

The British Academy – the UK’s national academy for the humanities and social sciences – convenes the second annual SHAPE Conference at a moment of rapid change and opportunity for our sector.

The past year has brought significant policy reforms and emerging proposals that are reshaping the higher education and research environment. For the SHAPE disciplines, this brings both challenge and possibility, and a renewed need for spaces that spark fresh thinking and collective action.

SHAPE Conference 2026: Fuel for Thought provides a dedicated space to examine these developments, reflect on their implications, and consider how we can respond with shared purpose and collective leadership. It is designed to ignite debate, energise our community, and equip us to drive forward the changes our disciplines need. As one of the four national academies, we see stewardship of this landscape as part of our responsibility: to champion these disciplines, to support their communities, and to help shape a system that enables them to thrive.

Today, we welcome academics, policy professionals, subject advocates, university leaders, early career researchers, civil servants, funders and all those invested in the future of SHAPE. Together, we will strengthen our collective voice, create new connections, and build our shared future.

British Academy Higher Education & Research Policy team

This conference has been organised by the Higher Education & Research team, which sits as part of the British Academy’s Policy Directorate. We work to strengthen the SHAPE disciplines and demonstrate their value, and, through our SHAPE Observatory, we monitor disciplinary health across the education pipeline, building a robust evidence base to assess what is happening and what this affects.



**Scan to find out more
about SHAPE Observatory**

British Academy SHAPE Conference

Fuel for thought



Sponsored by

**Arts &
Humanities
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WILEY

Programme of events



9:00-9:30 – Welcome

Lee Library

Arrivals with tea, coffee and light breakfast options

09.30-10.00 – Opening plenary

SHAPE Room

- Welcome from Susan J. Smith, President of the British Academy
- Keynote from Lord Vallance, Minister of State for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear

10.00-11.15 – Panel discussions

Option one: Learning from our own history

SHAPE Room

Looking back on higher education and research reforms, what succeeded, what failed, and what drives lasting change in the sector?

- Chair: Hetan Shah, The British Academy
- Philip Augar
- Shirley Pearce
- Vivienne Stern, Universities UK
- Adam Tickell, University of Birmingham

Option two: Precarity then and now

Lecture Room

Reflecting on the evolving challenges for early-career researchers since the launch of the British Academy's Postdoctoral Fellowships in 1986.

- Chair: Evelyn Welch, University of Bristol
- William Allen, University of Southampton
- Mike Braddick FBA, University of Oxford
- Daisy Ogembo, International Centre for Tax & Development

Option three: What's on the horizon for international collaboration?

Wohl Gallery

With the next EU Framework Programme approaching, reductions in aid funding, and the Government's new buckets approach to be implemented, what will be the impacts for the SHAPE disciplines and how can they respond?

- Chair: Harriet Bulkeley FBA, University of Durham / Utrecht University
- Marie Adams, University of Leicester
- Philip Lewis, The British Academy
- Christopher Smith, AHRC
- Martin Smith, Wellcome

11.15-11.35 Break and refreshments – Lee Library and Reading Room

11:35-12.30 – Debates

Option one: Do the right number of people go to university?

SHAPE Room

Debating access to higher education – why it matters, who's excluded, and what the future might hold.

- Chair: Margot Finn FBA, University College London
- Jess Lister, Public First
- Andy Westwood, University of Manchester

Option two: Is 'responsible' AI ever truly possible in research?

Lecture Room

Exploring how AI is transforming research – is responsible, ethical, and transparent use possible?

- Chair: Christina Boswell FBA, University of Edinburgh
- Tom Stoneham, University of York
- Oonagh Murphy, Goldsmiths, University of London

12:30-13:30 Lunch – Lee Library and Reading Room

13:30-14.15 – 10-Minute talks

Option one: Myth busting for the public

SHAPE Room

Despite evidence that higher education – including SHAPE – is valuable, public perception remains critical. Hear how this can be challenged.

- Chair: Emma Cayley, Arts and Humanities Alliance
- Rita Gardner, Academy of Social Sciences
- Seb Gordon, Universities UK
- Jenny Richards FBA, University of Cambridge

Option two: On the ground: stories of engagement

Lecture Room

Universities use SHAPE to have impact through teaching, research and community engagement. Learn what this looks like in different places.

- Chair: Ruairi Cullen, The British Academy
- Duncan Morrow, Ulster University
- Vanessa Toulmin, University of Sheffield
- David Worthington, University of the Highlands and Islands

14.20-15.40 – Workshops

Option one: How do we change whose voices we hear in SHAPE research?

Lecture Room

A strategy session where attendees build advocacy strategies to change whose voices are heard and valued in SHAPE research. Led by British Academy staff with opening contributions from experts:

- Jaya Gajparia

- Alex Lewis, The British Academy
- Isabella Mascarenhas, Black Researcher Consortium

Option two: How should we prepare the sector for changing political priorities?

Beatrice Webb Room

A scenario planning session where attendees consider how the sector could react to political change. Led by British Academy staff with opening contributions from experts:

- Jess Lister, Public First
- Rebecca Hill, Campaign for Science and Engineering - CaSE
- Huw Morris, University College London

Option three: How could we build the universities of the future?

Wohl Gallery

An activity session where attendees explore and create models for future universities, based on possible functions and purposes. Facilitated and led by British Academy staff.

15:40-16:00 Break and refreshments – Lee Library and Reading Room

16:00-17.00 – Closing plenary

Higher education and research in society: telling a better story

SHAPE Room

- Chair: Samira Ahmed
- Susan J. Smith, President of the British Academy
- Malcolm Press, Manchester Metropolitan University / Universities UK

17:00-19:00 Drinks reception – Wohl Gallery



Scan to find out more about the speakers