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Title of paper: Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) 6

Main purpose of the paper: For information

Presenter: Professor Jane Robinson (Pro-Vice-Chancellor Business, Partnerships and Place)

Date of paper: 20 October 2026

Purpose of the paper: To provide a summary analysis of the recently published Knowledge Exchange Framework 6 (KEF6).

Relation to strategy and values: KEF6 is a measure of performance against our Knowledge Exchange activities. It is directly linked to our Business and Innovation, Research and Engagement and Place strategies.

Recommendations: For information

Consultation to date (including any previous committee consideration and its outcome): Executive Board, 20 October 2026

Information Classification: (policy available here)

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☐ Confidential – Sensitive information that could cause harm to the University if disclosed and should be limited to specific groups within the University. Includes personal data and commercially sensitive information.

☒ Internal – Information intended for use by internal colleagues or trusted third parties.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE FRAMEWORK 6: PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

Background and Key Information

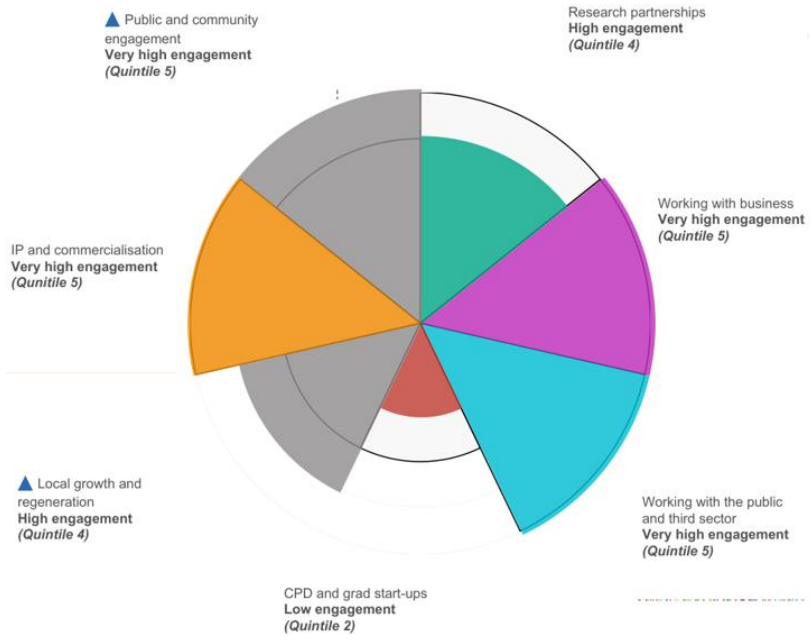
The Research England Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) provides a national benchmark of how effectively universities translate knowledge, research, expertise and assets into economic and societal benefit. KEF6 results are based on activity reported between 2022 and 2025 and were published in October 2026. KEF compares institutions within peer groups ("clusters"), with Newcastle remaining within Cluster V comprising large, research-intensive universities with broad disciplinary portfolios.

The KEF6 results demonstrate that Newcastle University has sustained the strong performance achieved in KEF5 while operating within an increasingly competitive cluster. Importantly, this has been achieved whilst implementing significant changes to knowledge exchange delivery through the reorganisation of Newcastle Innovations, strengthening regional partnerships, and expanding innovation-led engagement activity. The University's KEF6 results were highlighted publicly through Newcastle Innovations' announcement on partnership impact and innovation performance. Article can be found here.

As a reminder, a brief description of the perspectives and scores is included in Appendix A. Details of Cluster V and comparator performance are included in Appendices B - F. Further details on the KEF dashboards, perspectives and constituent metrics can be found [here].

Strong and Improved Performance in KEF6

Newcastle University has shown a strong performance in KEF6. The dashboard is shown below



These are the KEF 6 averages by Cluster:



Figure 2 – KEF6 cluster averages for each of the eight KE cluster groups

Executive Summary

KEF6 confirms that Newcastle University remains one of the strongest performing institutions in England for knowledge exchange.

At the headline perspective level:

- Newcastle has retained its KEF5 position across all seven KEF perspectives.
- Newcastle remains above the Cluster V average in:
    - Local Growth and Regeneration.
- Newcastle remains equal to the Cluster V average in:
    - Working with Business
    - Working with the Public and Third Sector
    - IP and Commercialisation
    - Public and Community Engagement.
- Newcastle is one quintile below the Cluster V average in:
    - Research Partnerships
    - CPD and Graduate Start-ups.

Importantly, the apparent stability masks genuine underlying performance improvements in several metrics. Three metrics improved quintile position compared with KEF5:

- CPD and Continuing Education income.
- Contribution to collaborative research.
- Consultancy and facilities income from non-SME businesses.

Newcastle also narrowly missed achieving higher quintiles in three additional metrics where small performance gains could deliver further improvements in KEF7:

- HE-BCI Graduate start-ups rate by student FTE (Part of CPD & Grad start-ups)
- HE-BCI contract research income with SME business normalised by HEP income (Part of Working with Business)
- HE-BCI Consultancy and facilities income with SME business normalised by HEP income (Part of Working with Business)

KEF6 Performance, Future Outlook and Strategic Priorities

Newcastle University continues to perform strongly within KEF6, maintaining its position as one of the UK's leading research-intensive universities for knowledge exchange. Performance remains particularly strong in Working with Business, Local Growth and Regeneration, Public and Community Engagement, Working with the Public and Third Sector, and IP and Commercialisation, with the University retaining either High or Very High Engagement status across these perspectives.

Particular areas of strength include:

- Working with Business, where Newcastle is ranked 1st in Cluster V for Innovate UK income as a proportion of research income, 3rd for SME consultancy and facilities income, and has sustained Very High Engagement performance. Growth in SME contract research activity

(+175% in 2024/25) demonstrates continued success in translating research excellence into external partnerships and commercial opportunities.

- Local Growth and Regeneration, where Newcastle remains one quintile above the Cluster V average and ranks 4th within the cluster, reflecting the University's role as a civic institution and its sustained investment in regional innovation, regeneration and economic development.
- Public and Community Engagement and Working with the Public and Third Sector, where the University continues to demonstrate strong national performance, including ranking 10th nationally for public and third-sector contract research income and 16th nationally for public and community engagement.
- IP and Commercialisation, where Newcastle retained Very High Engagement status, achieved significant growth in licensing income (+167% year-on-year) and ranked 16th nationally for external investment secured by spinouts, reflecting the maturity and effectiveness of the University's commercialisation ecosystem.

While overall performance remains strong, KEF6 also highlights several areas that are likely to be increasingly important as Research England continues to develop its approach to knowledge exchange assessment and HEIF allocation.

Recent signals from Research England suggest that future developments in HEIF will draw increasingly on evidence from KEF and wider knowledge exchange evaluation activity. This reinforces the need for robust impact measurement, strong partnership pipelines, effective commercialisation processes and clear evidence linking institutional investment to outcomes.

Newcastle University's institutional KPI requires us to maintain or improve our KEF performance. Although future results are inherently difficult to predict given KEF's relative assessment methodology, analysis of current trends and emerging 2025/26 data provides a reasonable indication of future opportunities and risks.

<u>Graduate Entrepreneurship and Skills</u>

The most realistic opportunity for future improvement lies within the CPD and Graduate Start-ups perspective.

Performance is already moving in the right direction. CPD income has improved from Very Low to Low Engagement, while Graduate Start-ups now sit at the top of the Medium Engagement quintile and narrowly missed moving into High Engagement. Given the increasing policy emphasis on skills, lifelong learning, workforce productivity and graduate entrepreneurship, this represents an important strategic opportunity.

Graduate entrepreneurship is particularly significant because:

- A substantial proportion of HEIF funding is linked to expectations around student and graduate entrepreneurship.
- National industrial and innovation policy increasingly views universities as generators of high-growth businesses and regional economic growth.

The proposed Foundership programme has been designed to bring together Newcastle University's start-up and spin-out activities into a single venture creation pathway aligned with sector best practice. Reinstating and scaling this programme would support future KEF performance while strengthening alignment with wider government priorities for innovation, entrepreneurship and economic growth.

Working with Business

Although Newcastle's longer-term performance remains strong, emerging 2025/26 figures indicate some softening across commercial income streams:

	25/26	24/25
Consultancy	£5,109,427	£5,274,894
Facilities	£1,554,196	£1,700,561
Commercial Research	£12,426,889	£13,748,358

These reductions appear to be driven by a combination of wider economic conditions and internal capacity constraints, including the impact of recent financial pressures, reduced academic participation in commercial activities, a reduction in resource supporting commercial access to facilities and the loss of dedicated Innovate UK business development capacity.

To mitigate these risks and strengthen future performance, several actions are already underway:

- Recruitment of a new Facilities and Innovation Manager to increase utilisation of University facilities and associated income generation.
- Establishment of a dedicated commercial contracts workstream through the Commercial Opportunities Project Board, focusing on pipeline growth, process simplification, costing and pricing review, and increased competitiveness.
- Recruitment of two new Innovation Managers to strengthen external engagement activity, including support for Innovate UK and collaborative innovation opportunities.

These interventions should help stabilise and grow business-facing income streams that underpin future performance in the Working with Business perspective.

Research Partnerships

Research Partnerships remains an area of both progress and opportunity.

The Cluster V overall performance improved to Very High Engagement in KEF6, supported by exceptionally strong performance in co-authorship with non-academic partners, where Newcastle ranks 14th nationally. However, performance continues to be constrained by the metric measuring partner cash contributions to collaborative research as a proportion of public funding.

Importantly, this is not a measure of institutional contribution but of the financial commitment made by external partners to collaborative research projects. While the metric has improved from Low to Medium Engagement, it remains below our performance in other indicators.

There are two key areas requiring attention:

- Ensuring that partner cash contributions are systematically identified and recorded. The newly appointed Innovation Business Intelligence Manager is reviewing data capture processes to maximise both KEF and HEIF reporting performance.
- Ensuring that developments arising from the Next Generation Newcastle programme, including Academic Shape, support rather than unintentionally constrain research and innovation activity. As Newcastle Innovations and faculty colleagues redesign the Enterprise and Innovation Academy, there is an opportunity to ensure future academic operating models strengthen participation in knowledge exchange, innovation and collaborative research activity alongside research excellence objectives.

Taken together, these actions will be important in improving both KEF performance and delivery of the University's broader growth and innovation ambitions.

Conclusion

Newcastle University's KEF6 performance demonstrates sustained excellence across the majority of knowledge exchange activities and confirms the institution's national leadership in innovation, partnership working and civic impact. While headline perspective scores remain unchanged, underlying metrics reveal meaningful improvement in several strategically important areas and create realistic opportunities for further advancement in KEF7/8.

The University's challenge is no longer simply to improve its KEF position. Rather, it is to maintain and grow the activities that drive economic and societal impact while developing the leading indicators, capabilities and partnerships required to succeed within a changing HEIF and research funding landscape.

Appendix A – A reminder of the KEF key principles

Each university is assessed across **seven perspectives**, representing key areas of knowledge exchange activity. These are visualised as coloured segments on the KEF dashboard, each with:

- A **score from 1 to 5**, where:
    - **1 = Very Low Engagement**
    - **5 = Very High Engagement**
- A **level descriptor**
- A **black line** indicating the **average performance of the cluster** for that perspective

Each perspective is informed by one or more metrics. The **quintile results** show how a university performs relative to the entire sector for each metric and perspective. The **cluster average** reflects how institutions within a cluster perform, on average, compared to the sector.

Importantly, the **3-year perspective quintile** is not derived from the average of individual metric quintiles. Instead, it is calculated by:

- Ranking each contributing metric (1st to 136th)
- Summing these rankings to produce a total perspective score
- Ordering institutions by total score to assign a quintile

Key Notes on Interpretation

- KEF's **cluster-based approach** is designed to facilitate meaningful comparisons between peer institutions.
- Many metrics are **normalised by income**, meaning performance reflects an institution's **capacity for knowledge exchange relative to its size**.

KEF as a Lagging Indicator

KEF remains a retrospective assessment of performance. KEF6 principally reflects activity undertaken between 2022 and 2025 and therefore provides limited visibility of the University's current position or the impact of more recent strategic interventions.

As such:

- KEF should be treated as a validation tool rather than a management tool.
- Performance improvement should be driven through leading indicators, not annual KEF results.
- Institutional decisions should focus on the activities that generate impact rather than movement within league tables as this is dependent on factors that our outside of our direct control (e.g. a high income year for one University due to a new high value contract).

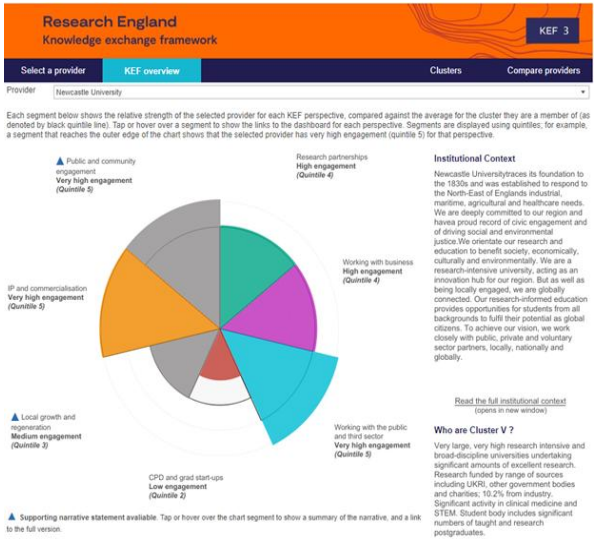
Appendix B

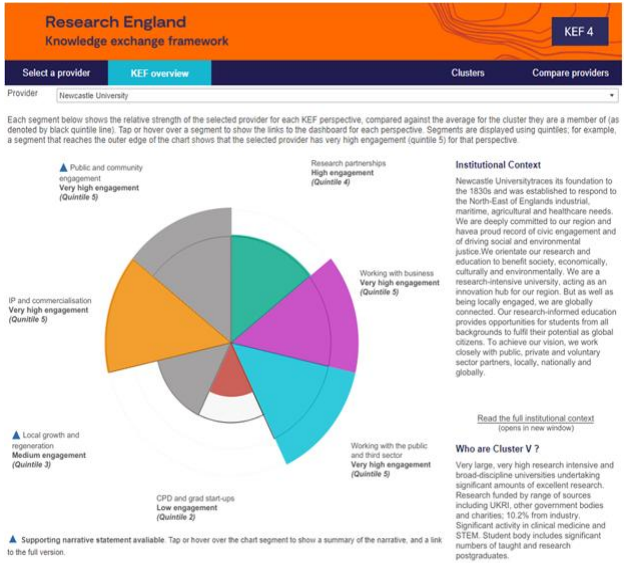
Cluster V

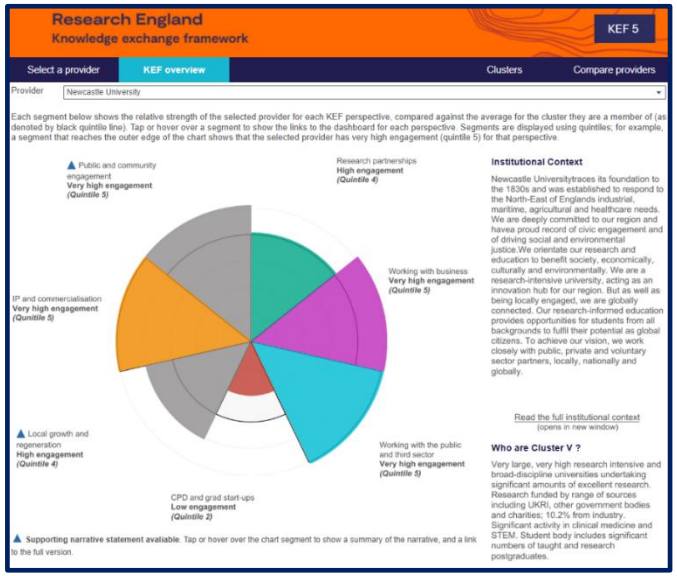
For comparative purposes, English universities are grouped into **clusters** based on size, research intensity, and disciplinary breadth. **Newcastle University** is part of **Cluster V** comprising **very large, highly research-intensive universities with broad disciplinary coverage**. Other institutions in Cluster V are:

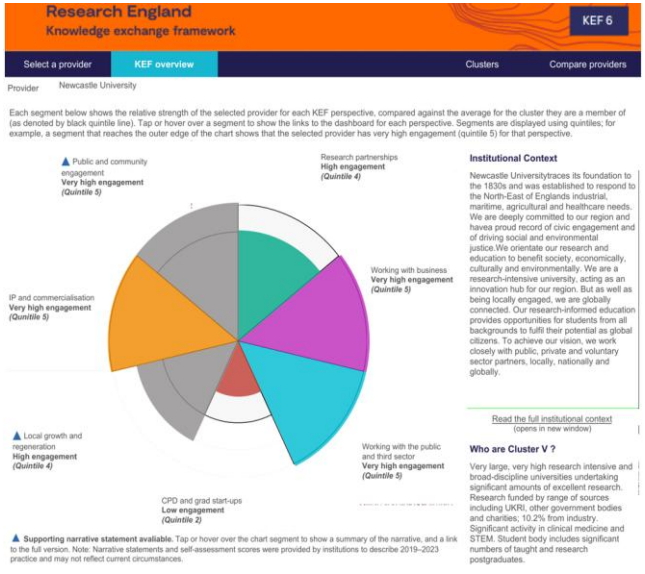
- Oxford
- Cambridge
- Imperial College London
- UCL
- King's College London
- Leeds
- Manchester
- Birmingham
- Liverpool
- Nottingham
- Sheffield
- Southampton
- London Business School
- Queen Mary University of London
- Bristol
- Warwick
- Exeter

Appendix C – Newcastle University performance (Clockwise from top left: KEF3, KEF4, KEF5, KEF 6)

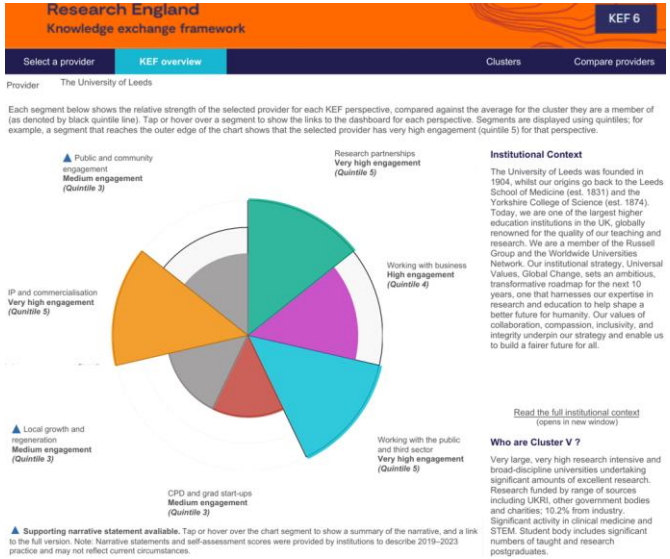


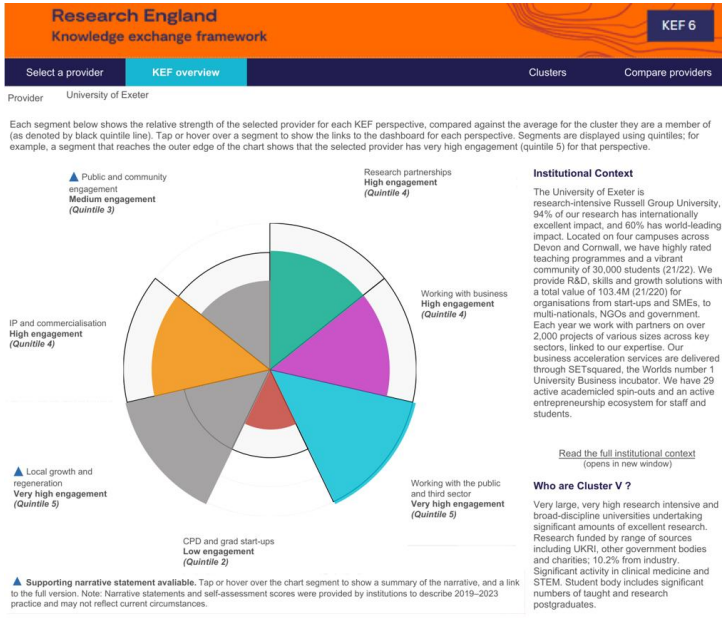






Appendix D – Comparison with other Cluster V universities (clockwise from top left: Leeds, Exeter, Sheffield, Southampton)





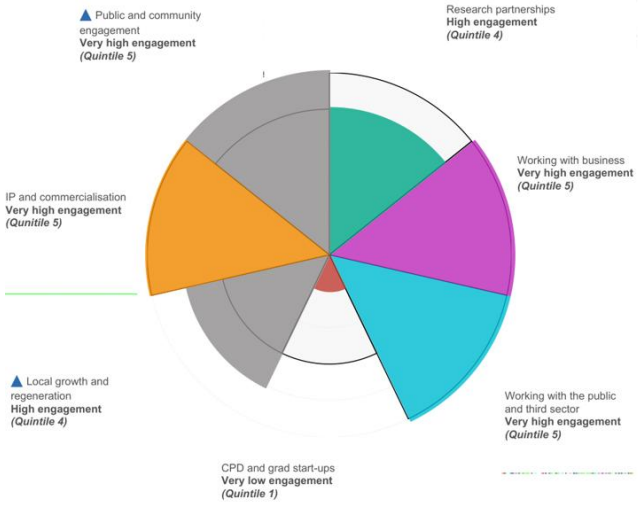
Research England
Knowledge exchange framework

KEF 6

Select a provider | KEF overview | Clusters | Compare providers

Provider The University of Sheffield

Each segment below shows the relative strength of the selected provider for each KEF perspective, compared against the average for the cluster they are a member of (as denoted by black quintile line). Tap or hover over a segment to show the links to the dashboard for each perspective. Segments are displayed using quintiles; for example, a segment that reaches the outer edge of the chart shows that the selected provider has very high engagement (quintile 5) for that perspective.



Supporting narrative statement avaliable. Tap or hover over the chart segment to show a summary of the narrative, and a link to the full version. Note: Narrative statements and self-assessment scores were provided by institutions to describe 2019–2023 practice and may not reflect current circumstances.

Institutional Context

The University of Sheffield has a proud history of discovery, innovation and social change and our motto Rerum Cognoscere Causas (to discover the cause of things) is as relevant now as when we were founded in 1905. Our story continues to evolve and is defined not just by our achievements but by the unique character of our people and the city. Our core vision is to deliver life-enhancing research, innovation and education that not only transforms the life of our graduates, but shapes the world we live in. Knowledge exchange and impact are embedded as part of the Innovation pillar of the Universitys vision and interlinked to our ambitions around research and education.

Read the full institutional context
(opens in new window)

Who are Cluster V ?

Very large, very high research intensive and broad-discipline universities undertaking significant amounts of excellent research. Research funded by range of sources including UKRI, other government bodies and charities; 10.2% from industry. Significant activity in clinical medicine and STEM. Student body includes significant numbers of taught and research postgraduates.

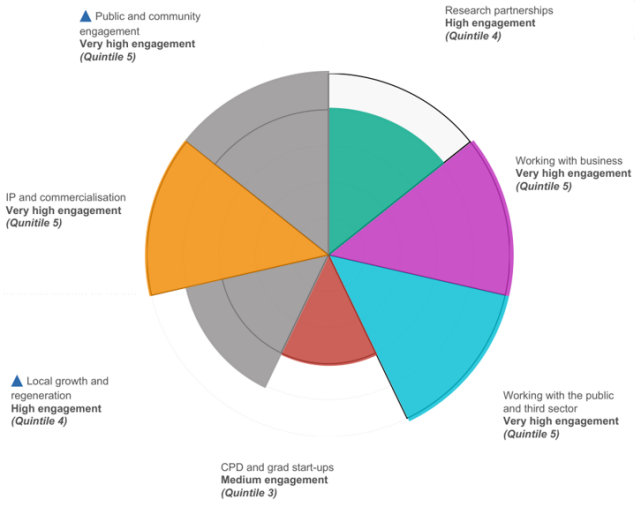
Research England
Knowledge exchange framework

KEF 6

Select a provider | KEF overview | Clusters | Compare providers

Provider University of Southampton

Each segment below shows the relative strength of the selected provider for each KEF perspective, compared against the average for the cluster they are a member of (as denoted by black quintile line). Tap or hover over a segment to show the links to the dashboard for each perspective. Segments are displayed using quintiles; for example, a segment that reaches the outer edge of the chart shows that the selected provider has very high engagement (quintile 5) for that perspective.



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Institutional Context

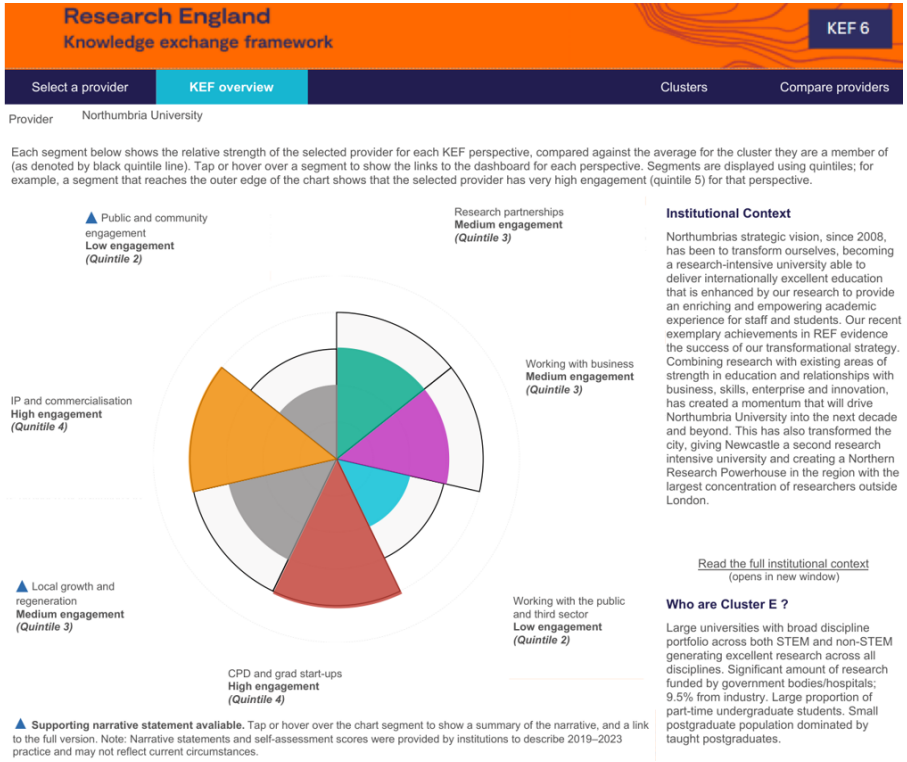
The University of Southampton is an anchor institution in our region and the only Russell Group university on the south coast, employing 6,000 staff alongside a 20,000+ student population. Located in one of the worlds significant port cities we are the second largest employer in the city of Southampton making an estimated economic contribution of 1.3bn per annum to the region. A comprehensive, research-intensive university; our contribution is national and global. Our overall economic impact is 4.14m per annum, more than half of which stems from research and knowledge exchange. Driven by making a difference and achieving the remarkable we are committed to making a positive societal impact, increasing social mobility, transforming lives and enhancing prosperity locally and globally.

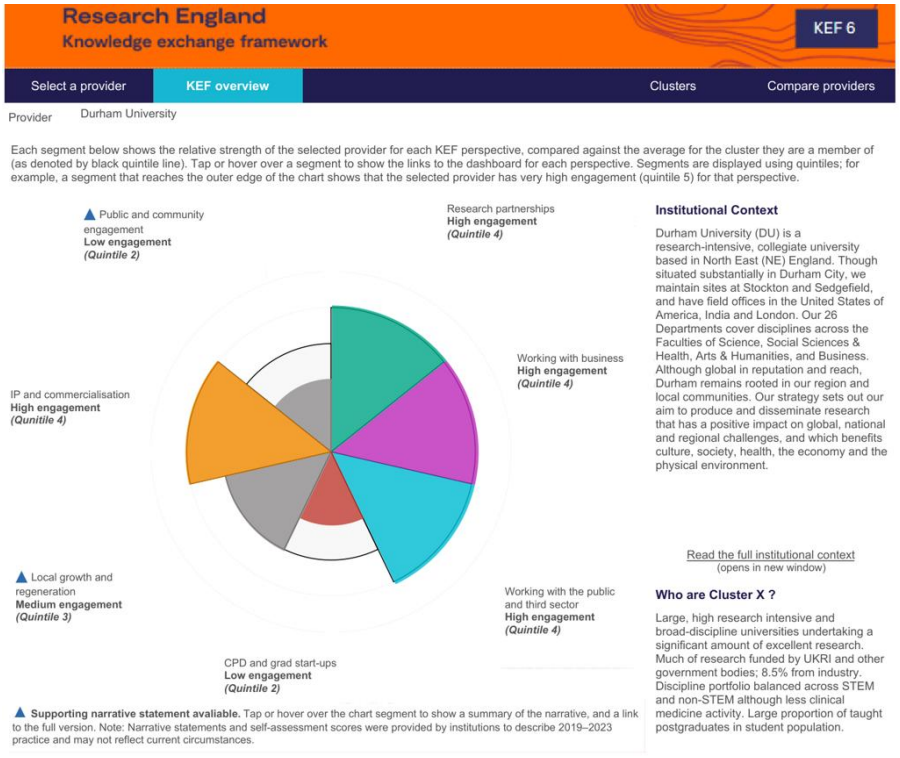
Read the full institutional context
(opens in new window)

Who are Cluster V ?

Very large, very high research intensive and broad-discipline universities undertaking significant amounts of excellent research. Research funded by range of sources including UKRI, other government bodies and charities; 10.2% from industry. Significant activity in clinical medicine and STEM. Student body includes significant numbers of taught and research postgraduates.

Appendix E – Comparison with other regional universities





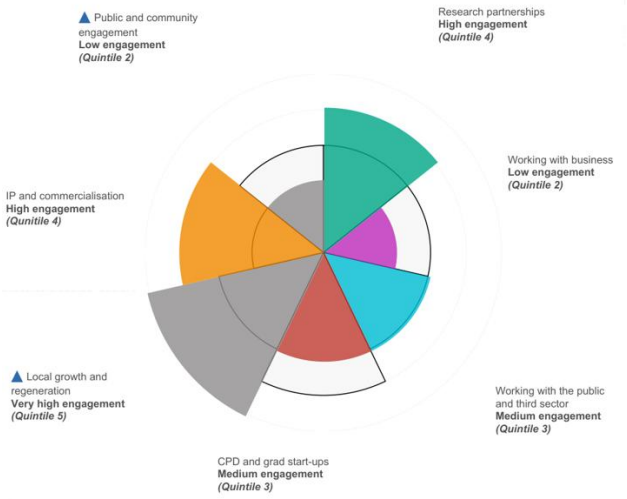
Research England
Knowledge exchange framework

KEF 6

Select a provider | KEF overview | Clusters | Compare providers

Provider The University of Sunderland

Each segment below shows the relative strength of the selected provider for each KEF perspective, compared against the average for the cluster they are a member of (as denoted by black quintile line). Tap or hover over a segment to show the links to the dashboard for each perspective. Segments are displayed using quintiles; for example, a segment that reaches the outer edge of the chart shows that the selected provider has very high engagement (quintile 5) for that perspective.



Supporting narrative statement avaliable. Tap or hover over the chart segment to show a summary of the narrative, and a link to the full version. Note: Narrative statements and self-assessment scores were provided by institutions to describe 2019–2023 practice and may not reflect current circumstances.

Institutional Context

Our mission is to be a life-changing university, with underpinning ambitions to be student-focused, professions-facing and society-shaping. Our focus is global as well as local, with campuses in London and Hong Kong, alongside engagement with 27 transnational education partners in 44 locations. However, we remain deeply rooted in Sunderland and the north-east of England. Our academic excellence is combined with a commitment to widening participation and the creation of career-ready graduates. Equally, we support local SMEs, apply our research in practical ways, create and exchange knowledge, and engage communities through our education and outreach programmes. This work maximises the regional impact of all that we do. In financial terms, this amounted to 476 million and 5,760 jobs in 2017/18.

Read the full institutional context
(opens in new window)

Who are Cluster J ?

Mid-sized universities with more of a teaching focus (although research is still in evidence). Academic activity across STEM and non-STEM disciplines including other health, computer sciences, architecture/planning, social sciences and business, humanities, arts and design. Research activity funded largely by government bodies/hospitals; 13.7% from industry.

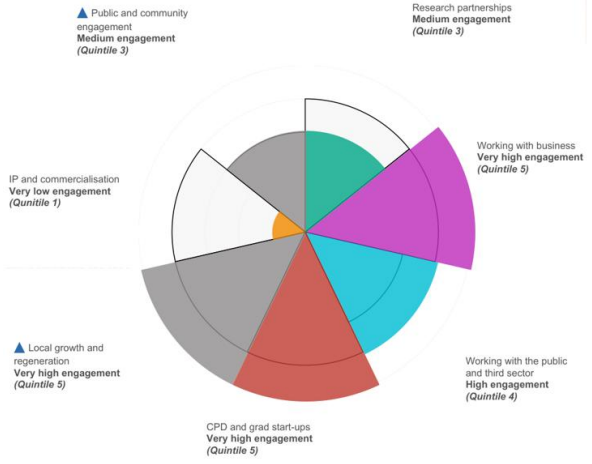
Research England
Knowledge exchange framework

KEF 6

Select a provider | KEF overview | Clusters | Compare providers

Provider Teesside University

Each segment below shows the relative strength of the selected provider for each KEF perspective, compared against the average for the cluster they are a member of (as denoted by black quintile line). Tap or hover over a segment to show the links to the dashboard for each perspective. Segments are displayed using quintiles; for example, a segment that reaches the outer edge of the chart shows that the selected provider has very high engagement (quintile 5) for that perspective.



Supporting narrative statement avaliable. Tap or hover over the chart segment to show a summary of the narrative, and a link to the full version. Note: Narrative statements and self-assessment scores were provided by institutions to describe 2019–2023 practice and may not reflect current circumstances.

Institutional Context

Teesside University is an anchor institution and the key Higher Education Institution in its region of Tees Valley, North East England. Our mission is to generate and apply knowledge that contributes to the economic, social and cultural success of students, partners and the communities we serve. Through education enriched by research, innovation, and engagement with business and the professions, we transform lives and economies.

Read the full institutional context
(opens in new window)

Who are Cluster E ?

Large universities with broad discipline portfolio across both STEM and non-STEM generating excellent research across all disciplines. Significant amount of research funded by government bodies/hospitals; 9.5% from industry. Large proportion of part-time undergraduate students. Small postgraduate population dominated by taught postgraduates.

Appendix F

Perspective scores by Quintile score from 1 ('Very low engagement') to 5 ('Very high engagement') from KEF2 to KEF6

Perspective	Metric detail	KEF2 – Newcastle	KEF 2 – Cluster	KEF 3 – Newcastle	KEF 3 – Cluster	KEF 4 – Newcastle	KEF 4 – Cluster	KEF 5 – Newcastle	KEF 5 – Cluster	KEF 6 Newcastle	KEF 6 Cluster
Research partnerships	Overall Perspective	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**5**
Working with business	Overall Perspective	**4**	**5**	**4**	**4**	**5**	**4**	**5**	**4**	**5**	**5**
Working with the public and third sector	Overall Perspective	**5**	**4**	**5**	**4**	**5**	**4**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**
CPD and Grad start-ups	Overall Perspective	**2**	**3**	**2**	**3**	**2**	**3**	**2**	**3**	**2**	**3**
Local growth and regeneration	Overall Perspective	**2**	**3**	**3**	**3**	**3**	**3**	**4**	**3**	**5**	**3**
IP and commercialisation	Overall Perspective	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**
Public and community engagement	Overall Perspective	**4**	**4**	**5**	**4**	**5**	**4**	**5**	**4**	**5**	**4**

Detailed Breakdown of Metrics in each Perspective

Perspective	Metric detail	KEF2 – Newcastle	KEF 3 – Newcastle	KEF 4 – Newcastle	KEF 5 – Newcastle	KEF 6 Newcastle
Research partnerships	**Overall Perspective**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**
	Co-authorship with non-academic partners as a proportion of total outputs	5	5	5	5	5
	Contribution to collaborative research (cash) as a proportion of public funding	2	2	2	2	3
Working with business	**Overall Perspective**	**4**	**4**	**5**	**5**	
	Consultancy and facilities income - non-SMEs	5	5	5	4	5
	Consultancy and facilities income - SMEs	3	4	4	4	4
	Contract research income - non-SMEs	4	4	4	5	5
	Contract research income - SMEs	3	3	4	4	4
	Innovate UK income as proportion of research	3	5	5	5	5
Working with the public and third sector	**Overall Perspective**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	
	Consultancy and facilities income with the public and third sector	4	4	4	4	4

	Contract research income with the public and third sector	5	5	5	5	5
CPD and Grad start-ups	**Overall Perspective**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	
	CPD/CE income	1	2	1	1	2
	Graduate start-ups by student FTE	4	4	3	3	3
Local growth and regeneration	**Overall Perspective** Regeneration and development income	**2**	**3**	**3**	**4**	**4**
IP and commercialisation	**Overall Perspective**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	
	Average external investment per spinout	5	5	5	5	5
	Estimated current turnover of all active firms per active spinout	4	4	4	4	4
	Licensing and other IP income as a proportion of research income	5	4	4	4	4
Public and community engagement	**One self-assessment based metric**	**4**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**