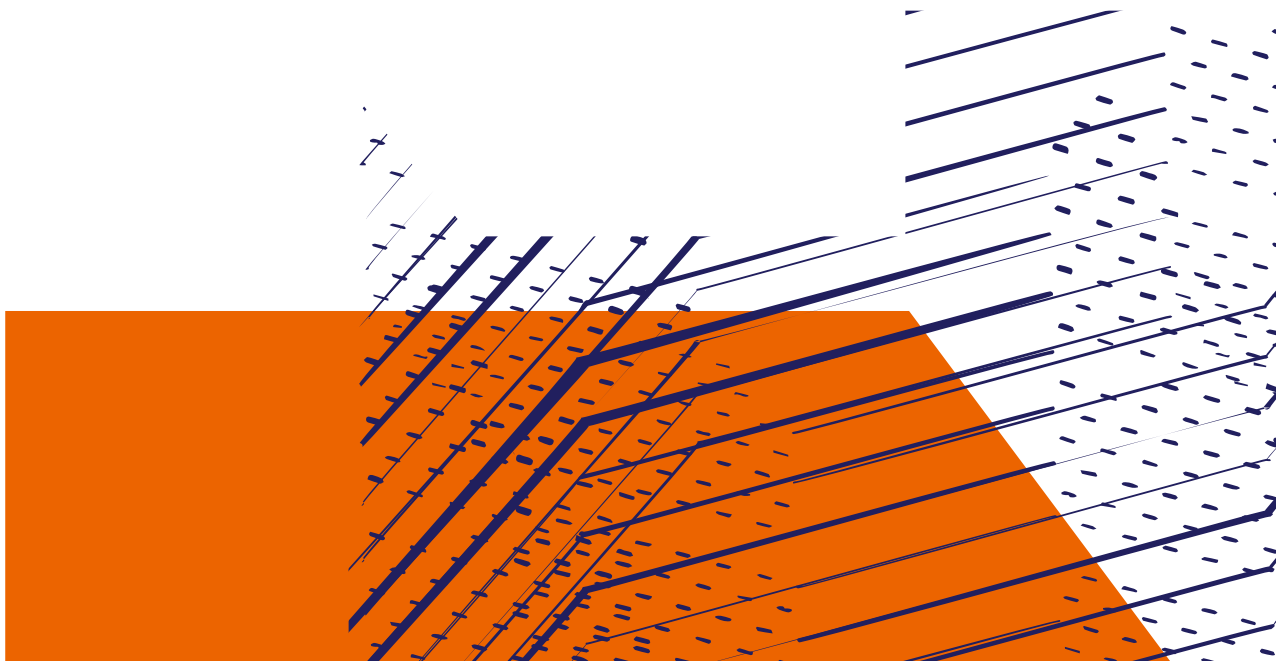


Research  
England

Strategy Paper | RE-P-2019-06

# Institutions Engagement Strategy

2019/20–2021/22





# Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	5
Our Engagement Vision	6
Our Engagement Objectives	8
Our Engagement Resources	12
Evaluation of Our Engagement	15



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# Foreword

With this Institutions Engagement Strategy, Research England – still a relatively new organisation – has made a clear commitment to engaging with higher education institutions across England. As the strategic lead for engagement on the Research England Council, I am pleased to present our strategy and our approach to working in partnership with universities.

We place a high value on our relationships with universities. Engagement with institutions gives us an overview of the key issues, trends, challenges, as well as examples of success across the sector, and consequent opportunities to identify and promote good practice. As the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost at the Royal College of Art, I am excited to see a recognition of the diversity of the higher education sector and a flexible approach to engaging all types of institutions in their varied research missions.

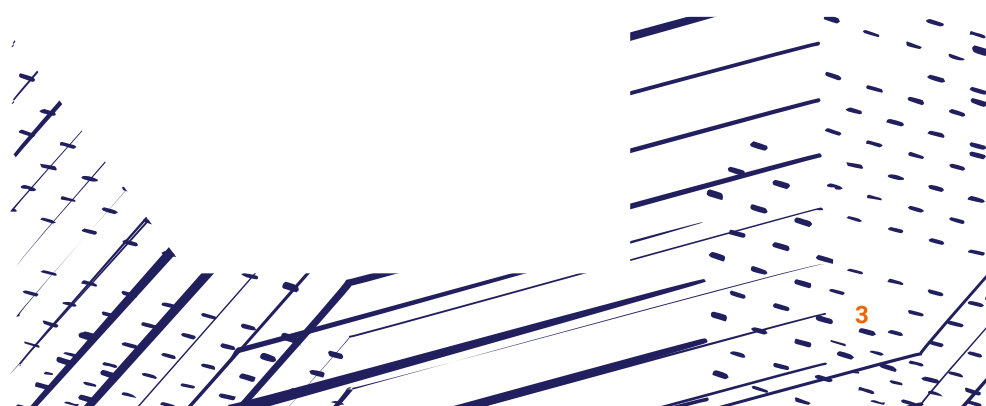
The strategy brings into focus the purpose of our engagement function, which is to gather intelligence from institutions to inform and influence the future development, and delivery, of higher education and research policy. Engagement helps us to support institutions navigate the challenging policy landscape, which is helpful at a time when the policy context is complex and unpredictable.

I anticipate that this strategy will be just the beginning of our journey with universities – our key partners in the higher education sector.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Naren Barfield".

Naren Barfield,  
Research England Council



# Introduction

Research England (RE) provides funding to English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs, also referred to as 'universities' and 'institutions' in this document) for research and knowledge exchange and delivers the Research Excellence Framework (REF), our national research assessment exercise. Unlike other parts of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), RE is unique in that we deliver over 90% of our funding as an annual grant to research institutions as a whole, rather than as a response to funding competitions in specified disciplines. Our funding is designed to be strategic and enabling, pump priming England's research infrastructure and ensuring that our universities can maintain the ecosystems needed for research to flourish. Our interest in universities is in their strategic direction of travel rather than excellence in any specific discipline. As such, we have a unique position and remit within UKRI to work with our principal stakeholders at the institutional level.

As a group, universities can offer us the most direct and relevant intelligence about their experiences in navigating the current higher education (HE) and research landscape, and how they are preparing for the future. We recognise the importance of other stakeholders – mission groups, other funders, representative bodies – but it is our engagement with universities that provides crucial primary intelligence to shape our policies and activities. Productive and dynamic engagement with universities will be a lynchpin in successfully meeting our objectives as a funding body, as set out in our [Delivery Plan \(DP\)](#).

Universities are therefore vital partners for RE, and this three-year Strategy sets out why and how we will interact with them through the period 2019-20 to 2020-21. We recognise the current uncertainty in the UK's political situation and are committed to ensuring that this Strategy remains fit for purpose. We will refresh this document should it become necessary due to political or policy developments. Nevertheless, the framework for our engagement will remain our DP, which points to the key role of universities in delivering a high proportion of UK research and innovation activities, with regional, national and global impact. The DP makes a commitment to listening to, working with and supporting universities, building on the foundation we've set since RE's launch in 2018.

**One year into RE's existence, we have evaluated what has been achieved through our engagement with HEIs.**

**During this first year:**

- **Our Institutions Engagement Managers (IEMs) have undertaken around 100 institutional visits, bringing back observations and intelligence, which are being collated and analysed to create an intelligence resource;**
- **Through their visits, IEMs have identified examples of excellence and innovation, research ambitions, institutional directions of travel, risks, challenges, opportunities and different perspectives from across the sector;**
- **We have held four Engagement Forums, actively engaging a wide range of senior representatives from institutions across England and generating positive feedback from participants.**

Our intention – and the purpose of this Strategy – is to build on these successes. We actively listen to and engage closely with universities to build awareness and intelligence about how they are responding to research and knowledge exchange priorities and the role played by institutional strategy and decision-making processes. We use engagement as a mechanism to monitor broader issues affecting the HE sector, gathering intelligence about the research ecosystem in England to drive our policy and funding activities. We also recognise the catalytic potential of our dialogue with institutions to engender collaboration within and across a dynamic sector. An effective partnership model that seeks not only to understand, but to bring thinkers together and enable collaboration, will amplify the benefits of our engagement. Operating in an uncertain and unpredictable political and policy context, we believe that RE, and the strategic investment we provide in the form of upfront Quality-Related Research (QR) Grant, can and should be a dependable point of solidity for the HE and research sector. Our ongoing engagement with institutions will help us reinforce this role.

In the following chapters we set out our vision and ambition for what we can achieve through engagement with HEIs, 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 sits within the context of both our mission and that of UKRI, which seeks to create and maintain the best possible environment for research and innovation to flourish. As part of UKRI, our role within that mission is to maximise the contribution that English universities can make to that environment. At Research England, we see universities as vital partners in achieving our aims.

Our vision for engaging with universities therefore has a number of dynamic and interacting strands:

**We want to support and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the English HE sector.** Through our engagement we will build close and collaborative relationships with universities – our vital partners. We will actively listen to the sector and establish open dialogue that will allow us to understand institutional strategies and priorities. Our engagement will enable us to advocate for the strengths of English university research and knowledge exchange, and to present the opportunities universities can offer to national and international research and innovation systems and infrastructure. It will also give us the contextual knowledge that can support effective policy development. Strong, trust-based relationships and open dialogue will enable us to challenge universities to tackle the priorities set by government and by UKRI's overarching research and innovation strategy.

**We want to be an authoritative source of intelligence on the English HE system beyond research and knowledge exchange.** Our engagement with universities will allow us to gather intelligence on issues affecting their wider sustainability and performance. We will develop a holistic understanding of institutional strategies, capabilities and capacities, and how these are being mobilised to respond to risks and opportunities in the HE environment, 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 elsewhere. Above all, our engagement will enable us to see the big picture of how the sector is evolving and responding to national and global priorities, to inform policy development in RE and elsewhere.

**We want to support UKRI as a whole to understand how their interventions are affecting English universities.** Our engagement should not benefit only Research England, but will also support good policy-making and decision-making across UKRI through sharing intelligence and analysis. We intend to provide insight into how the policies and mechanisms of research and knowledge exchange funding are working on the ground, and the impact they have on the ability of universities to reliably undertake excellent research and high-performance knowledge exchange. Our engagement will also support the monitoring and evaluation of Research England's own policy and funding interventions, as well as those of wider funding partners. As the England-only component of a UK-wide funder, we will continue to work closely with the HE funding bodies in the devolved nations in order to develop robust and comparable evidence across the whole UK HE system.

**We want to ensure that the advice that UKRI provides to government is appropriately informed by institutional intelligence.** By gathering robust and practically useful institutional intelligence, our engagement will identify how university research and knowledge exchange strengths can best be deployed for national and international benefit. We want to ensure that policy is informed by a broad base of qualitative and quantitative evidence, including from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Office for Students (OfS), to allow for a holistic understanding of the sector's strengths and challenges.

# Our Engagement Objectives

In our first year, our engagement has focused on introducing ourselves to the sector, establishing key relationships, and setting the boundaries of who we are as an organisation and what our role is within UKRI and the wider sector. We've actively listened to institutions, covering a broad range of topics through our engagement activities so far, and building up a big picture of the current landscape.

As we move into year two, we recognise that we are also moving into a new phase of engagement, where our priorities may shift depending on current events (particularly political change), funding activities and the circumstances of HEIs, and we will respond swiftly to such events where necessary. We will use the intelligence gathered in our first year, alongside policy developments, to inform the topics on which we will engage in year two. We will also use our engagement, as far as possible, to spread effective practice throughout the sector, facilitating cross-fertilisation, building networks, and creating an environment in which the benefits of our engagement can emerge organically.

In this Strategy, our objectives are driven by demand from two sides: that of our internal stakeholders – RE's policy teams, directors and Council – and a desire to fully comprehend how the institutions we fund experience the policy environment and our place in it. We see these drivers as having a common destination: our primary purpose is to gather and share intelligence that will build our understanding of what underpins sustainable success in research and knowledge exchange at a sector level in order to effectively shape and influence HE policy. This includes appreciating how policy developments and new funding streams impact on different parts of the sector.

In developing this Engagement Strategy we have consulted RE's Research and Knowledge Exchange teams on our vision and objectives, and on how best our engagement function can fulfil their needs as policy teams working one step further away from institutions. Their feedback was specific, focussing on promoting funding streams, understanding why institutions apply (or don't) to those programmes, and increasing the diversity of institutions that bid. Feedback from RE's Council focused on the need to recognise the diversity of the sector and to be inclusive without compromising our ability to undertake objective analysis of the performance of the sector as a whole. All internal stakeholders emphasised the potential for RE's engagement function to be a vehicle for sharing effective practice.

The benefits of engaging intelligently – acting as a vehicle to spread effective practice, consolidating our convening power to bring together networks of universities with common interests, and the influence to encourage consortia and partnership approaches to tackling national priorities – are not unnoticed but should be considered secondary purposes of our engagement.

Our engagement will be dynamic and responsive, as well as proactive. We recognise that IEMs may need to have challenging conversations and are prepared that there may be instances in which we need to focus our engagement resource on specific institutions, topics or issues. In light of the uncertainty of the current climate, we will endeavour to be nimble and proactive to respond to changes impacting the sector.

We intend that our engagement will be equitable. We see the great diversity of institutions that exists within the English HE 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 financial support is 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 is predicated 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 missions and strategies.

This Strategy is therefore informed by an [Equality Impact Assessment \(EIA\)](#), 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 also 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. While these differences are not referenced in the Equality Act 2010, they 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 engagements at all times:

<p>i) Gather real-time nuanced intelligence from universities to guide our actions and influence policy development</p>	<p>As the key delivery partners for national research and knowledge exchange priorities, universities have a unique perspective on the operation of the overall research and innovation system that we need to bring into RE to help design effective policy and funding interventions. Through our engagement we will help institutions to articulate their successes through case studies that demonstrate the value of their contributions to national policy agendas, while raising awareness of how English universities are responding to the challenges present in the overall HE system.</p>
<p>ii) Use our engagement with universities to augment evidence on the health and dynamism of the research and innovation system in England</p>	<p>Engaging with universities directly will enable us to build up the bigger picture of what is going on within the research and innovation system across England and the rest of the UK. This includes gaining an understanding of whether universities are equipped to respond to government priorities including those set out in the Industrial Strategy. It will also enable us to identify those areas where the system could be supported to work more effectively, including in operational policy terms or through more effective support for e.g. interdisciplinary research.</p>
<p>iii) Demonstrate that public funds are being used appropriately and highlight the contribution our funding makes through the intelligence we gather through engagement with universities</p>	<p>We rely on the OfS to provide us with assurance that the universities covered by their regulatory framework are financially sustainable, well-managed and well-governed, and this assurance underpins our own approach to applying terms and conditions to our funding. While it is not the primary purpose of institutional engagement, our interactions provide a light-touch mechanism for gaining additional assurance around our own funding. This includes highlighting how our funding is generating value for money.</p>
<p>iv) Ensure that our engagement is inclusive and that analysis is objective</p>	<p>The English HE sector is broad and diverse, comprising a mix of institutions with different specialisms and strategies. While we acknowledge that our financial support for institutions 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. We will therefore seek to ensure our engagement, combined with information about the health and activities of the sector, serves as a mechanism to help us understand trends and to scan the horizon. We commit to engaging the sector in different ways, taking account of the different types of institutions and diversity of the sector.</p>



## Our Engagement Resources

Responsibility for implementing the Institutions Engagement Strategy sits with the Insight and Engagement (I&E) Team, and principally with the Institutions Engagement Managers (IEMs). Currently numbering four, the IEMs each have a portfolio of institutions with whom they engage on a regular basis, ensuring ongoing two-way dialogue between RE and the universities we fund. Institutions are allocated on an England-wide basis, ensuring that each IEM engages with a broad range of institutions in different geographies, with different specialisms, and with different missions and strategies.

Working closely with the IEMs are a Senior Policy Adviser and a Partnerships Officer. These roles assist in the synthesis and analysis of the intelligence that the IEMs gather through their engagement, ensuring that it never exists in a vacuum, but is brought together to provide real insight for the policy teams at RE and UKRI more widely. The I&E Team will connect with engagement leads from the Research Councils and Innovate UK in order to share and triangulate this intelligence, maximise learning and minimise the risk of duplication, ensuring that our engagement activities dovetail wherever possible.

The I&E Team also works closely with RE's Head of University Sector Health and Head of Sustainability and Efficiency, who look for and analyse trends and patterns in the sector-wide picture, engaging with regulatory bodies such as the OfS, devolved funders, mission groups, representative groups and other



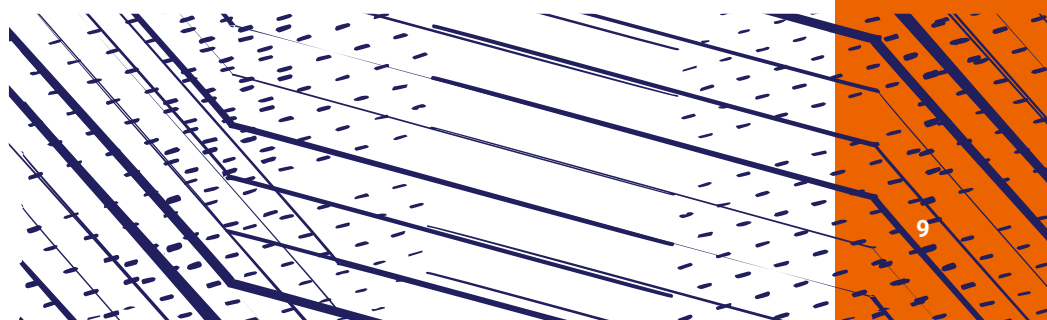
organisational actors in HE. RE's Analysis Team and Funding and Assurance Manager provide further aggregated or individualised quantitative data on institutional financial performance. The effect of this cumulative quantitative (institutional or sector-level) analysis is to support our understanding of how institutions sit within the sector. Cross-referencing this data with our institutional intelligence strengthens our ability to produce robust evidence that can be used to influence policy decisions.

Alongside these individuals, RE policy teams will engage with universities on policy-specific topics or particular funding streams where they have expertise. This means that our universities have access to specialist information where needed. We liaise closely with RE's policy teams to share insight and intelligence. RE's Research, Knowledge Exchange, and I&E Teams have all contributed to the development of this Strategy.

RE's Council is made up of professionals from a wide range of backgrounds, including the HE sector, making them an invaluable resource for testing our ideas, providing expert advice on our direction and strategy, and challenging us in monitoring progress against our objectives. Council members are informed by their own professional work and diverse institutions. They can act as a temperature check for RE's activities as well as an engagement conduit in their own right. The Council has overseen the development of this Strategy and will continue to be a key resource in our evaluation of its success.

In our Executive Chair, David Sweeney, RE has a well-respected and engaged leader. The I&E Team work closely with the Executive Office to ensure that key intelligence is shared usefully and appropriately.

As a small team within a small organisation, we recognise that the I&E Team needs to carefully manage its finite resources and prioritise its engagement activity effectively. Our engagement incorporates a range of methods of interaction and dialogue. This includes our biannual Engagement Forums, which are designed as an opportunity to explore big issues in the research sector, discuss institutional responses to policy developments and to network. Our IEMs also carry out one-to-one interactions with institutions and may, at times, meet with groups of institutions based on their geographic location, or common interests, challenges or opportunities. In deciding how best to use our resource, we will take into account a number of factors. These include, but are not limited to: our objectives as set out in the previous chapter; information about the size, type and strategy of institutions; and what we aim to achieve through engagement on behalf of our internal stakeholders. Any activity that involves prioritising our resource in this way will be informed by the EIA that accompanies this Strategy.





# Evaluation of Our Engagement

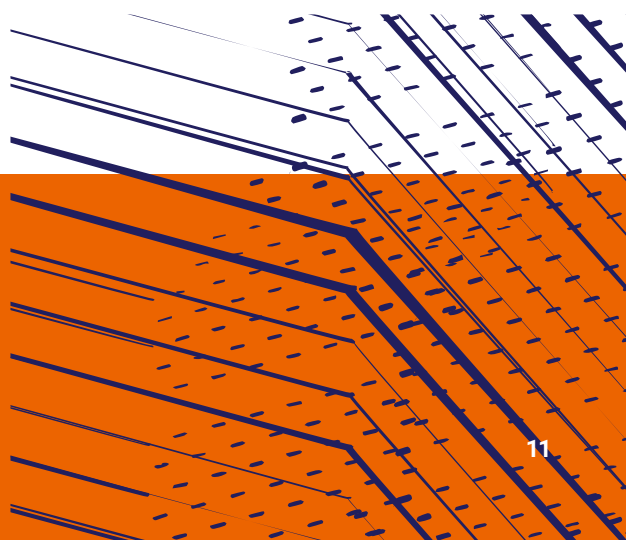
To ensure that we discharge the commitments of this Strategy effectively, we commit to regularly evaluating our progress against our objectives. Our longer term intention is to implement an evaluative framework, aligned to wider evaluation processes across UKRI. Initially, the I&E Team will identify indicators of successful engagement and measure how well we are delivering this Strategy, considering the following questions:

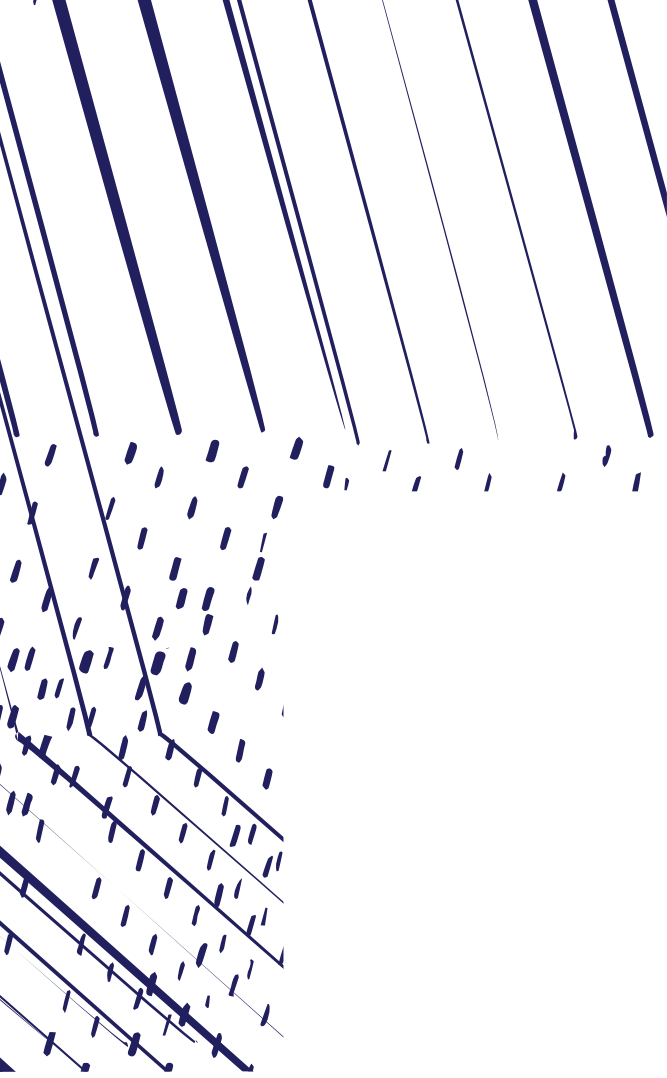
- Are we well-informed and well-placed to brief leaders about the key issues, strengths, risks and trends across the HE sector?
- Do research and knowledge exchange policy leads access and interrogate our pool of intelligence and how does this intelligence influence and inform RE's decisions and policies?
- Is engagement evidence adding value to other RE policy workstreams, such as the sustainability and health of the sector?
- Does our engagement function identify and promote examples of effective practice within the sector?
- Does RE have a diverse pool of examples 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 HE sector?
- Has our engagement enabled institutions to begin to build relationships with each other, through the growth of networks/consortia?

By asking ourselves these challenging questions and comparing our internal analyses, we aim to triangulate information and experiences across RE and UKRI. 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 institutions through to the end of the Academic Year 2021/22, coinciding with the results of REF 2021, which are due for publication at the end of 2021. This should provide a timely opportunity to re-evaluate, refresh and, if necessary, redraw our Engagement Strategy in line with new government policy objectives and with the information provided by the REF.

However, we recognise the current uncertainty in our political situation, particularly in relation to exiting the European Union, as well as other areas of significant concern for the HE sector. We will, therefore, be agile and responsive to changes that impact on the sector. We will use our annual evaluations as a catalyst to refresh or update this Strategy to better reflect the policy environment and priorities of RE, ensuring it remains a living document that is fit for purpose. These annual evaluations will be supported by existing and ongoing data gathering and analysis within RE, and aligned with wider evaluation processes across UKRI.





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