

GuildHE response to:

Research, development, and innovation landscape review

24 February 2022

About GuildHE

GuildHE is an officially recognised representative body for UK Higher Education. Our members are universities, university colleges and other institutions, each with a distinctive mission and priorities. They work closely with industries and professions and include major providers in technical and professional subject areas such as art, design and media, music and the performing arts; agriculture, food and the natural environment; the built environment; education; law; health and sports. Many are global organisations engaged in significant partnerships and producing locally relevant and world-leading research.

Opening Comment

1. We welcome the opportunity to engage with the review. This response combines our experience and that of our members; specifically those 30 institutions involved in our dedicated research consortium for smaller and specialist universities and colleges.
2. Smaller and specialist institutions represent pockets of research excellence, spread geographically across almost all regions of the UK. These institutions have a vital role to play in the RDI landscape, including giving access to research careers in higher education ‘cold spots’, engaging mature learners in research, sustaining research specialisms in diverse disciplines, and connecting those specialisms with industry and the third sector.
3. Whilst we acknowledge that this review is expressly focussed on the landscape for RDI and not mechanisms for funding, we would like to emphasise how interlinked these are. The current landscape is a result of mechanisms for funding, and any changes to that landscape will be driven by those mechanisms. For institutions that are less well established in research or the research base of which is specialised or smaller in scale, mechanisms for funding will be the determining factor as to how, to what extent, and with what level of success they are able to play their part in the RDI landscape.
4. We would therefore encourage the review to consider ways in which the landscape could be enhanced by enabling such institutions to engage more fully and become a more valued part of the system. This could be achieved through targeted initiatives that actively encourage collaborations that equitably include diverse institutions, supporting the development of capacity to innovate, and a move away from unnecessary reliance on competition between institutions of uneven capacity to compete. It would also be enabled by stability and coherence in policy, allowing initiatives to truly ‘bed in’, and a positive appreciation of existing institutions to avoid rushing to reinvent the wheel.

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Smaller and specialist RPOs and the wider landscape

There are a variety of research-performing organisations in the UK and this is an acknowledged strength; there is critical interest and debate in issues ranging from STEM to Arts and Culture, and that plurality, as well as the range of perspectives brought to bear on these topics by such a broad range of research entities is valuable. Smaller and specialist universities play a vital role within this landscape, but one that can be hidden from view; as they are not typically recipients of large research funding grants or newsworthy fellowships, they are not the institutions which come to the forefront in the public imagination, and even amongst funders of research. It is however important not to overlook them, and to ensure they are supported to continue and extend the role that they play.

Located in diverse geographic regions, and in some cases in 'cold-spots' of higher education provision, these institutions can provide students, staff, and external partners with access to research and research careers that would otherwise not exist. Even when not located in under-served locations and perhaps part of a larger metropolitan area, smaller and specialist institutions engage with their communities differently, making research accessible to different kinds of organisations and students; we know that more of our postgraduate research students are part-time, mature learners, often consolidating professional experience and making that applied knowledge available to the research ecosystem.

Crucially, such institutions sustain research in specialist areas across a diverse range of disciplines. Harper Adams University, for example and further outlined in the box below, is a beacon for research and innovation in agricultural science, developing world-class projects such as the Hands Free Hectare that belie the scale of the institution. Royal Central School of Speech and Drama have pioneered research methodologies in participatory research and community development in global contexts, drawn from their rich seam of specialism in theatre and performing arts. Specialist research areas sit in close connection to teaching and knowledge exchange, and innovation results.

Harper Adams is a small specialist institution focusing on higher education and research for the delivery of sustainable food chains and the protection of rural resources for future generations. As a small institution we can focus our research in specific areas of agriculture and the wider environment. Because of this specialism it allows us to have clear connections with rural businesses both small and large and with the agri-food supply chain. This connection is developed at many levels including larger strategic alliances (School of Sustainable Food and Farming) to individual business (Alltech, Saputo, TAFE, G's Fresh). This allows us to be flexible in the support we give to the wider community through our research with a particular focus on helping agri-food businesses with achieving their NetZero ambitions. In order to drive our collaborative research with business we have a team of Business Development Managers. A benefit of this approach is the high number of apprenticeships we are able to offer to our students with local and national businesses.

Challenges in the current RDI Landscape

This role is however a challenge to sustain in the current landscape. There are significant barriers to engaging with others in the research community, some internal, some external, that limit their potential.

Infrastructure: Building infrastructure to manage and capitalise on research activity is an issue that is sector wide, but perhaps one that is felt sharply by research environments that are establishing these for the first time. Costs for infrastructure can easily outstrip available resource, and shared services are few; most proprietary systems for research information, outputs or impact are built with much larger

organisations in mind. This challenge to keep pace with technology around the RDI landscape can constrain institutions' ability to find, enter into, and compete for opportunities.

Balancing institutional priorities: Such institutions have emergent or consolidating research environments, within a teaching-intensive structure. This means in practical terms that they must continually balance priorities within very lean teams, and rely on a staff body whose main priority is teaching. Developing research and innovation activities is dependent on the resilience of staff to take on additional business engagement or research work, and find time to research, apply for funding and forge collaborations; under current conditions, including funding mechanisms, this is a significant challenge. Many are also working hard to reach and achieve benchmarks that help them demonstrate their research excellence and capability, including RDAP and HR Excellence in Research awards, alongside submitting to REF. With the exception of REF, this is a portfolio of competing demands on institutional time which others in the HEI landscape do not have.

Competition-led Landscape

It is common for many funds, even those directed toward wicked problems such as equality and diversity, to be organised and won by competition. There are of course sound arguments and long precedent for doing so. However, competition within RDI is not an even game. With few exceptions this reliance on competitive allocations favour established institutions with significant scale and research intensity. Institutions may have proven their research excellence and quality, yet they are at a disadvantage in an open competition due to the scale of their research environment and depth of experience in the system.

Instability in policy

A landscape supported by consistent and coherent policy aims has more chance of succeeding in reaching those aims. It can be a significant challenge for institutions to redistribute effort when policy directions change, and whilst this is felt across all RPOs, it can be especially disorienting for smaller research environments. The recent cuts to GCRF and the abandonment of the Industrial Strategy are good examples of where lean research operations can really struggle to keep pace, and where good work is suddenly lost. Conversely, the rapid adoption of new directions and allocation of resources in tight time frames, such as the single year HEIF and QR allocations to support research culture, whilst very welcome, present a different kind of challenge. In an RDI system the time to develop projects and embed impact is essential to create conditions whereby diverse RPOs can engage effectively.

Enabling engagement for all in the RDI Landscape

It strikes us that there are ways to help more organisations of differing missions, scales, and disciplinary focus participate more effectively in the RDI Landscape in the UK. Some of the ideas illustrated below have some reliance on funding mechanisms; as stated previously, it is challenging to disentangle funding from the success of RPOs. Yet funding aside, these all represent reconceptualisations of the status quo which could be enacted through policies, processes and procedures, those of RPOs themselves, of government, and of 'stewards of the system'.

Prioritise initiatives that encourage collaborations that equitably include diverse institutions

There should be real terms incentives for research intensive RPOs to collaborate with a more diverse range of other institutions in the RDI Landscape, and to do so equitably, for example by involving all partners in projects from the point of inception. This would strengthen the capacity of UK R&D to open up spaces for collaboration between different parts of the system, recognising the different strengths made

available by diverse scales of operation and the communities those entities engage with. The dominance of competition needs to be balanced out by emphasising co-creation and collaboration.

Support institutions to develop more capacity to innovate

Smaller and specialist institutions are ripe for developing innovations and commercialising research, but they have seen significant interruptions in the support available to embed and extend this work. As discussed above external support is needed to stimulate this activity; otherwise other very important institutional priorities will often win out. For example, external training and support would be advantageous for institutions who have not substantially entered the innovation marketplace but have the potential and desire to do so. A deeper understanding of how the UK's strengths in SHAPE subjects can be leveraged for innovation needs to be developed, with clear articulations of those disciplines' contributions that is not derived from the discourse and arguments employed to talk about STEM. Specialist institutions have a real role to play with helping the whole system truly appreciate this.

Dispense with reliance on competition between institutions of uneven capacity to compete

In light of the Levelling Up agenda and the People and Culture Strategy, there are clearly significant drivers to improve the culture of research, value all those involved, and spread benefits across more areas of the country. It is therefore time to rely less on competition between RPOs. It is tempting to see competitive approaches as inherently fair, and yet it is fairly apparent from recent work on equality and diversity that open competition sits on top of other systems of privilege and inequality. The review has the opportunity to consider the system from a unique perspective and we encourage an objective consideration of the ways in which all RPOs may benefit from a reimagining of the status quo.

Create stability and coherence in policy

Research is a long term endeavour. Whilst we recognise the need to adopt new priorities to reflect society and culture, there has been in recent years a range of policy driven initiatives which have started so fast institutions have had a hard time keeping up, and been abandoned before the results can be appreciated. This is unhelpful for a healthy system and builds a sense of disorientation amongst those working in RDI. Understanding optimum conditions for RPOs to engage with policy is something the review has the opportunity to articulate.

Strength in Diversity

The RDI Landscape of RPOs is diverse and that is something to be celebrated and utilised. Indeed that diversity is essential to embarking upon research and innovation that relates to and works with and for the society, the economy, and culture as it exists in the world around us. Appreciating what exists is a consistent theme of this response. We are keenly aware of the rigour and effort of those we work with to create healthy, effective research environments, to engage in innovation and with businesses and professions, to sustain specialist inquiry, and to enable individuals to access research careers who might otherwise have decided 'it's not for them'.¹

We urge the review to take account of smaller and specialist universities and colleges, and to consider how the RDI Landscape can be supported and encouraged to appreciate their networks, communities, talents, and skills.

¹ For further discussion of the experiences of researchers from diverse background in postgraduate research see: *Understanding the lived experience of ethnic minority students in postgraduate research*, Aliyu et al, GuildHE and Institute of Community Studies, 2022.
<https://research.guildhe.ac.uk/2022/01/31/understanding-the-lived-experience-of-ethnic-minority-students-in-postgraduate-research/>