

University Research & Regional Levelling-Up Inquiry Higher Education Commission

London Higher Submission

The following submission is based on views and opinions collected from across the London Higher membership, which comprises over forty higher education institutions of different sizes, local London geographies and specialisms. As a result, the views presented will not necessarily be shared by all our members and, instead, this submission should be seen as a snapshot of the diverse viewpoints and positions represented across our wide membership.

The higher education sector in London is as diverse as the city itself, comprising a wide range of institutional types, focuses and specialities. These range from long-established, well-known higher education institutions to more modern “post-92” institutions and small specialists. Across London’s higher education and research landscape, there are institutions and fields of research which are internationally recognised for their research excellence. All of London’s higher education and research institutions engage in a wide range of research activities, from “pure” or “blue sky” research to “applied” research, as well as that conducted with business and local communities.

Measuring impact

Criticism that London, as part of the so-called “Golden Triangle”, already receives a high amount of research and development (R&D) investment misses the point that London’s higher education institutions and research-performing organisations are able to achieve substantial impact with this investment. The impact of London’s higher education and research institutions is felt, within London, the UK regions and internationally. Although this cannot, at present, be observed through existing data collections, several London universities are nevertheless working hard to ensure that their research impacts on other UK regions are better captured, particularly when these benefits reach areas outside Greater London and the South-East.

University College London (UCL) is one such case in point, as the institution has recently appointed a Pro Vice Provost for the United Kingdom to help capture domestic impact activities and further develop regional relationships across the country. For this reason, we recommend that it would be beneficial to look not simply at which regions receive research funding, but also which regions benefit from research outputs and impact.

As highlighted in a recent [report](#) from UCL, the geographic concentration of research funding is a characteristic of research globally, rather than an idiosyncrasy of the UK system, with the level of regional concentration in the UK less than that in other major research nations. Indeed, the picture of R&D concentration also varies with the granularity of the data, and comparisons between regions can mask significant variation in funding within regions. This is true within the Greater London region, as inequalities exist between different boroughs and different types of institutions. Therefore, the UK needs to look beyond overall investment levels in each region to contextualise the disparities that exist within each region.

Access to research funding

To further maximise the benefits of research funding in the UK, we should ensure that UK R&D funding streams are accessible to all types of higher education and research institutions regardless of institutional background, pedigree, and preference for fields of research.

It is imperative that institutions which may not be traditionally recognised as “research-intensive” should not be disincentivised from applying for research funding, as these institutions and their researchers often bring unique skills, perspectives and opportunities. Furthermore, more modern, technical and vocational institutions have often sought for differentiation in the sector and have established additional funding mechanisms through strong linkages with industry.

Anecdotal evidence collected from the London Higher membership reveals, for example, that researchers from more modern higher education institutions in the capital are less likely to bid for Research Council funding – although, when they do so, their research outputs can be more practical and applied in nature than those of traditionally more “research-active” institutions due to their proximity to industry and their local communities. Having, by and large, a younger, early career researcher (ECR) population, these “teaching-focused” institutions are also less likely to be in a position to bid for and win some of the larger funding calls. Building the research talent pipeline at more senior researcher levels, although an ambition shared by these institutions, will inevitably be a slow process. So, more needs to be done to ensure parity of access to major funding sources for researchers, irrespective of host institution-type.

The allocation of funding also needs to be reflective of the enormous potential that certain sectors can have to drive innovation and economic growth in the capital – addressing any current shortcomings in investment in these areas. As it stands, the creative industries are largely excluded from R&D funding and tax credits, yet they contributed £117.7 billion to the UK economy in 2018, up 7.4 per cent from the previous year and with a growth rate five times larger than that of the UK economy as a whole. The creative industries are also a particular strength of the Greater London region, with its wealth of theatres, galleries and studios.

“[Createch](#)”, where creativity and technology meet to create new ways of engaging with industry and inspiring business investment, is testament to the enormous value R&D in the creative industries can bring, both to London and the country at large, making the UK a world leader in an exciting emergent field. At London Higher, we believe now is the chance to further explore the opportunities of R&D in the creative sector and the interplay with technology and science – especially in London, given the city’s wealth of creative research potential and status as a global creative hub. This is an area of largely untapped R&D potential for the UK, and should be prioritised going forward.

Regional engagement

It is of particular concern that not all of the major Research Councils have London or South-East regional engagement leads, as demonstrated by the [EPSRC](#), for example, which has leads for Scotland, Northern Ireland, the North West and Wales. Leaving London out of the equation means we are at risk of overlooking the specific needs of the capital and not enhancing the parts of the city’s innovation ecosystem that need it. The Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority (GLA) do a huge amount to support R&D activity across the capital, but involving the London authorities in strategic advisory procedures and decision-making processes with Research Councils at an early stage could ensure investment is better targeted toward the city’s strengths and needs and will help the Councils to understand specific regional sector clusters. London Higher recommends that regional leads should be established for all Research Councils and all regions within the UK, including London.

R&D activity is particularly important as the national economy looks to recover after Covid. The provision and allocation of R&D funding is, therefore, essential to maximise the economic gain. At

London Higher, we firmly believe there can be no strong national bounce-back without a strong London bounce-back. So, to facilitate a more balanced and needs-driven approach to investment, there should be further devolution of control to the bodies closer to the city's R&D activity, as this would allow the various Research Councils in charge of administering large portions of the UK's R&D funding to be more reflective and targeted in its funding.

It is, therefore, our belief that Research Councils should work with local authorities, such as the GLA, to understand how regional sector clusters are developing, and what interventions may be needed to make these thrive. Intelligence sharing between the funding Councils and local authorities may help funders take better account of local communities and economies when making decisions. This is also an approach that would not just benefit the Greater London region, but also those with other Metro Mayors and regional R&D accelerators, such as the Midlands Engine and the Northern Powerhouse – organisations which the Greater London region currently lacks.

Industry and academic collaboration

Another important step in enabling more collaboration between universities and industry is the widening of the scope of R&D tax credits to incentivise development in new creative ideas. The broadening of this definition can catalyse innovation and will go some way to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, in terms of promoting partnerships, what would be beneficial would be for additional resources to be released into university-stakeholder partnerships, as a mechanism to forge and encourage new collaborations. This could operate as a regional catalyst fund, introducing a local element to better enable and facilitate these discussions, in addition to supporting the UK Research Investment Partnership Fund to incentivise industry and higher education institution collaborations.

Levelling up

It is essential that the Government's "levelling up" agenda does not mean levelling down for London and that we work to maintain, not lessen, the strengths of the London R&D ecosystem. First, bringing down London is not going to benefit other UK regions, but indeed further disadvantage them, particularly if they are reliant on research partnerships and collaborations with established London partners. Second, any attempt to remove R&D resource from London and redistribute it elsewhere ignores the micro-level disparities that exist within and between the different London postcodes. Some areas of London are among the most deprived areas of the UK and, beneath the façade of a seemingly wealthy region, lies individuals and communities in extreme pockets of deprivation. These areas deserve to benefit from increased research investment too, adding strength to the argument for place-based and needs-based approaches to future funding allocations.

Conclusion

It is our view that any evaluation of regional R&D activities, and any subsequent changes to national funding mechanisms, should emphasise:

- the overall impact of individual research projects, rather than the collective level of investment received by each region;
- the ability of all institutions to access research funding regardless of reputation, location, or fields of research;
- the establishment of regional leads for all Research Councils and all regions within the UK, including London;

- deeper and more meaningful engagement between Research Councils and local authorities to better understand regional and local needs;
- the creation of a mechanism (hereto undefined) to increase industry and higher education and research institution collaboration; and
- a commitment that levelling up is an inclusive, UK-wide initiative, which does not level up particular regions at the expense of others (i.e. London).

Although each UK region shares different research strengths and capabilities, we are ultimately all working towards the same goal of a strong and successful UK R&D base. That is why taking regional approaches to addressing existing weaknesses and bolstering emerging strengths is the only genuine way of “levelling up” R&D funding and ensuring each part of the UK, including London, can build back better for the future.