

Autumn budget 2026 – Stakeholder Representation – The British Academy

The British Academy recommends that Government:

- **Protect the record £22.6bn for R&D awarded in the 2025 Spending Review and strengthen investment in discovery-led research** across all disciplines, recognising it as a strategic national asset and a foundation of future growth.
- **Establish a sustainable long-term funding settlement for higher education** that supports teaching, research, and universities' civic contribution.
- **Invest with no detriment to the Spending Review settlement in global research collaboration and the UK-EU reset through committing to associating to Framework Programme 10 (FP10)** as soon as possible to provide stability for the sector.
- **Maintain the UK's attractiveness to international research talent**, recognising that international mobility, competitive visa routes and a welcoming research environment remain essential components of a successful research system.
- **Strengthen regional education, research, innovation and civic capacity** as a foundation for inclusive economic growth across all parts of the UK.

To achieve these five priorities, the Academy recommends that Government invest holistically in the UK's knowledge base to support inclusive growth, national resilience and opportunity.

The Government's ambitions for economic growth, prosperity in every postcode, public service reform, and national resilience and renewal depend on the UK's ability to generate, apply and diffuse knowledge.

Research and innovation are among the UK's [greatest strategic assets](#). Universities educate a [highly skilled workforce](#), generate [world-leading research](#), [support innovation](#), [strengthen communities](#) and attract [international investment](#). Yet the foundations which underpin these strengths face increasing pressure.

Universities continue to experience significant financial challenges. Discovery-led research is becoming more vulnerable. Research and innovation capacity remains unevenly distributed across the UK, in part due to a [history](#) of too many small-scale, short-term and competitive place-based funding schemes, raising important questions about how future investment can strengthen regional ecosystems while maintaining excellence. At the same time, the UK must secure its place in the next generation of international research collaborations in order to maintain its [comparative strategic advantage](#).

These challenges are interconnected. Strong universities enable excellent research; excellent research drives innovation; and innovation supports productivity and growth.

The [successful adoption of new technologies](#) depends not only on scientific advances, but also on understanding people, institutions, communities and behaviour. The humanities and social sciences are central to this agenda. As the UK seeks to harness artificial intelligence, strengthen public services, improve productivity and support growth across all regions, understanding culture, trust, governance, ethics, behaviour and skills is becoming an increasingly important national advantage.

As the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, the British Academy works with researchers, policymakers, business and civil society to ensure that evidence informs decision making and supports long-term national prosperity.

1. Protect discovery-led research as a strategic national asset

The UK has built an internationally respected research system founded on excellence, curiosity and openness. This strength derives from sustained investment in fundamental research – by which we mean experimental or theoretical work undertaken primarily to gain knowledge without any direct practical application or use in view – as well as talented researchers and institutions capable of pursuing long-term inquiry.

Many of the most significant technological, social and economic advances emerge from research whose ultimate applications were neither obvious nor predictable at the outset. For example, philosophical [research](#) at the University of Oxford has helped shape international approaches to AI governance and safety; British Academy funded education [research](#) at the University of Reading has transformed literacy policy and classroom practice affecting millions of children in the UK and internationally; and languages [research](#) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council revolutionised the treatment of interpreters in war.

Discovery research therefore represents one of the most important long-term investments a nation can make, including in the humanities and social sciences. New knowledge about trust, democratic resilience, migration, education, labour markets, AI adoption, social mobility, cultural participation, place-based renewal and behavioural change will be central to meeting the UK's policy challenges over the coming decade.

However, UK research is increasingly under pressure. Universities, where most discovery research takes place, face growing financial constraints. As institutional resources become more stretched, the ability to sustain capacity and capability for long-term research is at risk. Protecting research and innovation cannot be done effectively without taking cognisance of the financial and staffing constraints being experienced in institutions. This represents a strategic challenge. Research capability can take decades

to build but can be lost quickly. Once expertise, talent pipelines and institutional capacity are weakened, rebuilding them is difficult and costly. This loss has already been felt in the languages community: the erosion of world-class expertise in languages and cultures, including in regions central to the UK's international relationships and strategic interests, has undermined [soft power](#), [trade revenue](#), and [workforce agility](#).

Sustained support for discovery-led research should be accompanied by efforts to strengthen research capacity across the UK's nations and regions, ensuring that the benefits of research are felt in every part of the country.

To address these challenges, we call for the Government to:

- **Maintain and increase investment in discovery-led research** across all disciplines, through quality related allocations, while ensuring universities have the financial stability required to sustain the research ecosystem on which future innovation depends.
- **Provide a funding system that supports excellent research** wherever it is found, while strengthening research and innovation capacity across the UK's nations and regions.
- **Recognise the strategic contribution of SHAPE disciplines** to national priorities, economic growth and public policy.
- **Provide stronger support for museums, libraries and archives** as essential research infrastructure.

To support the Government, the British Academy is already:

- **Distributing over £37m of discovery research funding in 25/26**
- **Supporting the next generation of researchers** through our [Post Doctoral Fellowships](#), [International Fellowships](#), and [Early Career Researcher Network \(ECRN\)](#)
- **Ensuring that we are attracting and retaining the very best talent through our discovery led fellowship awards** and supporting the flourishing of new ideas and partnerships through our [Small Research Grants Programme](#)

2. Secure the future of higher education

Universities are among the UK's most important strategic assets. They educate future generations, undertake [world-leading](#) research, support local [economies](#), provide critical [social infrastructure](#), and contribute [directly](#) to productivity and growth. Their impact extends well beyond campuses through the development of skills, attraction of investment, support for innovation and strengthening of civic and cultural life across the

country. Every £1 of public [investment in the higher education sector](#) generates £14 for the UK economy, contributing to a total annual economic impact of £265 billion.

Yet the financial position of the sector is increasingly fragile. Rising costs, infrastructure pressures, changing demand and uncertainty across income streams are weakening the cross-subsidies that sustain teaching, research, and wider civic contribution. The Office for Students [projects](#) a net reduction in annual tuition fee income of almost **£438 million**, with nearly half of providers expected to be in deficit.

These pressures are already affecting staffing, courses and research capacity, particularly in disciplines and places where provision is fragile. [Evidence](#) from the British Academy's SHAPE Observatory shows that parts of the UK – particularly coastal, rural and historically underserved parts – are becoming disciplinary “cold spots” where students can no longer access particular subjects within a commutable distance. This risks narrowing opportunity, weakening local skills pipelines and reducing the research and civic capacity needed for growth.

The risks extend beyond higher education itself. Where disciplinary capacity is lost, places lose access to expertise, research capability, cultural assets and workforce skills that support innovation, productivity and public service improvement. Universities also [serve as anchor institutions](#) within their communities and regions, strengthening local partnerships, supporting social and cultural infrastructure, and helping to build trust, participation, and civic capacity. If current trends continue, there is a danger that areas with the greatest need for growth and opportunity will become those least able to draw upon the institutions that support it.

Government should now move beyond short-term interventions and develop a sustainable long-term framework capable of supporting teaching, research and civic engagement for the decades ahead.

To address these challenges, we call for the Government to:

- **Establish a long-term review** of higher education funding and sustainability to develop a stable funding framework that reflects the full contribution universities make to society and the economy.
- **Protect the geographic breadth and disciplinary diversity** of provision across the UK through a [market monitoring function](#) tracking and funding “at risk” subjects by region.
- **Recognise universities as vital civic, cultural and economic infrastructure** that support local growth and opportunity.
- **Improve collaboration across ministerial portfolios in England and devolved governments** to better align higher education and research policy.

To support the Government, the British Academy is already:

- **Delivering the [SHAPE Observatory](#)**, which brings together system-wide data on the health of the humanities and social sciences to support policy development on research, education, staff, and students.
- **Deploying evidence from the SHAPE disciplines** to offer insights and solutions to the crisis in higher education and research, benefitting all subjects, students and staff.
- **Equipping the sector with [data visualisation and analysis tools](#)** to demonstrate the collective impact of individual institution decision making on student access and the knock-on effects on graduate outcomes and the UK skills base.

3. Invest in global research collaboration through Framework Programme 10

International collaboration is a defining feature of excellent research and innovation. The UK's association to Horizon Europe has helped rebuild partnerships, networks and opportunities that benefit researchers, businesses and communities across the country. Participation in major international programmes, including EU Framework Programmes, enables access to expertise, talent and collaborative opportunities that cannot be replicated through national investment alone, and helps sustain the continued excellence and leadership of UK research.

As discussions on Framework Programme 10 (FP10), the successor to Horizon Europe, continue, the UK should demonstrate clear strategic ambition. Government has [previously recognised](#) the value of engagement with FP10 and the British Academy believes that immediate clarity regarding future association would provide important confidence to institutions, researchers and international partners. This is essential as plans to develop consortia will begin before 2028 and Government needs to overcome past uncertainty to provide UK-based researchers with the best opportunity to continue the upward trajectory being seen in Horizon Europe.

FP10 association is critical to ensuring access to the European Research Council (ERC), a leading funder of discovery research that enables the UK to attract and retain the very best researchers. The scale, competition and expert global peer review the ERC provides cannot be replicated domestically and it is vital that the UK research base remains fully engaged with the opportunities the ERC provides.

To address these challenges, we call for the Government to:

- **Commit now to associating to FP10 from its start date**, without any discontinuity and with no detriment to the 2025 Spending Review settlement, so

as to provide stability to the sector and the ability to plan partnerships and consortia with counterparts elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

- **Provide consistent funding to boost participation in Horizon Europe and future EU Framework Programmes** for Research and Innovation through regular multi-annual pump-priming calls and additional expert resource to support applicants and their institutions
- **Work with the sector to deliver association to the next EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation** including through a specific group focused on advising on FP10 association and strategy for participation
- **Engage with the sector on the opportunities presented by the European Competitiveness Fund** and options for association or partial association

To support the Government, the British Academy is already:

- **Boosting participation in Horizon Europe** to reintegrate UK-based researchers into EU programmes and networks through pump priming grants for Pillar 2 collaboration, webinars advising on how to apply to the European Research Council and dedicated regional sessions for researchers to learn from successful award holders.
- **Working in Brussels to influence the direction of the next EU Framework Programme** through engaging with the European Commission, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and sector bodies so the UK can associate as swiftly as possible.

4. Maintain the UK's attractiveness to international research talent

The UK's research competitiveness also depends on its ability to attract, retain and develop world-leading talent. International mobility, competitive visa routes and a welcoming research environment remain essential components of a successful research system. Maintaining the UK's attractiveness to researchers from around the world should remain a strategic priority.

The UK's research strength depends on the international connectedness of its research base. Moreover, research and innovation are increasingly central to national competitiveness, security, and international influence. While UK policy often framed strategic advantage in terms of emerging and frontier technologies, the SHAPE disciplines are a major, underleveraged source of international strength. UK SHAPE research is highly influential internationally, at levels comparable to the US, and significantly ahead of China, including in business partnerships and collaborative research linked innovation.

The UK has consistently ranked third or fourth position globally in its share of Global Research Output and Global Citations in [SHAPE disciplines](#). UK SHAPE research has also shown exceptional resilience in the face of China's rising influence compared with other major research economies. [For example](#), in a decade where China has more than doubled its global influence in SHAPE, the EU-27 has lost around 7% of its influence, and the US has lost 11% and 12.4% of its SHAPE Global Output and Global Citations share respectively. By contrast, the UK remains within 4% of its Global Output share over the decade, and even increased its Global Citations share by 2.9%. UK research and innovation policy should invest in these connected capabilities and capacities alongside its technology priorities.

The UK needs a stable and attractive proposition both for UK-based researchers seeking international opportunities and for international partners who want to collaborate with, or work in, the UK. That proposition must be flexible enough to reflect the interests and needs of researchers and innovators in the UK and internationally.

Attention should be paid to the role of international students within this system. International students make a substantial contribution not only to university finances, but also to local economies, research capacity and graduate skills. The Academy has [repeatedly](#) protested against the introduction of a Levy on the income from international student fees as a policy which risks deepening sector financial instability and reducing international competitiveness. If the Government does bring forward legislation to introduce the Levy, it should carefully assess the consequences for institutions and consider exemptions for those on international mobility and partnership schemes.

To address these challenges, we call for the Government to:

- **Work with the Global Talent Visa Endorsing Bodies** to implement immediately the proposed visa reimbursement scheme to reduce the costs of all those who receive a Global Talent Visa
- **Provide immediate confirmation that the current length for Indefinite Leave to Remain is kept in place** for current and future Global Talent Visa (GTV) holders and their dependants
- **Tackle the continuing barriers and deficiencies with the UK's immigration system, including for short-term mobility** which either needs urgent reform or the establishment of a new route in order to be effective for researcher mobility and to facilitate effectively study visas for all nationals regardless of their location of origin.
- **Reduce visa costs** to ensure they are at least as competitive as other leading science nations including exempting researchers from paying the UK Immigration Health Surcharge.

- **Ensure the UK is attractive to international students and global talent**, through stable immigration and higher education policies that recognise their contribution to institutional sustainability, research capacity and economic growth.

To support the Government, the British Academy is already:

- **Investing in our International Fellowships** for early career researchers to expand the number available to be awarded over the spending review period.
- **Acting as an endorsing body** for the Global Talent visa, including processing 1,878 applications in 2025-26.
- **Putting equitable partnerships and knowledge systems strengthening** at the heart of our [international research programmes](#).
- **Supporting [the British International Research Institutes](#)** which play a vital role in facilitating and sustaining world-leading research, connecting researchers in the UK with international academic and non-academic communities.

5. Support regional growth through people, places and the institutions within them

The Government's priority for growth in every postcode is ambitious and welcome. Every nation and region of the UK possesses distinct strengths, assets and opportunities. Unlocking these opportunities requires more than investment and delivery structures alone; it depends on strong local ecosystems and access to the breadth of evidence needed to address complex policy challenges.

Universities, cultural organisations, local authorities, businesses and civil society organisations all contribute to the skills, knowledge and civic capacity that support long-term prosperity. Universities play a particularly important role as [anchor institutions](#) within regional growth ecosystems through their contributions to skills, research, innovation and civic life. Alongside cultural institutions, community organisations and local leaders, they provide [social, cultural](#) and [economic infrastructure](#) that contributes to inclusive growth and societal resilience.

Research and innovation investment should reinforce these local ecosystems while maintaining the excellence that underpins the UK's global research strengths. Places have different [histories](#), assets and capabilities. Previous Academy work highlighted that place-based approaches to [R&D investment](#) should reflect these differences while building long-term capacity for innovation and growth. As shown through our programme on Economic Strategy, stable, multi-year funding investments, which are aligned to local strengths and opportunities and delivered through effective regional and national partnership, are more likely to generate lasting [economic and social value](#).

However, financial pressures across higher education risk weakening the institutional capacity that many places rely upon. [Evidence](#) from the British Academy's SHAPE Observatory demonstrates that educational and research provision is becoming increasingly concentrated in some parts of the country, creating disciplinary "cold spots" and limiting access to skills and expertise in local economies. The consequences extend beyond individual institutions. Where educational and research capacity is lost, places may also lose access to partnerships, evidence, cultural assets and civic infrastructure that support innovation, productivity and public service improvement.

Strong local ecosystems alone are not sufficient. Regional growth also depends on access to the breadth of evidence needed to address complex policy challenges. Many of today's policy challenges are fundamentally human challenges. Whether the objective is increasing [productivity and inclusive growth](#), learning from [policy histories](#) on topics from health to international trade, understanding what a '[good](#)' digital society might look like, strengthening [trust in science](#), or [achieving net zero](#), success depends on understanding and influencing behaviour, trust, incentives, governance and culture.

The humanities and social sciences are especially well placed to support regional growth because their methods and research approaches are strongly attuned to place, local context and community dynamics. They provide the evidence needed to understand these dynamics and improve policy outcomes. They help explain why interventions succeed in some places and not others, identify barriers to adoption and support the design of policies that are effective, trusted and scalable. Regional growth strategies are most successful when they combine economic, social and cultural development. Strong communities, trusted institutions and vibrant civic ecosystems contribute directly to resilience, productivity, and long-term prosperity.

To address these challenges, we call for the Government to:

- **Recognise cultural, social and community infrastructure** as drivers of economic resilience, productivity and inclusive growth and **protect the regional breadth of higher education and research provision**, recognising universities as anchor institutions within local growth ecosystems.
- **Target investment towards areas where educational and research capacity is at risk**, preventing the emergence of further disciplinary and geographic cold spots
- **Support place-based partnerships** between universities, local authorities, businesses and civil society organisations to address local economic and social challenges.
- **Strengthen the use of evidence** and evaluation in policymaking, embedding SHAPE expertise alongside scientific and technical expertise across delivery structures.

- **Invest in research across the eight Industrial Strategy sectors in truly interdisciplinary ways** so that the major social, economic and technological challenges and opportunities of our time are addressed through research drawing on as many disciplines, sectors, regions and perspectives as possible.

To support the Government, the British Academy is already:

- **Building evidence on the foundations of good and inclusive growth** through programmes including *Where We Live Next*, which explores sustainability, local knowledge and the visibility of places and communities in policymaking and our policy programme on an integrated *Economic Strategy* for the UK.
- **Supporting research partnerships across the UK** that bring together universities, researchers, local leaders and communities to address place-based challenges. This includes our thriving **Early Career Research Network** which has over 10,000 members across every region of the UK, providing seed funding to members to work closely with non-academic organisations throughout the country.
- **Providing the evidence for a broader framework for national resilience**, including how to support and measure the value of social and cultural infrastructure in supporting thriving communities, civic participation and inclusive growth; what makes a good digital society; how the UK responds to the challenges of sustainability, climate, humanity and nature at home and abroad; and the drivers of global (dis)order.
- **Enabling the UK's workforce to be flexible, creative and [multilingual](#)**; in sectors where the UK is a global leader, [skills learnt from studying SHAPE disciplines](#) foster resilience in a dynamic and rapidly shifting economic context.
- **Providing policymakers with evidence on regional educational and research capacity through the SHAPE Observatory**, including analysis of disciplinary cold spots and their implications for opportunity, skills and growth.

About the British Academy

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving well-being – today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies. We distribute £45m a year in research funding, investing in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas. We also engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone. For more information about the British Academy and our work please contact us at: publicaffairs@thebritishacademy.ac.uk