



Innovation Fund Q&A

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Innovation Fund FAQs



Logistics

1. Will you accept multiple applications from one university? Is it a disadvantage to be part of a larger submission?

Given the size of universities, we will of course accept multiple applications from one UK HEI — but applicants can only lead on one bid, so we encourage you to identify other applicant leads.

Being part of a larger submission is not an issue; regional capacity building can be sub-regional as well as across a whole region.

We highly encourage collaboration with other partners and UPEN members on similar applications, or on projects that speak to each other. Get in touch with Laura Bea, Head of Membership and Network development. (l.bea@ucl.ac.uk) if you need support with this.

2. Will there be subsequent rounds in 2027 or beyond?

It's possible but not guaranteed. With £550,000 available in total, 11 awards at £50,000 each would spend all the funding.

We are happy for smaller amounts to be applied for, at a minimum of £10,000. Act now to avoid future disappointment.

Eligibility

1. Are there restrictions on who can apply, for example post-docs, or professional services staff and knowledge mobilisers?

Providing the Institutional Lead at your university is aware of your application, anyone in your institution can apply. All applicants must be in contract for the full duration of the award.

2. What are the eligibility criteria for staff on fixed-term contracts?

As long as you are in contract for the duration of the award, you are eligible.



3. Are Welsh universities eligible?

Yes. The Innovation Fund is made up of financial support from Research England and the ESRC, so UPEN member universities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are eligible.

4. What kind of work is out of scope?

Blue-skies research, and existing research projects aiming to engage with policy are out of scope. There must be relevance to creating structures and testing interventions to strengthen academic-policy engagement, and to developing best practice and learning.

Policy partners

1. Are international partners allowed or encouraged, or is this about national and regional policymakers?

The focus is primarily on the UK, but international partners would be allowed as long as there is impact into the UK evidence-policy system. Any international partners must be co-applicants, not lead applicants.

2. Do you classify health boards as a policy partner?

Yes. External collaborators, for example parliaments, government departments, local authorities, charities, think tanks, can include arms-length bodies such as health boards.

Fund uses and match funding

1. Does the fund allow overheads and indirect costs, or is it direct project costs only?

Direct project costs only (directly incurred). Overheads and indirect costs can, however, be used to indicate in-kind or match contribution.

2. What are the match funding expectations? Is cash or in-kind preferred? Will the proportion, or its source, form part of the decision?

Match funding can come from either the home institution or a policy organisation.



We would expect a significant amount of match funding from any of the applicant organisations, at a minimum of 20% of total project cost — so around £10,000 of match or in-kind contribution against a £50,000 application.

3. Can the fund be used to extend and amplify existing, funded research?

In short, no. This fund isn't intended to be used to amplify the policy impact of individual research projects. The fund should be used to test interventions to strengthen academic-policy engagement as a system and practice.

Evaluating applications

1. Could you say more about the fund's aims and goals, particularly the 'strengthening collaboration' element and how that would be measured?

We've witnessed a considerable increase in academic-policy engagement activity and 'learning by doing' over the past decade. However, many activities and initiatives have been supported through fixed-term funding. This has made it challenging to establish sustainable activity, and hindered efforts to embed successful approaches and shared learning. Practical insights have faced limited opportunities for capture or consolidation.

With this in mind, we are seeking collaborative projects which:

- Advance sustainable academic-policy engagement
- Support innovative practice to deliver practical insights and shared learning
- Strengthen infrastructure for academic-policy engagement

Full applications will be assessed through several criteria, one of which is the project's contribution to innovation and sustainability.

2. How will applications be scored against the objectives of the fund? Do applications need to fulfil all the objectives, or demonstrate strength against one or a few?

There's no requirement to fulfil all the objectives. Please get in touch with Laura to develop your application and get support on this.

The objectives are:

- Contribution to innovation and/or sustainability
- Feasibility of the project and collaboration
- Project benefits
- Measurement of success
- Costs and budget justification



Criteria

1. Can you share previous successful applications and their aims and justifications, plus the key criteria and what to propose and not propose, to inform how we pitch and shape ideas?

As this is the first time we've been able to open the Innovation Fund, we do not have examples of successful applications or their aims and justifications. Our blog, written by the UPEN Co-Chairs and Head of Programmes and Operations Ayden McKeating, gives you [more information on ways to build your idea](#).

2. What core priorities, activities, and criteria does the fund target, and how should we shape collaborative proposals to ensure they align with what to propose?

Due to the prevalence of short-term funding in academic-policy engagement, this fund focuses on establishing long-term sustainability, consolidating shared learning, and strengthening infrastructure across three main pillars:

- Advancing sustainable engagement: Building lasting mechanisms that continue beyond the funding window
- Supporting innovative practice: Testing, consolidating, or scaling new methods to deliver practical insights
- Strengthening infrastructure and evidence use: Improving operational processes, assessing engagement impact, and supporting evidence uptake within policy organisations.

3. How will the potential for sustainability of initiatives be measured?

Money received to deliver your project should be used for evaluation. We are also looking for things to be brought into business as usual practice in UPEN, where project outcomes can be used for the wider public good.



Priorities and impact

1. What outcomes and impacts do you want to see, and how can we work with you to share lessons from the projects we develop?

We have a broad definition of impact — ideally we want to see the lessons learned from your project. You'll also be able to work with our comms team to develop short comms pieces reflecting on your work and distilling good practice. We'll work closely with successful applicants to define what they report on.

2. Which research areas or topics are targeted?

We are not focusing on specific research areas or topics, and would not want applications to be too closely tied to disciplines or narrow topic areas. We will look at everything on case by case basis.



About UPEN

Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) is a central space for academics, policy actors, and professional services staff who undertake and support academic-policy engagement. We champion academic policy engagement to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking in the UK.

UPEN is hosted by University College London (UCL), with co-chairs located at UCL, University of Huddersfield and University of Leeds.

UPEN Programmes

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