INNOVATION & RESEARCH CAUCUS

UK RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (UKRI)'s SYSTEM-LEVEL VALUE BEYOND FUNDING

A Social-Science Perspective

IRC Insight Paper 015

REPORT PREPARED BY

Muthu DeSilva
Birkbeck University of London

Tim Vorley
Oxford Brookes University

Delivered with ESRC and Innovate UK

Authors

The core members of the research team for this project were as follows:

- Professor Muthu DeSilva – Birkbeck University of London
- Tim Vorley – Oxford Brookes University

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The Innovation and Research Caucus supports the use of robust evidence and insights in UKRI's strategies and investments, as well as undertaking a co-produced programme of research. Our members are leading academics from across the social sciences, other disciplines and sectors, who are engaged in different aspects of innovation and research systems. We connect academic experts, UKRI, IUK and the ESRC, by providing research insights to inform policy and practice. Professor Tim Vorley and Professor Stephen Roper are Co-Directors. The IRC is funded by UKRI via the ESRC and Innovate UK, grant number ES/X010759/1. The support of the funders is acknowledged. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the funders.

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You are also welcome to email us if you have any questions about this report or the work of the IRC generally: info@ircaucus.ac.uk

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Executive Summary

UKRI creates system-level value not only through funding excellent projects but also through meso-level orchestration that aligns missions, standards, infrastructures, skills and markets. When these system-level roles are made explicit – turning national priorities into shared roadmaps, platforms and norms – coordination costs fall, adoption risks are reduced, and diffusion accelerates across places and sectors. We use "system-level value" to mean benefits that emerge between organisations – via direction-setting, platform effects, shared assets, rules-in-use, learning loops and cultural norms that make collaboration reliable and repeatable.

The typology summarises five reinforcing roles through which UKRI delivers this value: System Stewardship & Strategic Direction; Convening & Ecosystem Building; Market Shaping & Commercialisation; Infrastructure & Data Commons; and Culture, Standards & Research Integrity (Figure 1). It provides a common language for policy and programme design, portfolio management and evaluation – so that selection criteria, milestones and integration services (e.g., standards work, buyer guidance, open data, responsible innovation, EDI [equality, diversity and inclusion] and talent pipelines) are aligned with the mechanisms that actually speed translation and scale.

- **Type 1 – System Stewardship & Strategic Direction**: UKRI's meso-level orchestrator role turning national priorities into shared roadmaps, portfolio architectures and rules-in-use – lowering coordination costs and enabling adaptive learning.
- **Type 2 – Convening & Ecosystem Building**: UKRI's boundary-spanning work to form collaborative platforms and place-based coalitions with co-created governance – turning one-off projects into communities of practice that accelerate diffusion.
- **Type 3 – Market Shaping & Commercialisation**: UKRI's de-risking function – via Catapults/testbeds, translation funds, embedded collaborations and grant-plus-equity – that converts technical proof into investable, procurable and standards-ready solutions.
- **Type 4 – Infrastructure & Data Commons**: UKRI's stewardship of shared facilities, Open Access, Gateway to Research and evaluation frameworks that make the system legible and reusable – lowering search/transaction costs and enabling meta-learning.
- **Type 5 – Culture, Standards & Research Integrity**: UKRI's role in shaping norms and capabilities – integrity, trusted research, RRI [Responsible Research and Innovation], EDI and talent cohorts – so collaboration is reliable, ethical and repeatable, with practices diffusing through communities of practice.

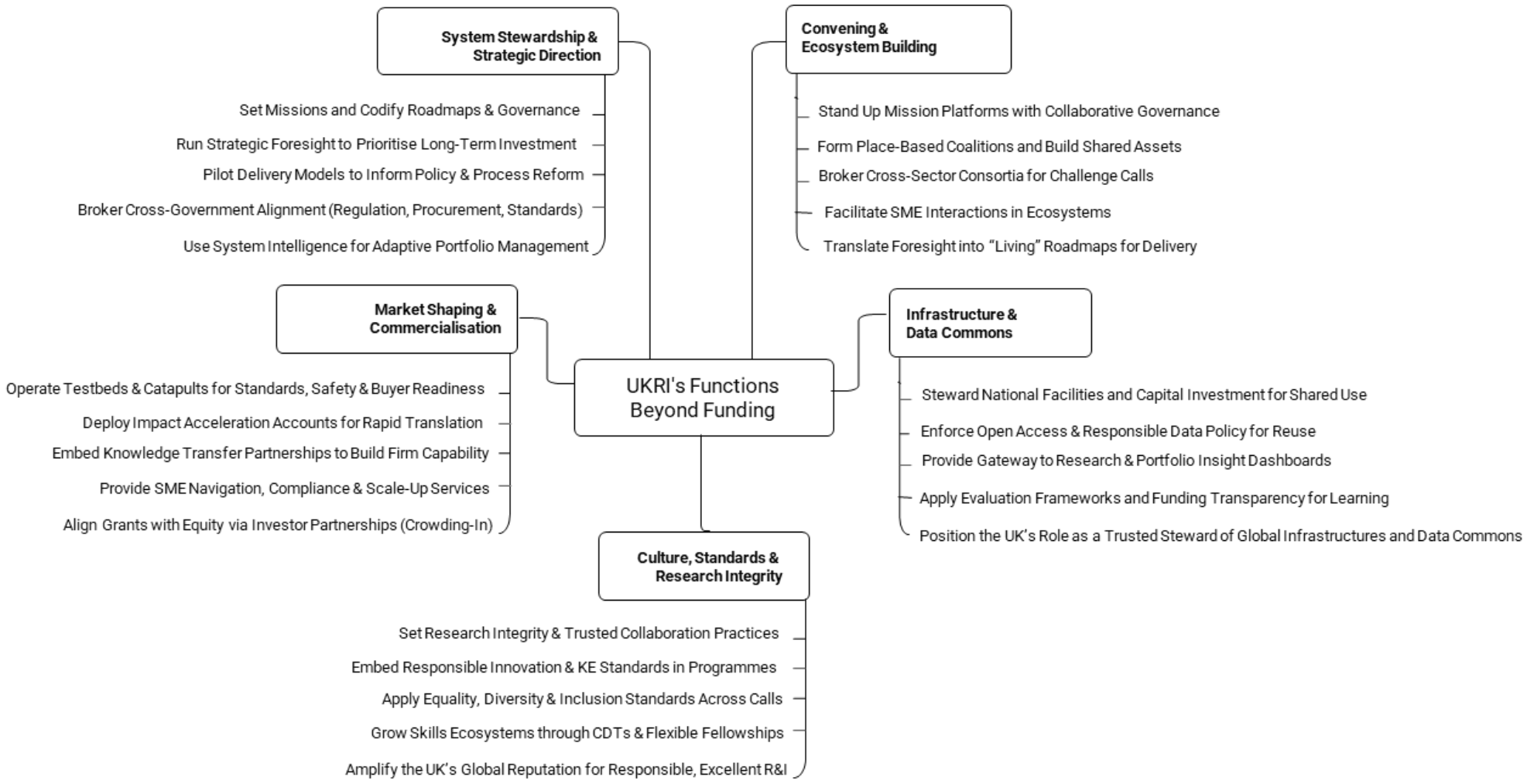

Figure 1: UKRI's System-Level Value Beyond Funding: A Social-Science Perspective

1. Type 1 – System Stewardship & Strategic Direction

UKRI provides meso-level stewardship for the UK's research and innovation system: it sets direction, aligns "rules-in-use", and translates national priorities into actionable roadmaps and portfolio architectures. This stewardship lowers coordination costs, surfaces bottlenecks early, and enables adaptive learning across programmes. UKRI's 2022–2027 strategy positions the organisation to play this role across people, places, ideas, innovation and impacts, guided by the principles of diversity, connectivity, resilience and engagement.

1.2 Set Missions and Codify Roadmaps & Governance

UKRI co-creates mission logics and roadmaps with stakeholders (researchers, firms, regulators, users), then codifies them into challenge structures (objectives, milestones, criteria, governance). This upstream institutional technology reduces uncertainty for complementary investors and delivery partners, ensures portfolio coherence, and keeps projects aligned with societal outcomes rather than fragmented, project-by-project aims. The challenge architecture also creates a learning forum in which evidence is regularly fed back to adjust scope, timing and balance.

Example box – Mission governance in practice

Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF): UKRI used Challenge Directors [Similaor roles include Champions or Ambassadors in work programmes] to translate mission intent into coherent, multi-project portfolios with clear objectives, milestones and governance. This enabled cross-council alignment (linking research and business-facing instruments) and systematic engagement with industry, embedding steer and accountability at portfolio level. [Sources: UKRI ISCF overview; governance materials]

1.2 Run Strategic Foresight to Prioritise Long-Term Investment

Through strategic foresight and horizon-scanning, UKRI connects emerging science, market evolution and societal shifts to downstream instruments. Foresight guides when to explore, pilot or scale, and identifies enabling conditions – skills, regulation, infrastructure – that must be developed in parallel. This anticipatory function allows UKRI to sequence calls and instruments so promising areas move from exploration to proof to demonstration without stalling at the "missing middle".

Example box – From foresight to calls

Net-zero and smart local energy: Signals around local, data-driven energy informed a design that linked exploratory studies to place-based demonstrations and an evidence integration layer (EnergyREV) under PFER [Prospering from the Energy Revolution]. Insights flowed between research, trials and policy, accelerating convergence on investable models. [Sources: UKRI strategy; PFER documentation]

1.3 Pilot Delivery Models to Inform Policy & Process Reform

Where delivery rules or approval processes are uncertain, UKRI tests alternatives – short-lived schemes, adjusted eligibility, adaptive evaluation – to generate credible evidence for proportionate process and policy reform. This experimentation reduces policy risk for government and smooths translation between research, innovation and deployment actors by removing friction that evaluations reveal.

Example box – Delivery learning

Challenge evaluations (including NAO [National Audit Office] scrutiny and final impact studies) highlighted approval-time bottlenecks and the value of portfolio integration. UKRI used this learning to streamline approvals and strengthen integration services, improving speed-to-impact and enabling portfolio-level learning to inform subsequent waves. [Sources: NAO/PAC [Public Accounts Committee] on ISCF; final evaluations]

1.4 Broker Cross-Government Alignment (Regulation, Procurement, Standards)

Seeing the whole pipeline – from discovery to diffusion – allows UKRI to advise and broker across departments (science, skills, industry, energy, place) so regulatory sandboxes, procurement pilots and standards activity are sequenced with funded portfolios. This links policy levers to demonstrators and feeds programme learning back to policymakers, reducing adoption risk and speeding uptake.

Example box – Brokerage

Challenge Directors and programme teams routinely surfaced regulatory/standards gaps to relevant departments and agencies, aligning sandbox activity with demonstrator timing – so projects did not "prove" solutions in a policy vacuum. This systematic brokerage is difficult for single projects to achieve but natural at UKRI's portfolio scale. [Sources: ISCF governance notes]

1.5 Use System Intelligence for Adaptive Portfolio Management

UKRI's system intelligence – award and outcome data, portfolio syntheses, independent evaluations – supports adaptive management. Dashboards such as Gateway to Research (GtR) provide a single view of "who is doing what, with whom, and to what effect," enabling UKRI and partners to abandon less effective approaches, scale those that work, and target co-investment where it changes the slope of diffusion. Publishing learning enables universities, Catapults, investors and local authorities to act on the same evidence.

Example box – Evidence-informed adaptation

GtR and programme evaluations supply portfolio-level visibility of awards, collaborations and outcomes; synthesis reports (e.g., on smart local energy) have been used to adjust subsequent calls and integration offers – adding data/standards work where interoperability slowed scale-up. [Sources: GtR; programme evaluations]

2. Type 2 – Convening & Ecosystem Building

UKRI builds collaborative platforms and place-based coalitions that align universities, firms, PSREs [public sector research establishments], local government and civil society around shared problems. By structuring repeated interactions and co-creating governance, UKRI converts one-off projects into communities of practice. The result is greater trust, thicker networks, and higher absorptive capacity – conditions under which knowledge flows faster and complementary actors can invest with confidence.

2.1. Stand Up Mission Platforms with Collaborative Governance

Mission-oriented programmes provide a focal problem and a "common table" where standards, ethics and data practices can be coordinated so that projects reinforce rather than duplicate each other. UKRI's platforms function as learning arenas: interdependencies (for example, data interoperability or user safety) are managed collectively, portfolio evidence is surfaced, and decisions about the next wave – what to scale, what to stop – are taken against a shared roadmap.

Example box – Platform effects
Smart local energy (PFER): UKRI deliberately linked exploratory design studies, place-based demonstrators and an academic synthesis hub (EnergyREV) to operate as a portfolio-level learning arena. This accelerated convergence on viable models and revealed where standards, digital and finance barriers had to be addressed in parallel. [Sources: PFER; EnergyREV]

2.2. Form Place-Based Coalitions and Build Shared Assets

Place-based consortia bring together regional anchors (universities, Catapults, major employers) with civic leaders and finance to co-create strategies and shared assets. The proximity effect – shorter distances between problem owners and solvers – reduces transaction costs and speeds feedback. Shared assets (labs, brokerage, data) crowd-in private capital and help retain spillovers (skills, supplier upgrading) in the locality.

Example box – Regional coalitions

Strength in Places Fund (SIPF): consortia such as those focused on advanced machinery and productivity align universities, Catapults and firms to build regional specialisation and supply-chain depth, underpinned by a published fund-level evaluation framework. [Sources: SIPF overview; evaluation framework]

2.3. Broker Cross-Sector Consortia for Challenge Calls

Brokerage lowers the search costs of finding credible partners and helps build balanced consortia that combine technical capability with routes to market and end-user validation. Early convening provides a neutral space to agree IP/data terms and milestones that reflect adoption constraints – not just technical ambition – so the risk of later re-work is reduced.

Example box – Brokered consortia

In mission areas with safety or standards dependencies, UKRI convened sector partners ahead of and during calls. This enabled consortia to integrate compliance planning into workplans from the outset, reducing downstream approval risk and aligning demonstrator timing with regulatory processes. [Sources: challenge documentation]

2.4. Facilitate SME [medium-sized enterprise] Interactions with Ecosystems

Dedicated SME pathways (clinics, partner days, sprint support) and sustained sector networking turn “who knows whom” into a public good. Firms learn which facilities exist, how to meet standards, and whom to approach for investment or testing, lowering the fixed costs of collaboration and speeding diffusion into supply chains – especially for first-of-a-kind adopters.

Example box – SME on-ramps

Through clinics and partner days attached to mission calls, SMEs accessed Catapult facilities (testing, model factories), investor showcases and standards guidance that would otherwise be hard to navigate – shortening time to pilot and adoption. [Sources: Catapult & Innovate UK materials]

2.5. Translate Foresight into "Living" Roadmaps for Delivery

Roadmaps only create value when they drive selection criteria, demonstrator design and evaluation priorities. UKRI keeps foresight "live" within ecosystems so that portfolios are updated as evidence accumulates: when demonstrators reveal constraints (for example, data interoperability or skills), subsequent calls and integration offers are adjusted accordingly. This tightens the loop between "what's coming" and "what to build next".

Example box – Living roadmaps

As smart local energy demonstrators exposed digital interoperability and market barriers, programmes updated roadmaps and added integration services (data, standards, finance), ensuring that subsequent projects were designed with these constraints in mind. [Sources: programme syntheses and final evaluations]

3. Type 3 – Market Shaping & Commercialisation

UKRI reduces first-of-a-kind risk and accelerates TRL [technology readiness level] progression by combining market-facing infrastructures (Catapults and testbeds), translation funds (e.g., IAAs [Impact Acceleration Accounts]), embedded collaborations (e.g., KTPs [Knowledge Transfer Partnerships]) and investor-aligned instruments (e.g., Investor Partnerships). Together these instruments produce a steeper discovery-to-deployment curve, higher-quality deal-flow, and clearer adoption pathways for followers – not just pioneers.

3.1. Operate Testbeds & Catapults for Standards, Safety & Buyer Readiness

Catapults provide shared facilities, deep domain expertise and regulatory interfaces where innovators can prove performance, safety and interoperability. Evidence from these trials is translated into standards contributions, buyer guidance and procurement criteria, thereby lowering adoption risk and shortening approval cycles for organisations that adopt later. Test-and-learn under realistic operating conditions also exposes the complementary investments (skills, data, integration) needed for scale.

Example box – Test-and-translate
Energy Systems Catapult “Living Lab” enables consumer-in-the-loop trials of smart local energy propositions; High Value Manufacturing Catapult’s model factories allow SMEs to trial advanced processes at low risk. Findings have informed standards discussions and buyer guidance, reducing uncertainty for followers. [Sources: Catapult network pages]

3.2. Deploy Impact Acceleration Accounts for Rapid Translation

IAAs fund rapid prototyping, user testing and policy engagement – the “missing middle” where many promising ideas otherwise stall. These small, fast grants generate user evidence, expose adoption hurdles (regulatory, usability, procurement) and enable quick iteration. Projects that pass this filter reach later-stage competitions, investors or procurers with clearer value propositions and early stakeholder buy-in.

Example box – Missing-middle wins
University IAAs have financed prototypes and policy pilots that subsequently converted into licensing, Investor Partnerships, or standards pilots – demonstrating how modest, time-critical funds unlock the next translational step. [Sources: university IAA [Impact Acceleration Account]]

3.3. Embed Knowledge Transfer Partnerships to Build Firm Capability

KTPs – that enable collaboration between universities and businesses- embed boundary-spanning Associates inside firms to institutionalise new routines in data, quality, design and process control. This raises firms' absorptive capacity, leaving durable capabilities that support future collaboration and export readiness. It also creates a repeatable interface between universities and businesses, making subsequent projects faster to initiate and more likely to succeed.

Example box – Capability embedded
KTPs have delivered step-changes in process and product performance across SMEs; many firms retain Associates post-project and re-engage with their university partners on follow-on innovation, building momentum towards scale. [Sources: KTP guidance/success stories]

3.4. Provide SME Navigation, Compliance & Scale-Up Services

Navigation support, regulatory/standards advice and scale-up services reduce the fixed costs of participation for SMEs. By coordinating access to calls, Catapult facilities, compliance guidance and export preparation, UKRI's business-facing services help promising companies avoid the gaps between discovery and market and shorten time-to-first sale.

Example box – Scale-up pathways

Companies have received coordinated guidance across Innovate UK funding, Catapult test facilities and internationalisation/pre-compliance support – converting technical readiness into commercial readiness more quickly. [Sources: Innovate UK business growth material]

3.5. Align Grants with Equity via Investor Partnerships (Crowding-In)

Investor Partnerships align public grants with lead-investor equity so that technical and commercial milestones are designed together. Public signals reduce information asymmetry and coordinate expectations; investor discipline improves governance and go-to-market planning. The result is higher leverage, better survival through the valley of death, and faster scale-up for frontier ventures.

Example box – Grant-plus-equity

Investor Partnership rounds have unlocked aligned equity and substantial follow-on capital by syndicating public validation with lead investors – bringing in capital and expertise that a grant alone would not mobilise. [Sources: Investor Partnerships directories/briefings]

4. Type 4 – Infrastructure & Data Commons

UKRI stewards shared facilities and evidence systems – national and regional research infrastructures, Open Access policy, the Gateway to Research (GtR), and evaluation frameworks – that make the landscape legible and reusable. These "commons" lower search and coordination costs, enable replication and meta-learning, and make the system more navigable and accountable for partners and the public.

4.1. Steward National Facilities and Capital Investment for Shared Use

Shared laboratories and platforms allow organisations to specialise while accessing capabilities they do not own. UKRI's stewardship concerns access models, upgrade cycles and co-funding so that advanced equipment, pilot-scale lines and specialist expertise remain available to multi-institution teams, including SMEs and regional partners. Visibility tools (for example, infrastructure catalogues) also help external users find assets and plan co-investment.

Example box – Shared capability
National facilities catalogued through UKRI infrastructure registries and the Catapult Network have enabled multi-institution teams to use advanced equipment and pilot-scale lines without duplicating capital spend – concentrating scarce expertise where it can be shared most effectively. [Sources: InfraPortal; Catapult Network]

4.2. Enforce Open Access & Responsible Data Policy for Reuse

Open Access and responsible data policies create a reusable knowledge base. UKRI requires immediate open access for peer-reviewed research articles submitted on or after 1 April 2022. For monographs, book chapters and edited collections published on or after 1 January 2024, an open-access version (VoR [Version of Record] or AAM [Accepted Manuscript]) must be available within 12 months under an open licence (CC BY preferred), with specific allowances for third-party materials. This transparency increases reuse, supports replication and secondary analysis, and builds public trust.

Example box – Open by default
UKRI's Open Access policy mandates immediate OA for articles (and from 2024, monographs/book chapters), enabling rapid reuse by researchers, policymakers and practitioners and accelerating policy learning. [Sources: UKRI OA policy]

4.3. Provide Gateway to Research & Portfolio Insight Dashboards

GtR provides a single, publicly accessible view of funded projects, outcomes and organisations, with APIs that allow partners to build portfolio insights: where capabilities sit, which collaborations exist, and where diffusion lags. UKRI's guidance documents explain data coverage, release cycles and publication rules, ensuring consistent, reusable metadata for analysis and decision-making.

Example box – One view of the system
Public dashboards and API [application programming interface] users leverage GtR to map collaborations, identify duplication and target co-investment. The "single view" enables universities, Catapults, investors and local authorities to act on the same evidence base. [Sources: GtR site]

4.4. Apply Evaluation Frameworks and Funding Transparency for Learning

Shared evaluation frameworks and transparent reporting allow programmes to learn collectively rather than in isolation. Publishing fund-level and programme-level evaluations – and financial/funding-flow transparency – normalises evidence-informed adjustments of calls, milestones and integration services, so future competitions reflect what actually accelerates diffusion and adoption.

Example box – Learning by evaluation

Portfolio and programme evaluations (for example, challenge portfolios such as smart local energy or ISCF-wide reviews) have been used to refine future competitions and strengthen integration services, improving speed-to-impact. [Sources: PFER final evaluation; ISCF impact evaluation/NAO]

4.5. Position the UK's Role as a Trusted Steward of Global Infrastructures and Data Commons

UKRI strengthens the UK's position as a trusted steward of shared infrastructures and data commons by aligning access models, licensing and interoperability with international partners. By coupling Open Access and responsible data policies with clear publication rules, portfolio visibility tools (for example, Gateway to Research), and proportionate Trusted Research and Innovation (TR&I) guidance, collaborative work becomes easier to join and safer to scale. This reliability reduces transaction and compliance costs for partners, attracts co-investment, and ensures benefits flow back to the UK through reciprocity (for example, direct participation in European frameworks), talent pipelines and influence in standards and governance.

Example box – Trusted and interoperable by design

Horizon Europe association from the 2024 work programme restored full participation and direct EU funding for UK entities, reducing administrative friction in multinational projects. In parallel, UKRI's overseas offices and international framework deepen durable partnerships, while UKRI's TR&I principles provide proportionate safeguards for data, people and IP. Portfolio-level visibility via Gateway to Research helps partners see who does what and where co-investment can add most value – reinforcing the UK's reputation as a reliable steward and delivering added value at home. [Sources: UK association to Horizon Europe; UKRI international collaboration pages; UKRI TR&I principles; GtR guide]

5. Type 5 – Culture, Standards & Research Integrity

UKRI shapes the norms and capabilities that underpin a healthy, inclusive and trusted R&I system. Through proportionate integrity and security guidance, responsible innovation practices, EDI standards, and people-centred investments (e.g., CDTs [Centres for Doctoral Training] and flexible fellowships), UKRI embeds behaviours that make collaboration reliable, ethical and repeatable. Our analysis of evidence shows that these cultural foundations reduce risk, widen participation, enhance reputation, and increase the legitimacy and uptake of research-led solutions – key mechanisms of system-level value creation.

5.1. Set Research Integrity & Trusted Collaboration Practices

Clear, proportionate guidance on research integrity and trusted collaboration sets shared expectations for good conduct, transparency and due diligence – without unduly burdening legitimate collaboration. UKRI's role is distinctive because it convenes funders, universities, publishers and public authorities to cohere norms and provide practical tools (policy templates, training, reporting routes). This risk-governance function sustains legitimacy and long-run cooperation, ensuring that openness and security are balanced in practice, not just principle.

Example box – Proportionate governance
UKRI-hosted integrity resources and outputs from the UK Committee on Research Integrity (UK CORI) articulate sector-wide expectations, case learning and proportionate due diligence for international collaboration – helping institutions collaborate openly while managing risk responsibly. [Sources: UKRI integrity; UK CORI]

5.2. Embed Responsible Innovation & Knowledge Exchange [KE] Standards in Programmes

RRI builds ethics, safety and user perspectives into design, experimentation and evaluation from the outset. Behaviour-shaping schemes – such as KE frameworks and concordats – codify co-creation standards, engagement quality and impact planning, so that productive collaboration becomes routine rather than ad hoc. The mechanism is institutional: common

expectations lower transaction costs for partners, reduce late-stage re-work, and improve social acceptance – raising the probability of adoption and diffusion.

Example box – RRI in practice

Programmes require impact planning, public engagement and integration of safety/ethics activities alongside technical work. Combined with KE frameworks, this has improved the clarity of intended use, surfaced unintended consequences earlier, and strengthened adoption prospects in public services and markets. [Sources: KE/Concordat materials]

5.3. Apply Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Standards Across Calls

EDI standards shape who participates and whose needs are represented in research and innovation. By requiring inclusive practices in calls, monitoring participation and supporting inclusive leadership, UKRI broadens the pool of ideas and partners. Social-scientifically, this enhances the relevance and legitimacy of outputs – solutions better match varied user needs – thereby improving adoption and impact while addressing structural barriers in the system.

Example box – Broadening participation

Programme guidance and institutional EDI plans embedded in awards have increased participation from under-represented groups and diversified partner sets, which in turn has strengthened problem definition and widened routes to adoption. [Sources: UKRI EDI pages]

5.4. Grow Skills Ecosystems through CDTs & Flexible Fellowships

Centre for Doctoral Training [CDTs] and flexible fellowships function as communities of practice that socialise researchers into cross-sector collaboration, responsible conduct and engaged scholarship. Joint supervision, placements and cohort activities create boundary-spanning leaders who can translate between scientific, technical, commercial and policy domains. Alumni then carry these norms across organisations and regions – one of the most durable channels for cultural change and system-level capability building.

Example box – Cohort effects

CDT cohorts and Future Leaders Fellowships have produced leaders who move between academia, industry and public bodies, taking with them repeatable practices for co-creation, responsible innovation and evidence-based decision-making. [Sources: CDT/FLF pages]

5.5. Amplify the UK's Global Reputation for Responsible, Excellent R&I

UKRI amplifies the UK's reputation by embedding integrity, responsible innovation and inclusion into programmes and by convening practical standards and professional practices that travel with people and portfolios. Cohorts – such as Centres for Doctoral Training and Future Leaders Fellowships – socialise cross-sector collaboration and engaged, responsible leadership; alumni carry these norms across institutions and borders. Alongside this people infrastructure, the UK Committee on Research Integrity (UK CORI) and the refreshed Concordat to Support Research Integrity provide nationally recognised benchmarks that are legible internationally. These visible signals attract talent, increase buyer and regulator confidence, and secure leadership roles in standards bodies and consortia – raising the probability of adoption and diffusion.

Example box – Integrity and cohort effects

UK CORI and the 2025 refresh of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity strengthen assurance for partners and procurers while promoting proportionate practice across disciplines. Future Leaders Fellowships and cohort-based doctoral training (CDTs) create boundary-spanning leaders who act as ambassadors for UK research and innovation, reinforcing the country's reputation for excellence and responsible practice in global collaborations. [Sources: UK CORI; Concordat to Support Research Integrity; Future Leaders Fellowships; EPSRC CDTs]

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Thank you

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